



# The Mis-named ‘Chinese Garden’ in Ninfa

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**Abstract.** Nowadays when someone talks about ‘Ninfa’, it refers to an area of English landscape garden in the province of Latina, about 50 km southeast to Rome. ‘Ninfa’ could be dated back to the Roman era, because of the historical remains of a temple dedicated to Nymph. The German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius called it ‘the small Pompei of the Middle Age’. From the 1920s, its owner, the family of Caetani, converted the ruins of the medieval city, which had been deserted since the 17th century, to an area of English landscape garden, that we call today ‘the garden of Ninfa’.

The title, *the Mis-named ‘Chinese Garden’ in Ninfa*, could be understood from different levels: literally, there is indeed a small area whose name is ‘*Sorgente dei bambù*’, the spring of bamboo, some of the visitors would like to call it ‘the Chinese garden’, where the gardeners cultivated bamboos and managed small ponds with a spring, and also built some stone constructions; on the other hand, if we re-examine the whole landscape structure of Ninfa, as a romantic English landscape garden, we can see some kind of the oriental influence on the European garden culture, or we should say, a misunderstanding of Chinese gardens. The ‘misunderstanding’ reflected fantastically in the gardens of Ninfa, when the Caetani constructed the garden of Ninfa upon the real ruins of the medieval city, which gives today’s visitors an extraordinary experience in the picturesque garden.

**Keywords:** Gardens of Ninfa · English landscape garden · Chinese influence · Ruins · Medieval City

## 1 Introduction

When Ferdinand Gregorovius visited the ruined city of Ninfa in 1860, he remarked on its legendary ruined city and its poetic landscape:

*... Ninfa! Era, dunque, la Pompei del medio-evo, la città dei sogni, immersa nelle paludi pontine!*

*... Così giungemmo a Ninfa, mezzo sepolta nella palude, con le sue mura, le sue torri, le sue chiese, i suoi chiostrì e le sue case coperte di edera. Il suo aspetto è più incantevole di quello di Pompei, le cui case sembrano spettri o mummie sventrate, faticosamente strappate alla lava vulcanica. Sopra Ninfa invece si muove, al soffio del vento, un mare di fiori; ogni muro, ogni chiesa, ogni casa è rivestita d’edera, e su tutte quelle rovine oscillano i purpurei stendardi del dio trionfante della primavera.*

*Si prova un'inesprimibile emozione nel penetrare in questa città d'edera, nel percorrere le sue vie deserte, nascoste quasi sotto l'erba e i fiori e nell'errare fra quelle mura dove il vento scherza fra le foglie. Non un rumore turba l'alta sua pace, all'infuori del grido del corvo che ha posto dimora sulla torre del castello, del mormorio delle limpide acque del Ninfeo, del sussurro dei giunchi in riva allo stagno e del canto melodioso e dolce delle erbe, agitate dalla brezza.*<sup>1</sup>

... Ninfa! Finally, there it was, the Pompeii of the Middle Ages, the city of dreams, immersed in the Pontine marshes!

... And so we arrived Ninfa, all half buried in the swamp, its walls, its towers, its churches, its convents and its houses entombed beneath the thickets of ivy. Assuredly it has a more charming aspect than Pompei with its houses, like half decayed specters and mummies dragged from amongst volcanic ashes and set up all around. But a fragrant sea of flowers waves above Ninfa; every wall is veiled with green, over every ruined house or church the god of spring is waving his purple banner triumphantly.

The impression of this ivied town makes as you enter it is indescribable. You wander through its grassy, flower-decked streets and between its verdant walls. Save the wind, which is whispering in the leaves of the trees, not a sound is heard except the croak of a raven up in the tower, the rushing of the stream, the rustling of the tall reeds by the pond, and the melodious singing and sighing of the blades of grass all around.

Gregorovius was not referring to actual pictures, of course, but to pictorially arranged views in the ruined city, which was reconstructed as the garden of Ninfa currently. And thanks to his depiction of his journey in Volsci Mountains, we've seen the ruined city was not isolated in the tenebrous marshes, but peacefully sited in a horizontal landscape: there was another ruined ancient city Norba upon the plateau back on its north; to its south, toward the Tyrrhenian Sea, there were the free stretched woods, in which were interspersed collected herds and farmers' houses; and where the woods cease, there are vast grasslands and the cultivated fields.

Today the garden of Ninfa,<sup>2</sup> the unique botanic garden, among the ruins of the castle and the medieval city, is located about 50 km from Rome, along the famous Via Appia. Called Pontine Marshes, this area at the piedmont of antique Monte Norba, close to Cisterna, which is currently called Cisterna di Latina, is connected to Severiana-Anziate,

<sup>1</sup> Gregorovius and Corsi (1906), pp. 143–189, 'I monti Volsci (1860)'.

