In search of the Malatestas in and around Rimini

edizione inglese
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In search of the Malatestas
in and around Rimini
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You do not need to be a particularly observant traveller to come across traces of the Malatesta family in Lombardy and in the Veneto region, in Emilia, in Le Marche, and most of all, of course, in the Romagna region. Museum-goers will find works of art owing their existence to Malatesta patronage in many far-flung places, not only in Italy but almost everywhere in the old world and the new. This is because towards the end of the Middle Ages, the Malatesta seignory was one of the foremost in Italy, together with the seignories of the Visconti and Scala dynasties, and had connections and relatives in all the major courts, Italian and foreign; Malatesta ambitions for patronage led them to compete with the Este and Gonzaga, Medici and Montefeltro dynasties. Originating within the Papal Dominions, it was a seignory frequently in opposition to the political and economic interests of the Papacy; it survived for three centuries before being cut down in the later fifteenth century by the resolute opposition of a Papacy determined to tidy up its dominions and bring back peace and quiet within its borders.

It seems likely that Malatesta was originally a nickname bestowed - in no friendly manner, since the meaning of the word is Evil-head - on some particularly stubborn or ill-natured member of the family; it then became a proper name and subsequently became so widespread as to be taken up as the family name. Truth to tell, the name is not inappropriate, since the history of the Malatesta family is studded with frequent episodes of cruelty, often ferocious and cold-blooded, directed against all those - close and distant relatives included - who threatened, or possessed the means to threaten, the power of the main family group.

The Malatesta family were soldiers first and foremost - but not just simple soldiers; they were condottieri, leaders of mercenary troops, a profession which is evident from their principal, and oldest coat of arms: a shield with three chequered bands, a clear allusion to the “game of war”. The political and economic fortunes of the dynasty relied on the bearing of arms; war, especially war carried out on behalf of third parties, was a source of considerable income, and this income was indispensable, both for payment of the annual tribute to the Papal coffers (which the Malatestas were obliged to make since they were “vicars”, or leaseholders as we should call them today), and for financing the demands of a court which increased steadily in size and refinement; and also to cover the cost of acts of patronage dictated partly by a genuine love of art and partly by the demands of entertainment, prestige, and propaganda.

The Malatestas, then, were mainly men of war; but in the long
history of the family, especially around the middle of the fourteenth century, there were a number of personages with considerable interest in culture and of outstanding cultural calibre. Such a man was **Pandolfo II**, a member of the Pesaro branch of the family, lover of literature and friend of the poet **Petrarch**, whom he had met at the court of Padua in 1361. Another was his son **Malatesta**, known as “Malatesta of the Sonnets”. The Lord of Rimini, **Galeotto Malatesta**, was famous instead as a great traveller, adventurous and possessed of a thirst for knowledge. He was known as **Malatesta the Hungarian** because he had been knighted in 1347 by Louis I Le Grand, King of Hungary. He travelled widely, to the Holy Land and to the Papal court in Avignon; then in France, Flanders, and England. **Galeotto**, uncle to **Pandolfo II** and **Malatesta the Hungarian**, was famous for his valour and wisdom: Pope Urban V raised him to the high office of Senator of Rome in the year 1368. Galeotto’s first marriage had been to Elise de la Villette, a niece of Amelio de Lautrec, Papal governor of Le Marche. Nor should we overlook **Carlo Malatesta**, Lord of Rimini from 1385 to 1429, who played an important part in the great “Western Schism”, and who gave hospitality in Rimini to the legitimate Pope, Gregory XII, and so “gave for some time to the city of Rimini the honour of being not merely the capital of the Malatesta seignory, but of reaching also the more ambitious position of capital of the Roman Catholic world”, as the historian Gino Franceschini noted. **Pandolfo III**, brother to Carlo and Lord of Brescia, Bergamo, and Fano, commissioned the writing and illustrating of sumptuous books, and summoned the artist **Gentile da Fabriano** to decorate his residence in Brescia, between the years 1414 and 1418. And the artistic patronage accorded by his sons **Prince Sigismondo** and **Malatesta Novello** is especially well-known, since the fruits can still be seen in the **Malatesta Temple** in **Rimini** and the **Malatesta Library** in **Cesena**.

From the mid-fourteenth century, the cities and above all the courts of the Malatesta dynasty were for more than a hundred years centres of lively, cosmopolitan culture, contributing a wealth of great works in a number of fields.
The origins of the Malatesta dynasty need not be sought far away in time or place, although a number of flattering fairy-tales invented and circulated by their learned courtiers would have us believe differently. In point of fact, the earliest documents naming the Malatestas date from the twelfth century; they refer to lands owned by the family in southern Romagna, and give a hint of conflict with the City-State of Rimini.

