



BBB

A JOURNEY TO DISCOVER
THE NOBLE MANSIONS
IN SICILY



The three Bs bring to mind, in a modern manner, the famous “Grand Tour” made by such adventure seekers and foreign visitors as Goethe, Houell, Vivant Denon, Gonzalvo de Neruo, Patrick Brydone and Dumas’s father. With the publication of their “Carnet de Voyage” they led the way for educated aristocrats and renowned artists, free-thinkers and poets towards the southern countries that had always caught the northern people’s fancy. Sicily, in particular, was known as the Wonderland.

The modern visitor has the chance to be welcomed in the same residences of that time and to dive in the picturesque environment that keeps all the fascination of those ancient times.

The house-owners’ tales will help you feel the site’s soul. You will experience interesting talks in a mythical Mediterranean garden, sipping a citrus fruit drink, or tasting the family’s traditional recipes full of the intense fragrances and ambience of a sicilian palace.



PALAZZO BISCARI



There are edifices - illustrious or not - so loved by their owners that they make it their goal to preserve the soul of their palaces: this is certainly the case of Palazzo Biscari and its most distinguished inhabitant, Ignazio Paternò Castello, 5th prince of Biscari.

THE EARTHQUAKE AND THE NEW PALACE

The birth of this majestic edifice, “chef d’oeuvre” of the Sicilian Baroque art movement, has a very tragic past: the catastrophic earthquake which in January 1693 hit Val di Noto, destroying approximately 45 villages and causing the death of more than



PALAZZO BISCARI

60,000 people. Ignazio Paternò Castello, 3rd Prince of Biscari received permission to build his new palace on the old city walls, which had resisted the devastation caused by the earthquake, and were built in the sixth century by Charles V. The architect Alonzo di Benedetto was in charge of this challenging task.

“IL GRANDE PRINCIPE”

The project was subsequently carried on by Ignazio's son, Vincenzo, who commissioned the sculptor Antonino Amato from Messina to decorate the seven large windows facing the sea - which until the 1920s skirted the old walls of the palace. The construction of the palace was finally completed by Ignazio,



son of Vincenzo, whom like his grandfather the “great prince” gave to the palace a strong aspect of his multi-faceted personality.

THE MUSEUM

Ignazio was a passionate archeologist, a member of various literary and artistic academies throughout Europe and an art collector. His taste for the arts led him to building a public theatre inside the medieval walls on which the palace was erected. Additionally, he added an extra wing to the palace where he created a private museum in which his archeological collections were exhibited, a kind of Sicilian “Wunderkammer”. The construction was at first directed by Girolamo Palazzotto (from 1751 to 1757) and secondly by another architect called Francesco Battaglia (in 1764). But by 1758 the palace had already

been officially inaugurated with great enthusiasm. The palace immediately became a major attractions for foreign visitors extending their travels to Sicily.

ILLUSTRIOUS VISITORS

Many of the guests visiting the Palace were of great importance. In 1767 Joseph Herman von Riedesel, one of the first classicists in the 18th century who achieved

his dream of visiting “Magna Graecia”; in 1770 Patrick Brydone, author of the book *Viaggio in Sicilia e Malta*; in 1774 Domenico Sestini, an abbot from Florence who accepted to stay in the palace for three years at the Prince’s service for the Numismatics collection; in 1778 Dominique Vivant Denon, future renovator



of the Louvre and founder of Egyptology; in 1780 Sir John Soane, the great British architect who apparently took inspiration from the museo Biscari in order to set out his own various collections still viewable today in his luxurious museum in London; and also Jean-Pierre Houël a famous French aquarelle painter. However, the guest who is recognized to be the most noteworthy, Wolfgang Goethe, didn’t meet the owner of the palace who had died the year before his arrival, but still had the chance to visit the edifice and the prince’s collections with great interest.