<sup>2</sup> In Italian, the names 'Giardino di Ninfa', and 'Giardini di Ninfa', which is literally 'gardens of Ninfa', are both frequently used to call the garden. From the point of view of an English landscape garden, we may understand it as a complex landscape composed by different parts of small gardens in the ruined area, and that's why the visitors would like to call the 'sorgente dei bambù' as the 'Chinese garden'.

and then Tyrrhenian Sea. Ninfa was frequented since the 8th century A.C., as a fortified military center, at the very beginning of its urban history.<sup>3</sup>

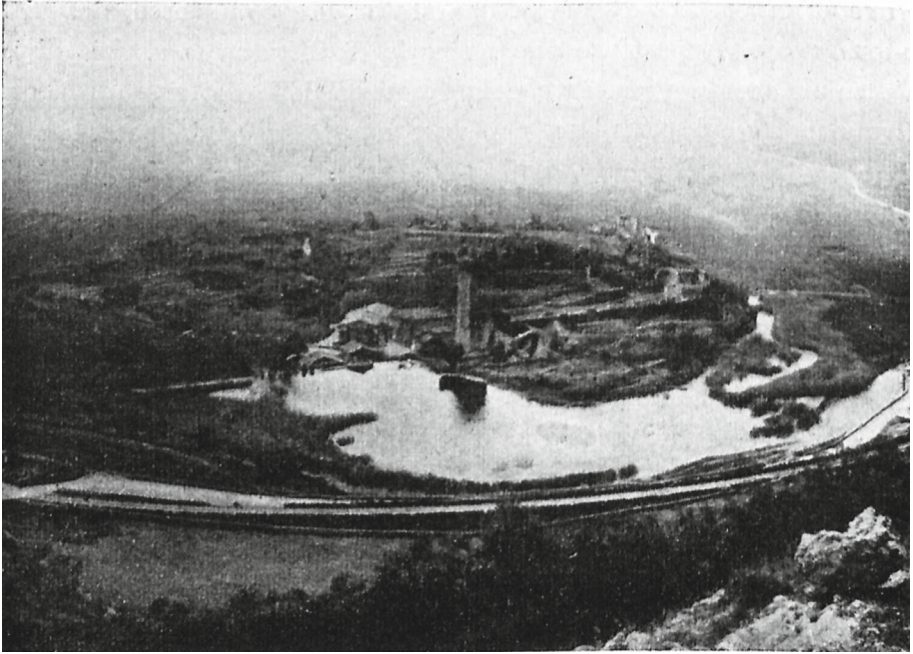
Some documents dating back to the classical period indicate that a temple dedicated to nymphs existed in the area where the ruins of Ninfa now stand. In 1908, during the construction of a hydraulic project in the river of Ninfa, a large amount of opus quadratum of the Roman epoch was found, which formed the parata of the banks and the base of a temple, dedicated to Nymphæus, together with lots of coins and tiny objects of common use at that time.<sup>4</sup> But it was only in the Middle Ages that Ninfa had the honor of forming an inhabited center.



**Fig. 1.** Moscioni, ‘Torre di Ninfa’ (source: *Domus Caietana: storia documentata della famiglia*, Roma, 1927, vol. 1, Prima Parte, p. 310).

<sup>3</sup> The history of Ninfa could date back to the Roman era, according to Tomassetti, the first document described a temple dedicated to water Nymphs. The city of Ninfa actually was born in the Middle ages. In c.750 A.C., when it was the property of the Empire, Emperor Costantine V gave it to Pope Zaccaria as a present, and from then on it became an important fortress in the religious wars and war against the Normanno of south Italy, when the family Conti Tuscolani possessed the area and Rome; during the period of Pope Gregorio VII, the Frangipani arrived in Ninfa, and around 1110 Pope Pasquale II occupied it; in the year 1159, the solemn coronation of Pope Alessandro III was held in the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore at Ninfa with the help of the Lega Lombarda; when the Pope Niccolò IV assign the income of Ninfa to his doctor Giovanni da Lucca in 1279, the new rich family Caetani was forming its power and property; before long, the Caetani have already arrived in Ninfa after a serious of dealing with the territories, and have started to focus on the property of Pontine Marshes by the end of the century. See Tomassetti (1910), pp. 393–407.

<sup>4</sup> See Tomassetti et al. (1910), p. 394.



**Fig. 2.** View of Ninfa from the mountain ‘*Veduta generale di Ninfa dal monte*’ (source: Tomassetti, G., *La Campagna romana antica, medioevale e moderna*. Roma, 1910, vol. 2: Via Appia, Ardeatina ed Aurelia, p. 394).