Briefly, the Malatestas seem to have been originally a family of landowners and brigands with vast properties; from their two well-fortified seats, Pennabilli and Verucchio (which both still claim to have been the birthplace of the family), they dominated the middle Marecchia valley and held control over the roads leading inland from Rimini. Perhaps the fortunate progress of the Malatestas owed something too to the protection of the Archbishops of Ravenna, who owned extensive lands in Romagna and Le Marche, and to the friendship and support of the major families of Romagna, many of which were related to them. The determining factor at the beginning of the family history was probably their long-standing relationship with the most illustrious and powerful feudal family in the region, the house of Carpegna. Almost all the most important families in the Romagna and Montefeltro area seem, in effect, to be descended from the Carpegnas.

At some stage, the Malatestas put so much pressure on Rimini, through their control over the roads and the surrounding territory, and consequently over agriculture and commerce too, that the economy of the city was seriously endangered, and open war ensued, to be brought to a close in 1197 with an act of reparation on the part of Giovanni De Malatesta and his nephew, Malatesta the Less. The City of Rimini subsequently took steps to link the interests of the Malatesta family with those of the city. The Malatestas were first given citizenship, and then in 1206 a seat on the city council; and finally they were invited to take up permanent residence within the city walls. This was considered indispensable in order to distance the Malatestas from their power centres and so keep them in check, and in 1216, to “convince” them to take this step, they were exonerated from paying taxes and were financed with loans.

From the second decade of the thirteenth century onwards, the Malatestas figure as eminent personages in the city of Rimini, acting as her representatives and guarantors in official business, and supporting her Ghibelline (that is, pro-Imperial) politics. From 1239 to 1247 Malatesta “Della Penna”, who had been “Podestà” (governor) of Pistoia in 1228, was Podestà of Rimini. And so the way was opened
for the Malatesta family to exercise total power over the city. In the space of a few decades, the Malatestas gained possession of all her civil and religious offices, and little by little they deprived of their power, without abolishing them, all her organs of administration, opposing, dispossessing and killing anyone who threatened their supremacy.

When they first came to live in the city, the Malatestas could certainly not compare their own standing, in terms of ancient lineage and refinement, with the old Rimini families of noble tradition, such as the Omodei, the Gambacerri, and the Parcitadi families; they were “those new people”, rough and uncouth. They were, however, immensely wealthy, and could count on the support of a number of important families, thanks to their astute marriages and shrewd alliances. They could also rely on the control they held over the surrounding territory, and on force, which they used absolutely unscrupulously, unchecked by any moral considerations. Once they came to power, however, they tried to claim very ancient lineage, and consequently very ancient noble titles. We can find family legends tracing the origins of the House of Malatesta back to Noah, or to Tarcon, a mythical Trojan hero, cousin to Hector and Aeneas; or to Otto III, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; or even to Scipio “the African”. Prince Sigismondo Pandolfo, the most famous of all the Malatestas, was particularly devoted to this last legend. A courageous condottiero and patron of artists and writers, he was Lord of Rimini from 1432 to 1468.
The first noble title for the House of Malatesta came from Frederick II of Swabia in about 1220; he invested Malatesta “Della Penna” with a knighthood. The son of “Della Penna”, Malatesta “da Verucchio” (1212 to 1312; known as “the Centenarian”) laid the foundations for real and official power over the city and all the territory in Malatesta possession, first by his marriage to the daughter of the Imperial Vicar, bringing him a rich dowry of lands; and then by abandoning his support for the Imperial faction on the defeat of Frederick II at Parma in 1248 and embracing the cause of the Pope. This change of alliance was compounded by a new marriage in 1266 to the wealthy niece of the Apostolic Legate of Spoleto. The traditional support of the Rimini Malatestas for the Guelph faction began with the “Centenarian”; and with him and his sons a family tradition of atrocious betrayals and savage killings reached a culmination. This ferocity long marked the struggle to increase or defend Malatesta family power, against a background coloured by the continuing conflict between Pope and Emperor and by shifting local rivalries. The Ghibelline Dante Alighieri was an attentive, if sectarian, accuser and chronicler of this savagery; he summed up in a few famous and very effective lines of poetry the situation in Rimini and the deeds of the Malatestas at the beginning of the fourteenth century. In his Inferno (Canto 27) he refers to Malatesta “da Verucchio” and his son Malatestino “dall’occhio” (“one-eyed”; he was blind in one eye), as mastiffs, who sharpened their teeth on Montagna (old Montagna dei Parcitadi, head of the local Ghibellines, captured by the “mastiffs” in 1295 and cold-bloodedly murdered). Dante refers to Malatestino as that fell tyrant, the traitor who with his one eye yet sees all, and names him as the perpetrator of another murder, that of two noblemen of Fano (Inferno, Canto 28), which allowed the House of Malatesta to take possession of the city of Fano and a considerable part of Le Marche.