MONCADA PATERNO' CASTELLO

Despite the loss of the works of art contained in the museum, the history of the palace didn't cease to exist. The family Moncada Paternò Castello has curate with great care the building, prolonging its history until now. In the decades of the twentieth century, the palace has lived through a kind of "revolution" because of the decision to open its halls to the public and using them to host various events. Nowadays, when entering the palace through the majestic doorway topped by the family coat of arms which is decorated with ears of wheat to symbolize the famine of 1763 and the generosity of prince Ignazio V who offered the harvest of his fields to help the starving population, visitors can experience a real step back into the past.

THE VISIT

The main court (the palace contains four in total) leads visitors towards the central stairs, which take them to the magnificent halls of the edifice. Paintings representing the family's ancestors are hung in the solemn entrance of the halls; after crossing the two following rooms we arrive in the "sala delle feste" (Ballroom), which can be described as an "inner court" paved with beautiful ceramic bricks from Vietri. The room is decorated with a profusion of elegant, refined "stucchi", large mirrors and frescoes painted by Matteo Desiderato and Sebastiano Lo Monaco. A cloud-shaped staircase, recognized as a "chef d'oeuvre" of Rococo art, enables the visitors to access the upper floor of the "sala delle feste", where the orchestra was once located. The adjacent "appartamento della principessa" (The apartment



of the princess) contains a room with *"boiseries en bois de rose"* and a marble pavement dating from the Roman empire. A section of the famous collection of ambers, coins and engraved shells used to be displayed inside showcases located in this space, unfortunately this treasure was dispersed among past generations of the family.

THE BIRD GALLERY

However the secrets of the palace are not limited to these rooms: the apartment alongside the halls, nowadays still inhabited by the descendants of the Moncada family, contains two of the most renowned spaces: the bird gallery also known in the past as the porcelain gallery, and the *"Don Quixote"* drawing room decorated with painted canvases relating Miguel de Cervantes famous novel. Despite its agitated

history of wars and revolutions, (during the second world war, the sala delle feste was used by the Allies as an indoor tennis court, probably the most precious of the planet!) the palace remains unharmed and still alive, acting as a mute testimony of new and important events, following the flow of its precious history. Ingazio the great prince, we can be sure, could not have dreamed of a greater future for his beloved creation...



IL BIVIERE

THE GARDEN OF MYTH AND THE NECTAR OF THE GODS

Many years ago the art history professor Cesare Brandi said *"This is a garden born as if by magic!"*

His magic is the spell of the myth.

Donna Maria Carla Borghese, the lady of the house, welcomes the guests in Saint Andrews' Chapel and tells the fascinating story of the sites.

It's a story that cannot be revealed in advance not to spoil the joy of discovery. It is a fascinating legend that will tell you more about Hercules, Demeter, Frederic II and the Templars, about a lake that became a garden of calm, colours and scents.



The Biviere was a unique fief for its importance and extension of 1300 hectares and the richness of its natural ecosystem.



THE OWNERS

In 1392 King Martino donated this fief to an ancestor of Prince Branciforte of Butera, who had the most important aristocratic title in the entire Sicily. In 1604 Prince Francesco Branciforte was very much invested in the development

of the fief. He married Giovanna d'Austria, daughter of Giovanni the winner of the battle of Lepanto. Their daughter, Margherita d'Austria Branciforte spent her life in Militello Val di Catania, just a few miles from the lake.



THE BORGHESE FAMILY

Generation after generation the lake got to Princess Sofia Lanza Branciforte of Butera, who married Prince Giangiacomo Borghese, and it was then inherited by their son Scipione.

The Borghese family is one of the most renowned Italian families. It is also included in the Gotha along with the royal families from all over the world. Hailing from Siena from the 1200s, the Borghese family counts among its ancestors Saint Catherine of Siena, patroness of Europe and Italy; Pico della



Mirandola; Pope Paulus V whose name is featured on the facade of Saint Peter's Basilica, and the renowned Cardinal Scipio who commissioned Villa Borghese in Rome.

The well-known Borghese chapel is within the Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome. The Altar features the *Madonna Nera* "Salus Populi Romani" which is worshipped and visited by thousands of pilgrims.