The Pontine Marshes caused the fall of the city from the modern times,<sup>5</sup> which finally became obsolescent and ruined in the second half of the 17th century. But still, the same Pontine, plenty of water, is the key source for the river and the lake of Ninfa. The image of the tower of Ninfa reflected upon the lake contributes to the impressive beauty of the land. And today, the major part of the botanical garden is situated on both sides along the river (see Figs. 1, 2 and 9).

## 2 Project of the Gardens of Ninfa

Nowadays, the mention of Ninfa or Sermoneta in Latina, a province in the region of Lazio, easily reminds us of the magnificent family of Caetani. The last generations of the family settled in the palace of Rome, and the castle of Sermoneta, which is about 15-min. drive from the gardens of Ninfa. The firmly binomial Ninfa-Caetani, however, refers to the continued contribution of the Foundation Roffredo Caetani, which is in charge of the gardens’ design, administration, managements and opening up to the public.

As is recorded in *DOMUS CAIETANA*, the Caetani family acquired Ninfa in 1297,<sup>6</sup> and owned it till the last descendant Lelia Caetani and her husband Hubert Howard,

<sup>5</sup> In Italian context, the word ‘*moderna*’ refers to the period since Renaissance.

<sup>6</sup> See Caetani (1927), Vol. 1, Seconda Parte, p. 276

then they left it under the management of the Fondazione Roffredo Caetani di Sermoneta Onlus (also in short, the Foundation Roffredo Caetani, which is different from the Foundation Camillo Caetani of Rome).

The decadence of Ninfa has to be attributed to the bad governance of the Pontine. The diminution of the inhabitants could be resulted from the serious marshy miasmas. People emigrated to settle at Norma, Sermoneta, and even at Cisterna, which actually wasn't immune from the exhalation miasmas. By Giulio Cardinal Piazza's visit on January 28th, 1681, the city was already abandoned and covered with the plants and moss. However, when Cardinal Altieri, the brother of Clemente X, visited the place at around 1670, he could still see the city with considerable residents. Therefore, we can assume that the city was possibly abandoned between the year 1675 and 1680.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the Caetani believed the draining of the Pontine, the appropriate management and administration would restore the Nymphs' place.

'How many generations can still see Ninfa?' Camille Enlart questioned in 1920<sup>8</sup>.

Ada Bootle-Wilbraham, wife of Onorato Caetani, 14th Duke of Sermoneta, the mother of Leone, Roffredo, Livio, Giovannella, Gelasio and Michelangelo, who were the penultimate generation of the Family Caetani, took obvious English influence upon their lifestyle. Ada was born in 1846 in London, from an English Lord family, whose father was a younger son of the first Lord Skelmersdale<sup>9</sup>. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Onorato and Ada took their children to Ninfa. Ada asked the farmer who occupied Ninfa to clear away some of the ivy so that more could be seen of the walls. Her great passion was roses. At Fogliano, where the family was mostly residing outside Rome, Ada had a small rose garden, from which she first brought the roses to Ninfa.<sup>10</sup>

Leone Caetani, the most glorious figure of the last generations, was an orientalist, islamist and historian, being familiar with Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Sanskrit, and Akkadian, maybe also Turkish. His experience at Ninfa could date back to 1900, when he met his first wife Vittoria Colonna, whom he married in 1901.<sup>11</sup>

Gelasio Caetani, the penultimate generation of the family, undertook the beginning work to restore the ruins between 1920 and 1922, which concerned mainly with the draining works of the marshes, before the project of the transformation of the large estate started.

For the current romantic beauty of the gardens, we have to thank Roffredo Caetani, for whose honor the Foundation was named, and his wife Marguerite Chapin. Roffredo is the second son of Onorato Caetani and Ada Wilbraham, also from the penultimate

<sup>7</sup> See Piazza (1703), pp. 50–51.

<sup>8</sup> According to Alberto Forni's research, at that time Ninfa was the so-called 'la città morta', the dead city, and was meant to be an electrical center near a railway station. See Forni (1990).

<sup>9</sup> Quest-Ritson (2009), pp. 27–28.

<sup>10</sup> See Caracciolo et al., (1995), pp. 66–68.

<sup>11</sup> See Caetani. (1929). According to the memoir of Vittoria Colonna Caetani, Duchess of Sermoneta, Things Past, her experience in Caetani family was not very enjoyable. Apart from Ninfa and the family's residence in Rome, she also recorded the rose garden of Ada in Caetani's villa at Fogliano.



generation. He met his wife in Paris in 1911. In the 1930s the couple finally returned to Rome and Ninfa and settled there.

