



VILLA GREGORIANA

Invitation to visit

VILLA GREGORIANA

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Due to the natural features of Villa Gregoriana, continuous careful actions are often required and paths may be closed to the public. For any further information please contact the staff.





“What beauty, this is already such a fortunate corner of the world, even without the addition of works of art! Nowhere else has nature been so generous to itself. Woodlands with towering trees bend on the rapid current of the river, the foliage reflected in it, the shadow of each tree fleeing along the watercourse”. It was the Latin poet Publius Papinius Statius who gave us this sublime description of the ancient valley furrowed by the River Aniene – today's Villa Gregoriana Park. What elicited his amazement and inspired his poetry was the simultaneous presence of a unique natural habitat and of human ingenuity: behind the ancient acropolis of Tivoli, clinging to a rocky spur and only accessible by bridge, Statius describes a lush, untainted and, above all, vibrant piece of the natural world. Nothing stands still in the notorious 'Valle dell'Inferno' (or 'Valley of Hell'), the beating heart of which is constituted by the tumultuous waters of the Aniene, which – having passed through part of the Tiburtine countryside – come thundering out in this very gorge. The ravine is dominated on the one side by the ancient acropolis with its two temples, and on the other side by the villa of the orator Manlius Vopiscus, which, as Statius tells us, was itself a sensational building. Over the centuries, the reputation of the stunning Aniene waterfalls and of the beautiful town the Ancient Romans called Tibur (modern-day Tivoli) made them must-see destinations for all pilgrims, travellers, aristocrats and artists on their way towards Rome.



Goethe was among those who were amazed by the area: “I was recently in Tivoli, where I admired a breathtaking natural spectacle. The sight of the waterfall there, along with the ruins and the whole landscape, greatly enriches the soul” (1786-88). Goethe visited during the heyday of the Grand Tour, when Italy was the destination of choice for upper-class travellers from all across Europe, affording them an unrivalled classical education. What remains quite remarkable to this day is the quantity of documentary evidence left by these travellers, for many of whom a visit to the so-called 'Valley of Hell' was a *sine qua non* of the Grand Tour. The unique nature of the site lay in the presence of three elements that, in those centuries, constituted the raw research material for every scholar with an interest in the debate between Neo-classicism and Romanticism, the picturesque and the sublime, encompassing the themes of *myth*, *nature* and *history*. Only in relation to Tivoli were there tales of a sacred wood that played host to the revitalising waters of a fast-flowing river and was inhabited by magical, supernatural presences, by *myths*: it was said that those who had completed the descent into the land of the *dii inferi* ('the gods below'), passing through the caves of Neptune and of the Sirens, on reaching the valley floor would come across the Tiburtine sibyl, an enigmatic, oracular divinity with the capacity to respond to any questions put to her; or perhaps they would be attracted by the spirit of the Etruscan king Anius, who had come here on horseback from his homeland in an attempt to save his daughter Salia, who had been carried off by Cathetus, but Anius tragically perished in the river that still bears his name, the Aniene.



Also lurking in the thick woods were the spirits of the two founding fathers of the town: Tiburtus, a Greek exile who, on reaching Latium with his father Catillus and his two brothers, established the first settlement of what would go on to become the town, to which he gave his name – Tibur; and Hercules, tutelary deity of the town. Another crucial element was *history*: as a testament to the founding fathers, but above all out of a desire to put this tough and dangerous area under the protection of the supernatural, the decision was made to construct the acropolis with its two temples, sited at the edge of the gorge. This is a wonderful example of the architecture of the 2nd/1st century B.C.

Last but not least, there was the element that was most celebrated by the Grand Tourists and that provided the backdrop for the Ancient Roman buildings and legends: beautiful, tempestuous *nature*, as embodied by the woodlands and the white water of the Tiburtine canyon. It is a landscape that is undergoing continuous metamorphosis, its destiny inextricably intertwined with the vicissitudes of the river's destructive power; the 'Valley of Hell' is made from travertine limestone, which – aside from being porous and friable – is not heavily compacted, and so is easily moulded by the frenetic water of the Aniene. It was Pliny the Younger who first documented the serious flood that, in 105 B.C., wreaked destruction upon the town, becoming engrained in the collective memory of the Tiburtines due to the inaudible violence with which it swept away dozens of houses, including the villa of Manlius Vopiscus. From that date onwards, the local historical sources document a series of (sometimes surprisingly regular) floods, which claimed numerous victims and caused great material damage.



Repeated efforts were made along the banks of the Aniene and at the brink of the waterfall to divert the course of the floodwater. But the date that marked an irreversible turning point for the town of Tivoli was 16 November 1826, when during the night the torrential rains reached so high as to destroy the banks and the riverbed itself, carrying away dozens of homes and roads and leaving the entire conurbation under water. As Tiburtine native Sante Viola put it: “Tivoli appeared to be under attack”; it was, then, necessary to intervene once and for all to combat the continuous destruction caused by the river. In 1828, the Pontifical Government issued a tender in which it asked engineers and architects to find a solution that would see a dam being erected on the Aniene; but it was only with the election of Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846) that the project was effectively implemented. In 1832, the design of engineer Clemente Folchi was declared the winner. While his plan would protect the town from the fury of the river, it also resulted in changes being made to the acropolis. Completed in 1834-35, Folchi's design involved the creation, under Monte Catillo, of two artificial canals, the so-called **Cunicoli Gregoriani** (Gregorian Tunnels), almost 300 metres long, intended to divert the course of the river directly away from the settlement, so that the town would never again have to face the risk of being overwhelmed whenever the Aniene burst its banks. Unfortunately, the works resulted in the loss of the image that had attracted so many Grand Tourists over the centuries: the 'Valley of Hell' would no longer resonate with the sound of the river, and the sublime view of the waterfalls crashing down to the base of the valley was accessible no more.



This is a factor that would not have been lost on Pope Gregory XVI, who called for the construction of a park featuring a wide variety of evergreen trees and plants, to be located around the new artificial waterfall created as part of Folchi's design. Villa Gregoriana thus came into being, bearing the name of the man who commissioned it.

Bombed during the Second World War (on 26/05/1944 to be precise), the villa was used in the post-war period as an open-air dumping ground by the locals; right up until the 1970s, the park languished in a deplorable state, and the town council had neither the financial nor the human resources to save it. The image we have of the villa today is the upshot of the work done by FAI, Fondo Ambiente Italiano (the Italian National Trust), which for almost five years has been investing a great deal of money and energy to return the 'Valley of Hell' to its original splendour, dealing both with a campaign to reforest the area along the lines set out in 19th-century documents, and with the creation of tourist routes within the park, which aim to highlight once again the natural beauty that had for centuries drawn large numbers of tourists to Tivoli, bewitched by the play of light in the Grotta delle Sirene and by the deafening roar of the Aniene gushing out of the Grotta di Nettuno, at once fascinated and terrified by the fast-flowing river while cradled by a sense of history at the Temple of Vesta and the Temple of the Sibyl.

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FAI takes care, promotes, monitors

Italy's art, nature and landscape.

This is a never-ending task, and so we need all the help we can get – including yours.

Credits

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