

## **Gian Giorgio Trissino, the Villa Cricoli and Palladio**

The fourteenth century Badoer castle at Cricoli in Vicenza came into the Trissino family in the fifteenth century. Gian Giorgio Trissino, a great humanist, poet, dramatist, grammarian, architect and ambassador inherited it from his father at the beginning of the XVI th century.

During the war of 1509 between Venice and the Empire, the Vicentino nobility took sides with the Emperor Maximilian I. A certain Leonardo Trissino, who had been an exile in Germany, crossed into Italy at the head of German troops and occupied Vicenza and Padua. On October 17<sup>th</sup>, the Emperor entered Vicenza with his entourage of Thienes, Da Portos, Chiericatis, Pagellos and Loschis. Gian Giorgio Trissino was with them but the Venetian Republic regained Vicenza on November 12<sup>th</sup> and Gian Giorgio was exiled and his property confiscated.

However his cultural standing and political contacts ensured him a gilded exile. He first followed the Emperor to Germany and then spent time in Milan with the humanist Jacopo Antiquario and Demetrio Calcondila, the teacher of Greek, to whom Gian Giorgio dedicated a stone tablet which can still be seen in the Church of the Passion in Milan. In 1512 he was in Ferrara at the court of Lucrezia Borgia, wife of the Duke of Este and, while in Florence, he was a frequent visitor to the Orti Orcicellari, the academy of Bernardo Rucellai, brother in law of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

In 1513, the newly elected Medici Pope, Leo X, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, sent him to the Emperor as papal envoy to promote peace in Europe and to campaign for the Crusades against the Turks. At the same time, the Pope asked the Doge Loredan for an amnesty for his "dilectus filius" (favoured child), whose property had been confiscated "sub pretextu rebellionis" (under the pretext of rebellion), while in reality "omnibus nota sit eius innocentia" (everyone knows he is innocent).

The amnesty was granted in 1516 and Gian Giorgio, who had, in the meantime, been appointed Papal ambassador to Venice, returned to Vicenza at the height of his prestige. He was instrumental in the peace treaty of Noyen in August 1516 which marked the end of hostilities between Venice and the Empire and in which Maximilian renounced his claims to Vicenza and Verona. From 1520 Trissino was able to begin renovation work on the family home at Cricoli.

He was also interested in architecture and some of his drawings and a first draft of an architectural treatise still survive. While staying in Rome, he had met Raphael and had seen his drawings for the facade of the Villa Madama. It may have been these which inspired him to create a light renaissance facade with a loggia for the castle at Cricoli.

Tradition holds that during the work at Cricoli, Trissino met "Andrea, son of Piero the miller from Padua", who had joined the vicentino guild of builders, sculptors and stonemasons and was working with Giovanni da Porlezza and Girolamo da Lumignano fellow stone-cutters (compagni taiapria) in Pedemuro San Biagio.

Whether this meeting at Cricoli actually took place or not, Gian Giorgio certainly saw the young stonemason's potential. He became his sponsor, introducing him to classical Roman architecture, which Andrea studied and drew accurately, and to the new lighter Renaissance forms. It was Trissino who gave him the name Palladio and introduced him to wealthy patrons.

Trissino continued to maintain close contacts at the highest levels. He served the second Medici Pope Clement VII and then Paul III Farnese, to whom he dedicated poems.

When Andrea Gritti, who had defeated Maximilian I at the head of the Venetian army, was elected Doge in 1523, the city of Vicenza asked Trissino to "make the speech". At the Palazzo Ducale, Gian Giorgio eloquently recalled the extraordinary achievements of Andrea Gritti in Constantinople, in the war against the League of Cambrai, in France, at the court of Francis I, he sang the praises of Vicenza, swore allegiance to the Serenissima Republic (forgetting personal sympathies, symbols of which can still be seen today in the form of the Imperial double-eagle on the facade of the Villa Cricoli) and entrusted the city to the Doge.

In 1530 he was called upon to carry the imperial train when the Pope crowned Charles V Holy Roman Emperor in Bologna. The event is commemorated by a stone inscription in Latin in the church of San Lorenzo in Vicenza.

Trissino turned Cricoli into an academy modelled on the Orti Oricellari which he had visited in Florence. He hosted men of letters and humanists and, under the guidance of Bernardino Partenio, the cream of Vicentine youth was educated there. He was in frequent contact with Isabella d'Este and her court in Mantua and above the entrance to the villa Cricoli were the words. "Academiae Trissinae lux et rus" (The Grange and Enlightenment at the Academy of Trissino)

When the bishop Niccolò Ridolfi, nephew of Leo X and a relative of Clement VII, came to Vicenza in 1543, he stayed with Gian Giorgio for two days at Cricoli before making his solemn entrance into the city through an extravagant construction of triumphal arches, obelisks and decorations in wood and stucco from the workshop of Pedemuro, by Benedetto Montagna, Giovanni Speranza, Gian Battista Maganza under the architectural direction of Andrea Palladio.