Marguerite Chapin, who was born in New England of the United States, started her interventions on the gardens by introducing many rare plants, for example cherry blossom, different roses, Japanese flowering crabapple, and other shrubs, as well as starting other works, which were described as redefining Ninfa as 'a symbol of culture and art'. When the Caetani still lived at Villa Romaine in Versailles, they had such a passion for arts and literatures worldwide, that Marguerite founded a magazine named '*Commerce*', which was published in French, Italian and English. Back in Italy, she launched a new one named '*Botteghe Oscure*'.<sup>12</sup> Francesco Gabrieli, who was really amazed by the magic scene of the greens and waters, recorded his visit to the gardens.<sup>13</sup> It's believed that the international cosmopolitan experience and comprehensive interests of the couple had a decisive influence on the romantic garden, with marvelous botanical collection and organization adapted to the ruins of the city.

Moreover, there's still Madam Lelia Caetani Howard, the daughter of Roffredo and Marguerite, who should also be paid tribute to, even more than her parents. Born in 1913 at Paris, being one of the last generation, Lelia showed a great talent of painting in her early youth. Lelia had been able to enjoy considerable cultural stimuli and develop her artistic vocation with the help of masters of the Nabis group, especially under the guidance of Edouard Vuillard. Balthus also portrayed her in the painting *Young woman in the park*. From 1933 to 1958, Lelia held series of exhibition at Paris, London, New York and Rome.<sup>14</sup> Doubtlessly, her talent and passion in the post-impressionism paintings contributed a lot to the extraordinary beauty of the garden of Ninfa nowadays.

In 1932, the family, Roffredo, Marguerite, Lelia and her little brother Camillo, returned to via Botteghe Oscure, their residence in Rome. Later, Lelia settled at Ninfa from 1940. She renovated the garden by eradicating the weeds in the water and introducing the particular plants, which actually set the base of the garden we have seen nowadays. Later, with the help of her husband, Hon. Hubert Howard, she established the Foundation of Roffredo Caetani in the name of her father to manage the gardens till today.<sup>15</sup> The Howards were one of the oldest families in England, and in Victorian times the Howards had a dramatic hillside landscape garden, planting over 500,000 trees and adding a pinetum in 1846.<sup>16</sup> Hubert, educated at Downside School and at Cambridge University, remained in England till 1940 to volunteer for the British expeditionary force to Finland, and moved to Italy in 1941. It's reasonable to believe that Lelia's English taste, her love for the peaceful country life and her naturalistic inclination as we found at Ninfa probably could be also related to her husband's influence. Her talent for gardening and interests in the rare plants may be attributed to the gene of the family, as is shown by a document from the seventeenth century about the purchasing of rare plants from a skilled merchant destined to their garden of Cisterna,<sup>17</sup> which was also mentioned in

<sup>12</sup> See Dennett (2016), also see Petroni (1990)

<sup>13</sup> See Gabrieli, F. (1990)

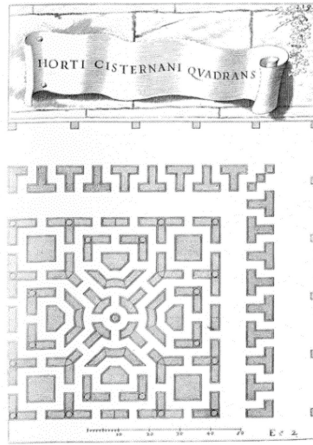
<sup>14</sup> See Riccio, B., Bianchi, L., (2001), p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> See Howard (1990).

<sup>16</sup> See Quest-Ritson, C., (2009), p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> See Ferrari G. B., (1638), Libro Terzo, pp. 217–219.

book of Giovan Battista Ferrari, as a great example to show how to maintain a flower garden (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** ‘HORTI CISTERMANI QUADRANS’ (source: engraving from Ferrari, G. B., *Flora sive De Florum Cultura*, Roma, 1638.)

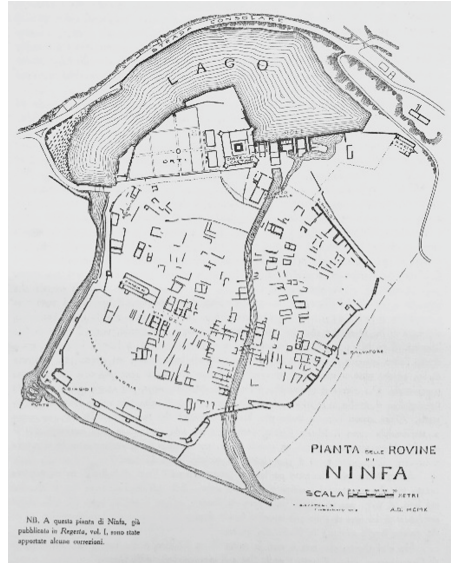
With such plenty documents of the Caetani, we still didn’t find any trace to see if there was an architect on the project of the gardens of Ninfa. It is believed that the family themselves made the major decisions and worked out the designs of the whole works, accomplishing the transformation from the medieval ruins to a unique English landscape garden.