THE LAKE DISAPPEARS

In 1930, due to malaria, lake-draining activities began and were completed in the 50's. Just before 1970 Scipione Borghese and his wife Maria Carla Sanjust di Teulada decided to leave Palermo with their four young children and to live at the Biviere. They planned on transforming this place in a farm of citrus groves and wheat.

The land, without any trees or plants, was not hospitable.

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It was just a vast, fallow, abandoned land. The property consists of the main house, the chapel dedicated to Saint Andrew, patron Saint of fishermen, and the “*Locanda*” renowned for its particular colour.

THE BIRTH OF A GARDEN

At the beginning of their life at the Biviere, Maria Carla Borghese would sit for hours on the stairs facing west, charmed by the sunset’s colours and by a fine sensation of peace. She would meditate on what to do with the poor land around her.



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She had to rely on her imagination and not much on her knowledge. She imagined a green garden gently degrading to west, as if it were running after the sun until its last ray of sunlight.

When Maria Carla was imagining how to make the Biviere alive again, she did not want to leave out the ancient docks that belonged to the port which surrounded the land around the house. She imagined two long flower-beds of succulents on the docks of the old port’s stones. The Irish garden architect Patrick Bowe later called it “a verdant harbour”. He was enchanted by the *Yuccas Elephantipes* planted in the shelter of the docks, which looked like imposing sailing ships at anchor.





THE VISITORS

Many were the renowned visitors who fell in love with the garden. Just to name a few: Queen Elisabeth, "the Queen Mother", Prince Charles, the King and the Queen of Belgium, art-historians, garden architects, history professors as Robert Lane Fox from Oxford, directors, actors and writers like Sciascia and Quasimodo. When the visitors go away, the scents of this enchanted garden remain in their hearts and in their minds won over by its beauty.



THE NECTAR OF THE GODS

On the other side of the garden, Ceres' wheat has returned. There is an organic land, farmed by Giangiacoimo Borghese, Scipione and Maria Carla's son, who dedicates all his efforts and his enthusiasm to his work. Blood oranges, blonde oranges, delicious lemons, mandarins and grapefruits, apricots and peaches are greatly demanded. In the fruit packing house they are all prepared to be shipped



all over Europe. It is possible to visit both the farm and the packing house and taste the fruit that reminds of God's nectar.



NEWS

The garden is part of the "Grandi Giardini Italiani" network, a very prestigious association counting more than a hundred gardens.

Its President is Judith

Wade, a woman with a strong personality and culture, who is dedicating herself to increase the visibility of the association all over the world.

In our little shop it is possible to find copies of the book written by the lady of the house, "The garden that wasn't there", published by Silvana Editoriale.

Many magazines and television programs have featured wonderful photos of the garden.



BENEVENTANO PALACE



The "Domus Magna," which stood massive and imposing in one of the handsomest squares in Italy, Piazza Duomo in Syracuse, in the year 1522, after the conquest of Rhodes by Soliman the Magnificent, housed the Religious Order of the Knights of St. Jhon of Jerusalem. After some time the Order left Sicily for the islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino, which had been granted to them by Charles V. This gave beginning to the long

history of the Order of the Knights of Malta. Later, Baron Guglielmo Beneventano del Bosco bought the edifice and started the great transformation of the "Domus Magna" into a baroque palace in keeping with the taste of the period.

"In primis" (first and foremost), in the purchase agreement,





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are these two words: “non nobis”, which express the awareness that the beauty of the new architecture on Piazza Duomo would be a source of unanimous appreciation from all the visitors and a point of pride for the citizens.

Today, the palace projects the graceful shadow of its elegant 18th century design in the center of historical town and is admired by tourists from all over the world.

We marvel at the comprehensive design of architect Luciano Ali. The two courtyards in the interior are divided by a monumental staircase, “one of the most elegant in Sicily”. (Blunt)

The first courtyard is embellished by a mosaic of lava stones and river cobblestones, a rare if not unique example of ornate

baroque; the second one, closed off to the sea side by a terrace with a balcony of perforated “pietra viva” stones, topped by a baroque fountain with three vertical basins through which water roars, evoking cool thoughts in summer time. Friends call it “the singing fountain.”