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Cardinal Castagna was a guest at Cricoli. He was Papal legate to the Council of Trent, Nuncio to Venice and then became Pope, taking the name of Urban VII. His stay at Cricoli was commemorated with a marble bust in a room on the ground floor.

Trissino's later years were soured by the decline in his prestige and bitter disagreements with his son Giulio, canon of Vicenza Cathedral. These disagreements stemmed from matters of inheritance and the Calvinist and Lutheran leanings of his son. In numerous vehement letters, Gian Giorgio criticised Giulio for his ingratitude for the many benefits he and his family had received from no fewer than three Popes, and warned him of the dangers of his heretical stance as a canon. In his will, Trissino disinherited him with bitter words, but Giulio had already won a court case in Venice, perhaps even bribing the judges, and he seized the villa from his father.

Now weak and infirm and in the last year of his life, Gian Giorgio followed Charles V to Augusta but the Emperor had already left by the time he arrived. He wanted to personally give him his epic poem "Italy liberated from the Goths" where he drew parallels between Justinian's exploits and Charles V, hoping in vain for some recompense from the Emperor.

Renaissance ideas and forms had fascinated and profoundly influenced Trissino culturally, but politically he was rooted in the Middle Ages. Firm in his belief in the Holy Roman Empire, he dreamt of building universal peace through agreement between the world's two cornerstones: the Papacy and the Empire. He did not understand that the Holy Roman Empire was over, he did not sense the burgeoning commercial vitality of Venice nor the rise of the nation-states which began at that time in France with Francis I and he did not heed the demands of the Protestant reform.

Gian Giorgio Trissino died alone in Rome in 1550, crying over the loss of Cricoli and cursing Venice in Latin verses as terse and fluent as they are violent:

Quaeramus terras alio sub cardine mundi,  
Quando mihi eriptur fraude paterna domus  
Et fovet hanc fraudem Venetum sententia dura,  
Quae nati in patrem comprobat insidias:  
Quae natum voluit confectum aetate parentem  
Atque aegrum antiquis pellere limitibus,  
Chara domus valeas, dulcesque valete penates,  
Nam miser ignotos cogor adire lares.

Which can be loosely translated as:

Let us seek asylum with the other world cornerstone (Rome) when my paternal home is fraudulently seized and this fraud is supported by the harsh sentence of the Veneti, serving to reinforce the son's deceit, he who would expel the father from his ancient confines, weakened by old age and infirmities. Adieu, my dear house, adieu sweet penates I must go forth, wretched, towards unknown dwellings.

In the nineteenth century, with the collapse of the delicate socio-economic balance which the Venetian Republic had guaranteed for centuries, Villa Cricoli underwent a period of decline and neglect, as the heart-rending words of Giacomo Zanella can testify.

Cricoli of once beauteous roses and fountains  
Whose mighty walls and turrets  
Stand tall across the wide and fertile plains  
Refuge to Popes and poets.

But grass is growing now amidst the halls,  
The smoke of ancient lanterns  
Blackens the noble paintings on the walls  
And rakes and nets lie scattered

The roses and the fountains have long gone  
And genius grows silent,  
So too Palladio, whose intellect once shone  
Revealing here his talent.  
Thou, rippling Astichel\* doth live alone  
To teach that life is but a moment.

\*The River Astichello flows beside Cricoli.

In 1898 the last heir of the Trissino family sold the villa to Count Sforza della Torre. He undertook a series of renovations. To the north he built a porticoed stable and a huge greenhouse and he replaced the crenellated boundary walls along the public highway with an elaborate wrought iron railing, decorated in cast iron. The inside of the villa, however, *'was stripped bare; frescoes, decorations and writings were removed; the bust of Urban VII, erected by the Trissino family, was disposed of and even the plaster was taken from the walls'*, as Sebastiano Rumor wrote in a report to the Superintendent of Monumental Works at the time.

The death of Count Sforza in 1913 brought work to a halt and, with the outbreak of World War I, the Villa was requisitioned by the military authorities. Rumor recounts, *"No one could possibly imagine the devastation soldiers wreaked in five years. Only the walls were left standing, doors, floors, shutters had been destroyed and taken away. The plants in the park were used for target practice"*.

In 1920 Villa Cricoli was purchased by Francesco Rigo who began the regeneration of a place of *'such notable standing in the history of Art and Literature in Italy'*.

In 1994 Villa Trissino at Cricoli was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The registration of a cultural or natural site on this list is evidence of its outstanding universal value so as to ensure its protection for mankind.