### 3 The Landscape Structure of the Garden of Ninfa, and the Mis-named ‘Chinese Garden’ Along the River of Ninfa

The unique character of the garden of Ninfa, resulted from the effort of the legendary family, is certainly not only due to the widespread Italian garden, but more, it’s a result of the mysterious ruins of the medieval city buried under the green plants. Thanks to the favorable climate of Pontine, located near the source of the water, the fertility of the earth and less intrusion by visitors since it was deserted, the growth of plants in the botany is almost triple as those of the outside. Underneath these plants, the great architectural fragments contain such a rich history of about the medieval city, which is exceptional not only in Italy, but worldwide (Fig. 4).

‘PIANTA DELLE ROVINE DI NINFIA’ from *Domus Caietana* shows the condition of the ruined city in the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The ‘plan of the Garden of Ninfa’ (see Fig. 5), shows us almost the same condition as we can see it today. The lake and the river of Ninfa can be easily recognized. The ruined churches are highlighted with the red circles, which were constructed along the city wall, and with the red rectangle, ‘S. Maria Maggiore’, which was the cathedral of the city during the middle Ages, in the center of the city. The baronial castle and city



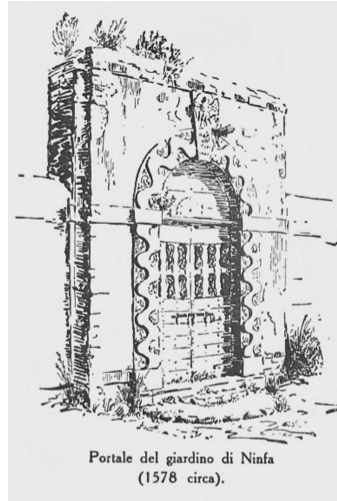
**Fig. 4.** Plan of the ruins of Ninfa '*Pianta delle Rovine di Ninfa*' (source: *Domus Caietanae: storia documentata della famiglia*, Roma, 1927, vol. 1, Prima Parte, p. 308.)



**Fig. 5.** Plan of the Garden of Ninfa (author, 2016)

hall are marked out as well. Then, *Sorgenti dei Bambù* is also pointed out with the green circle, along the river.





**Fig. 6.** ‘*Portale del giardino di Ninfa (1578 circa.)*’ Gate of the enclosed garden, about 1578, (source: *Domus Caietanae: storia documentata della famiglia*, Roma, 1933, vol. 2, p. 168.)

The water descending from Monti Lepini formed the lake of Ninfa next to the castle, from which the most popular images of Ninfa are taken. The striking figure of the tower is located in the center of the castle, which could be seen in the plan. The wall around the castle and *Hortus Conclusus*, the enclosed garden, marked the border between the baronial residential area and the medieval city of Ninfa, in other words, the contemporary landscape garden of Ninfa (Fig. 6).

*Hortus Conclusus*, the pretty little garden inside the wall, located amid the lake of Ninfa, the castle, and the abandoned city, is not the main topic of this paper, but from which we can also find the trace of the English taste, the collection of rare plants worldwide. The main path in the garden connected the castle and the west border of a baroque pond, and along the path are dotted the main nurseries of the Japanese oranges, lemons, and some other citrus trees. At the center of the nurseries there is a pond of lotus, while on the other end of the path there are two pools for the swans. Behind the castle, there are the bamboos in the deepest corner between the castle and the lake, obviously a symbol of the Orient.

The ruins of the city of Ninfa occupied the major part of the plan, in which two rivers streaming down from the lake of Ninfa run along the confines and through the center of the city, heading for the Tyrrhenian sea. The double-wall partly remained, with the southeast part hardly damaged, and fortunately the gates of the city and the towers attached on the walls also left with that. As is talked before, the city was cut into two parts by the river of Ninfa, it could be seen with the words ‘*via del ponte*’, which means the street of the bridge. Obviously, it refers to the principle road of the city, crossing with the river and connecting the two gates on the east and west side. The dominant buildings, the churches, which can be recognized with the apses, were marked out by the names, ‘S. GIOVANNI’, ‘S. SALVATORE’, ‘S. BIAGIO’, etc. More of which, the master public space is marked out as ‘PIAZZA DELLA GLORIA’. Remarkably, the church named ‘S.

*MARIA. Maggiore*', at the crossing of the city wall and the principal road Via Del Ponte, was the very one where the Pope Alessandro III was coronated after fleeing away from Rome soon after being elected, haunted by the antipope Vittore IV, heading for Napoli. As is shown in the plan, nowadays the ground of the church is covered by grass, the apse left mainly even with a fresco of the figures, and the facade of which was re-enforced in the recent restoration work (directed by the faculty of architecture, university of Rome, La Sapienza, in 2015). Almost all the other churches were located at the gates of the city, which can be supposed as one of the characters of the medieval fortress city.