The interior walls of the palace are decorated with frescos and tempera from Louis XVI through the neoclassical period, enriched by large panels above the doorways, oil on canvas, by Ermenegildo Martorana from Palermo. Of particular interest is the chapel on the first floor tiled in Neopolitan majolica of the 18th century.



GUESTS AND VISITORS

Distinguished guests have stayed in the palace throughout the years. Among these, the owners were honored to host Ferdinando IV, King of the Two Sicilys, memorialized by a large marble stone on the façade, as well as Francesco I and Ferdinando II with



Queen Maria Teresa. To this day, a room in the Palazzo is called Nelson Hall, in memory of the visit by the renowned British Admiral who, in 1800, escorted by Lord and Lady Hamilton, came to Syracuse to have his name inscribed in the Mastra Nobile of the city, to commemorate his victory over the French in Abukir, Victory that saved Sicily from the horrors of the revolution. More recently, the King and Queen of Belgium, the Sovereigns of Liechtenstein, Don Pedro Burbon dos Sicilias, the Duke and the Duchess of Paris, were guests. Also hosted, some of the Gran Maestri of the Order of Malta. Most notable, Fra Philippe de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Fra Angelo de Mojana di Cologna. There is also a long list of artists who have visited the palace, some of whom, from the central balcony, have made drawings, engravings, and paintings of the splendid square below. Famous is The Procession of Santo Spirito and San Filippo, which





was drawn and engraved by Jean Baptiste Houel. In our days, there was Alexander Creswell, watercolor painter of the English royal family, who followed in the footsteps of another famous English painter, Roberts, who 200 years earlier had visited the palace.

BENEVENTANO DEL BOSCO

The history of the Beneventano family in Sicily began towards the end of the fourteen century when Pietro Orsini and two of his sons moved from Naples to Sicily because of "dangerous and powerful enmities."

This event is widely acknowledged



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by historians and heraldry and appears in the documentation of various family trees.

Historians of the time recount that King Pietro d'Aragona, in order to end the strife, forced the three Orsini to adopt the name "Beneventano" from their country of origin.

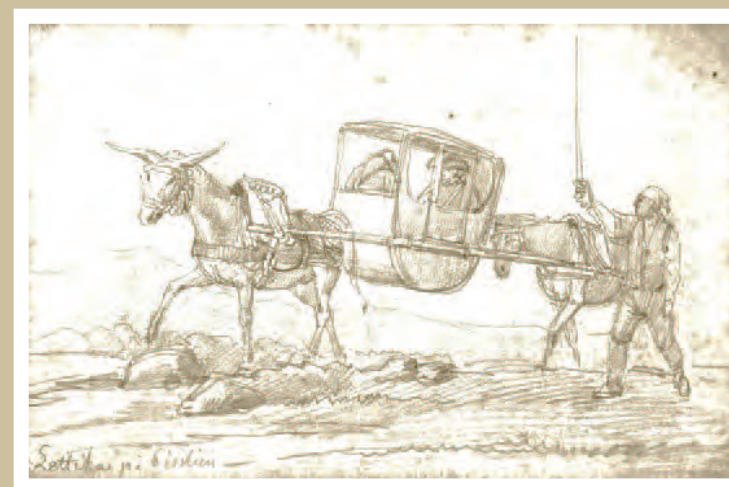
The Beneventano received many important appointments on the island. Gugliermo Beneventano was "balio" to Isabella d'Aragona (who became Queen Elisabeth of Portugal)

and as a reward was given the "Feudo di Ragalna".

They were also given the task of organizing the defense of the Sicilian coastline against Turkish pirates.

From that time the Beneventano family reputation and importance on the island grew and they were fully content with their Sicilian relocation.

It is strange, however, and this leads to some speculation, that according to the archived documents, the Baroni Beneventano, throughout the centuries, would put the name Orsini ahead of Beneventano exclusively in petitions and written communication sent to various Popes.



*J. HERMAN VON RIEDESEL
pencil drawing
Beneventano collection*



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IL BIVIERE

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