Upon this context of the ruins, the English landscape garden was formed. Along the trace of the city walls were planted pines in lines, to imply the missing parts. A remarkable collection of plants could be seen like the roses on the ruins of the church, the ivy on the top of the walls, as well as the cherry blossoms grown up in their own spontaneous and natural shape and occupied a thematic area. In this way, we arrive at the 'Chinese Garden', on the bank of the river of Ninfa, which formed here a single pool with a tiny stone bridge and a little forest of bamboo as its background (see Fig. 7).



**Fig. 7.** '*Sorgente dei Bambù*', Spring with bamboo, the mis-named 'Chinese Garden', in the Garden of Ninfa (author, 2019)

#### 4 The English Landscape Garden and the Garden of Ninfa

It's quite opportune that, after we have understood the history of the planning of the garden of Ninfa, and seen that it was built upon the ruins of the city, some short consideration can be made, on what is a garden, from which kind of the historical and philosophical circumstance the English landscape garden developed, and to face the profound analysis of the characters of gardens of Ninfa.

There is no doubt that a garden is an extremely vulnerable artificial reality, basing on the organized work of nature materials. Many different languages the words: art, artifice, artificial, have the same root. On the works of gardens, artificial refers to the combination of art and nature, which means the importance and acclimation of the plants, even when they are from very different origins. In the sixteenth century, Jacopo Bonifadio called it 'a third nature (*una terza natura*)', which is related to the Roman writer Cicero's phrase

'*alteram naturam*', a second nature, indicating a landscape with the elements which men and women introduce into the physical world to make it more habitable. Cicero's implication of a primal nature is what we call the wilderness today.<sup>18</sup>

Different from the Italian garden, also called the architectural garden, and French formal garden which is more popular and diffused on the whole Europe before the 18th century, the English landscape garden as generally visualized typically, would consist of 'undulating grass that leads somewhere down to an irregularly shaped piece of water over which a bridge arches, of trees grouped casually, with cattle or deer about the slopes, and of houses and other buildings glimpsed in the middle or far distance'.<sup>19</sup>

As early as the sixteenth century, still seen in the engravings, Tudor garden was a small, carefully organized, and confined by the high walls. While from the seventeenth century, under the influence of the Italian Renaissance forms, a typical English enthusiasm arose for its 'variety, the juxtaposition of regularity and irregularity, the elaborate manipulation of visitors, and its invocation, even recreation, of the vanished glories of antique Roman villas'.<sup>20</sup> After that, the English garden also took the inspiration from France, for its formal layout with dominant palace, axial and radial avenues, its vistas and political and social image; and from Netherlands for its smaller scale and great use of the plants and flowers. In the early 1700s, the English landscape garden movement started to have a critical view of the Italian garden and the French formal garden, while contemporarily the English society picked up the idea of liberty and democracy. At that time an English mode of gardening was characterized by local solutions and by a more flexible handling of the ratio of art to nature, so called 'rural' gardening. Literature, painting and gardening started to be talked about together. Pliny the younger's praise for the country house inspired the Italian Renaissance gardens to admire an adjacent countryside view, which was also assimilated by the English taste, as well as what they learned from the Palladium architecture. So as today, we see the extensive views in the English landscape garden as one of its important character. The seventeenth century landscape paintings of Claude and Poussin also contributed to the English sense of classical scene, together with the literature. Apart from these two central factors, the influence of actual theatre designs and the development of botanical, horticultural and agricultural science also promoted the flourish of the landscape garden. In the second half of the eighteenth century, comes the maturity of the English landscape gardening movement. During this period, 'Capability' Brown's design prominently could be seen as representative of the English garden. At the same time, Sir William Chambers' writing and his design of Kew Garden continued to emphasize the rise of Orientalism. While during this period the picturesque taste also became controverted by some of the architects and gardenists, like Richard Payne Knight, Uvedale Price and Humphry Repton.

On the continent, it was the French who first recognized the peculiar Englishness on the landscape Garden. They also noticed the temples and the oriental ornaments. They named it as *Le Jardin Anglais*,<sup>21</sup> the English Garden, or *Le Gout Anglo-Chinois*,<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See Hunt (1992), pp. 3–4.

<sup>19</sup> See Hunt, (1988), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> See Clark (1948), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> See Symes (2016), p. 21.

the Anglo-Chinese taste. As they could easily get the direct images and more precise knowledge of Chinese garden and ornamental figures, when the French came to create landscape gardens, they saw themselves as beholden to both England and China, use a more flexible language, which was not specifically English.<sup>23</sup>

In Italy, the formal Renaissance and baroque garden was so celebrated and firmly rooted in the territory, plus there was a tradition of French garden in Piemonte region. However, by the 1780s and 1790s, the ideas of English landscape garden started to be transmitted and spread.<sup>24</sup> In the heart of Italy, Italy, Rome, there are many excellent examples to show the Italians favour of the landscape garden. Throughout the eighteenth century, more and more landscape features were added in Villa Doria Pamphilj in its outer sloping area around *Villa Vecchia*, the old villa, a suburban villa of Pamfilio Pamfili, which in a naturalistic manner, changed the historic estate to a more extensive, English landscape garden. Not having the enormous territory like Villa Pamphiji, in the centre area of the city, Villa Borghese, with its pre-existed historical Italian villas in a hilly area, underwent a transformation into 'a garden of romantic inspiration' under the supervision of the Scottish landscape designer Jacob Moore, whose works concentrated on modifying the delicate area by *il lago di Vico*, the lake of Vico, centred in the villa area. By adding the Temple of Aesculapius on the island, Moore created a perfectly balanced scenery with a rotunda, a Temple of Diana, and reflected the prevalent romantic taste for ruins.

In *Essay on Modern Gardening* published in 1770, Horace Walpole mentioned that: 'adieu to canals, circular basins, and cascades tumbling down marble steps, that last absurd magnificence of Italian and French villas. The forced elevation of cataracts was no more. the gentle stream was taught to serpentine seemingly at its pleasure, and where discontinued by different levels, its course appeared to be concealed by thickets properly interspersed, and glittered again at a distance where it might be supposed naturally to arrive. Its borders were smoothed, but preserved their waving irregularity.'<sup>25</sup> These words all perfectly match the description of the lake and the river of Ninfa.



**Fig. 8.** Path at the façade of the church S. Maria Maggiore (author, 2016)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 106–112.

<sup>25</sup> See Walpole (1904), pp. 57, 59.



**Fig. 9.** River of Ninfa, with the ruins of the medieval city (author, 2016)

Another irregularity of the English garden is that, the paths should be designed serpentine, and it's best not to distinguish the different classes of the paths. Most of the guided routes for the visitors in Ninfa are arranged directly on the earth, among the ruins of the medieval buildings (see Fig. 8). But the central paths, which are too often frequented, are paved with the tuff bricks to remind the big groups of visitors not to set foot in the dirt area that reserved for the plants. That's because, the main structure of the garden is formed by the Caetani basing on the original urban structure of the medieval city and its ruins. The principle roads of the formal city could be easily recognized even today, which arrive at the city gates and most of the highlights of the garden: the churches, the river, the plaza and the castle. The recommendation of the director of the gardens, Lauro Marchetti, refers to the manner to manage the historical-naturalistic garden on the two essential conditions: 1) The visit of the garden should be made in the appropriate period at the demand of the garden, 2) Above all, it should be guided, which was determined on the conservational philosophy, and the spirit of the couple Lelia and Hubert Howard.<sup>26</sup> These guidelines demanded that, the organization of the tour path

<sup>26</sup> See Marchetti (1990), p. 378.

should be established mainly on the formal roads of the city in case not to damage the context of the medieval city, and what else, to invent some new route, for example, to arrive and pass the plaza of Gloria, which remains as an open space but covered with grass and bushes of lavender, that formed a new way of going, paved with tufa bricks.

When we try to answer, why Ninfa was converted into an English landscape garden, besides the ruined site of the city, the personal experience of the members of the family Caetani should not be ignored.

Under the English cultural influence by his English mother, so as her passion for the roses, at the same time with an emotional connection with the family history and the history of other roman families and the territory, it is not too hard to understand the primary hydraulic works and the restoration of the castle and some other buildings in Ninfa by Gelasio Caetani, not to say that his great efforts in writing of the history of the family, *Domus Caietana*.

Roffredo and Marguerite had long-time living experience in Paris, where it was very easy to take international cultural influences, especially from the other side of the channel. As they were both deeply immersed in the good taste of art and literature, and lived in the villa Romaine in Versailles with open-air vistas, which can be seen from the historical photos of the Archive Caetani at Rome, it was doubtless that they would be easily fascinated of the landscape of Pontine Marshes.

When Lelia was born in the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century in Paris, the center of art and artists was dominated with the atmosphere of Post-impressionism. As a student and friend of the master of Nabis Edouard Vuillard, Lelia herself was a brilliant painter. Her talent of the painting probably also stimulated her genius of gardening, to transform Ninfa into such a picturesque English landscape garden.

The discussion on the English garden is always open even nowadays, not to ignore the influence of the English art works, and the change of the social thinking and the common taste of the fine arts. The story of the influence of China on the development of the English garden in the 18th century is quite well known.

Before the eighteenth century, the most famous essay on the Chinese gardens in England is from Sir William Temple's *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus: or of gardening*, published in the year 1685. The relevant reading on *A History of Garden Art* by M. L. Gothein shows us the key points of the oriental gardens, mainly the Chinese and the Japanese, is the admiration and imitation of Nature and the irregularity and diversity. Many scholars see the English taste of naturalism and irregularity came from China and oriental culture.

It's reasonable to notice that the year of the publication of the essay by Sir William Temple is contemporaneous to the Restoration of 1660–1688. In this period, the Royal Society had a major influence on the selection of the architecture style of the Kingdom, which could be seen as a comparative study of the Chinese gardens. The Royal Society concerned endeavored to establish a systematic method for the collection of information for its history, to send out a large and varied group of contacts all over the world. They became interested in Chinese architecture for its influence on speculations about the nature architecture. Similarly, the character of the Chinese garden, especially the part that they can use for a reference in their garden culture is focused on the naturalism and the critic thinking or disapproving on the geometric forms. The effects could be



seen on Addison's essay published on *Spectator* no. 414 (June 25, 1712) that, 'I do not know whether I am singular in my Opinion, but, for my own part, I would rather look upon a Tree in all its Luxuriancy and Diffusion of Boughs and Branches, than when it is thus cut and trimmed into a Mathematical Figure; and cannot but fancy that an Orchard in Flower looks infinitely more delightful, than all the little Labyrinths of the more finished Parterre.' Unfortunately, the valuation on the Chinese garden, just like the Chinese architecture, of high quality and of great antiquity, was highly admired, but the antiquity was not easy to be adapted to a different culture, the famous example is the ten-floored tower in the Kew Gardens at London.

But, on the other hand, according to the researches of Michel Symes, there were many misunderstandings of the ornamental language in the descriptions of English garden, and not like direct connections with China in the countries of the continent, the direct knowledge of actual Chinese architecture and garden were rare on the other side of the channel before 1750. And before Sir William Temple's introduction of the Chinese garden, there were already the inspiration from naturalism into scenery. From Symes' point of view, the Frenches picked the appellation of *Le Gout Anglais-chinois* is 'because when they came to create landscape gardens, they saw themselves as beholden to both England and China', and for the French, the characteristic elements of the landscape gardening were sometimes not particularly English. When he came to the pagoda in Kew garden, he saw it mostly an adoptive and playful use of Chinese forms in a decidedly rococo way of ornamentation.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of '*Sorgente dei Bambù*', actually I found a possible explanation of the presence of bamboo there. In the Caetani's temporary residence in Fogliano, they have a holiday villa by the side of Lago di Fogliano, which is along the beach of Tyrrhenian Sea. In the garden of the villa there was a church. When Ada was living there with her family, taking care of her small rose garden, she also had imported the emblematic Chinese plant of bamboo, probably the first case in Italy. She planted them around the church.<sup>28</sup> The bamboo was also introduced to Ninfa after that. Since a catholic family might thought the church as the origins of the life of human beings, in this light, the spring offers origin to the river of Ninfa, while the water of the river offers the fantastic vitality and beauty of the garden of Ninfa.

As we re-examine the gardens of Ninfa, the antiquity and historical ruins occasionally emerge as its most honorable value. It's the favorable experience, the unexpectable stray among the medieval ruins and the half-lighted shadows of the giant trees, that formed the magic scene, as Francesco Gabrieli had seen decades before, which makes the romantic phenomena and the singularity of the gardens highly admirable.

## 5 Conclusion

Ninfa's history is hidden underneath the evergreen ivy, the stone pines, the roses and flower blooming. The river of Ninfa keeps running through it, watering and fertilizing the marvelous beauty of the garden and the territory

<sup>27</sup> See Symes (2016), p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> See Rossetti (2002), pp. 39–40.

As we have seen, during the nascence, growth, maturity and wide-spreading of the English landscape garden, many different factors left their marks on its characters and stylistic components, which formed its remarkable variety, irregularity, naturalistic taste, extensive vistas outside the confines of the garden, and some elements of the far-east architectural and garden language. After its arrival in the continent, the Frenches named it as '*Le Jardin Anglais*' and noticed its naturalism and peculiarities as close in the taste to the Chinese garden. While in Italy its picturesque language is highly welcomed and beloved national wide, and pleasurably combined with abundant historic ruins and heritage.

As far as this is concerned, the garden of Ninfa is quite appropriate to be recognized as an outstanding case of the English landscape garden, while we should notice that it was not a landscape garden designed under the doctrines of irregularity or symbolistic language of antiquity. It was a natural fruit of its well conserved ruins from medieval ages, and the cultivated generations of Caetani. As there are still lots of openminded discussions about the Chinese influence on the English landscape garden, and what's more, in case of Ninfa, we found it more closely connected between 'sorgente dei bambù' and the exceptional family preference, the mis-named 'Chinese garden' seems to relate to a more romantic imagination.

The conservational planning and management of the gardens guarantee the unique scenes of Ninfa, with the ruins conserved by the favorable botanic circumstance, a remarkable garden of culture and art.

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