The life of every Malatesta was entirely subject to family politics. “Reasons of State” governed every action, including marriages, which brought political alliances and the increase of wealth and power. And if these marriages often failed, for the men of the family it was unimportant; infidelity was accepted and mistresses were respected and had their own courts, while bastard offspring were seen as a potential source of family wealth and were often legitimised: Galeotto Roberto, Prince Sigismondo and Domenico Malatesta were all bastard sons of Pandolfo III. But for the women of the family, matters were very different indeed: who could forget the story of Francesca?

It is Dante once more (Inferno, Canto 5) who tells us of the love
story between Francesca da Polenta and her brother-in-law, Paolo il Bello, and of its tragic epilogue at the hands of the betrayed husband, the crippled Gianciotto. The marriage of Gianciotto and Francesca was part of a well-planned strategy: to unite the Polenta and Malatesta families and so strengthen Malatesta power.

The sad story of Francesca is not the only tale of love and death to befall the ladies of the House of Malatesta, who on a number of occasions rebelled against the conduct demanded of them by family politics and by the morals of their time. Parisina Malatesta was married to the duke of Ferrara, who had her beheaded in 1425 because she had become the mistress of her stepson. Rengarda Alidosi, the first wife of Andrea Malatesta, repudiated by her husband for infidelity, was put to death by her brothers in 1401. Costanza, daughter of Malatesta the Hungarian, accused of impropriety and licentiousness, was executed on the orders of her uncle Galeotto in 1378.

But as if to compensate, the history of the House of Malatesta numbers also many ladies of great virtue and courage. In 1326 Polentesia da Polenta saved her husband Malatestino Novello from the relatives who were conspiring against him. Gentile Malatesta, the widow of Galeazzo Manfredi, ruled Faenza as regent for her sons, and personally defended the city against the Florentines in 1424. Elisabetta Gonzaga, the wife of Carlo Malatesta, was a woman of considerable wisdom; Violante da Montefeltro, wife to Malatesta Novello, was gentle and virtuous; the lovely Isotta degli Atti, mistress and then wife to Prince Sigismondo Malatesta, was the guiding spirit of a most refined court; and last but not least was Annalena Malatesta, famed for her charity; after the murder of her husband Baldaccio d’Anghiari in 1441, she gave all her possessions to the poor and opened her house in Florence to all women in need of aid or sanctuary.
Malatesta the Centenarian, and his descendants first consolidated their power base in the Romagna region by opposing the Papal Rectors and then extended their dominion into Le Marche and Tuscany. They continued to ask the Pope for official recognition as rulers of these lands, which belonged to the Church and which they had annexed; but their request was repeatedly refused. Only in 1355 were they named vicars of the cities and territories of Rimini, Pesaro, Fano, and Fossombrone, for an annual rent of 6,000 florins and a tribute of fighting men for the Papal troops.

The Malatestas then built castles and fortresses to defend their lands against enemies both within and without; they set up a permanent system of military protection, indispensable for the defence of borders threatened by powerful neighbours. Three of their cities were furnished with sound defences, large and elegant residences, and efficient chancelleries, and were equipped to serve as state capitals: these were Rimini, Cesena, and Pesaro, which were ruled by different branches of the family, who often fought and betrayed one another without scruple.

Rimini was the most splendid of the Malatesta capital cities, and had the longest career. The greatest and best part of the family history began and ended here; and although there are few traces of Malatesta rule today, the mediaeval city walls are notable. The city already had walls for defence in the twelfth century, and these were strengthened and extended by Emperor Frederick II and completed by the Malatestas, who partly walled the surrounding villages too.

The best-preserved sections of the city walls are to the south and east of the city centre; they can best be seen from the ring road and the Cervi gardens. The walls end at the Arch of Augustus, the ancient eastern gateway to the city, enlarged and decorated in the year 27 BC in honour of the Roman Emperor Augustus, responsible for paving the most important roads in Italy - so proclaimed the inscription on the attic, now replaced by merlons. The Via Flaminia, the road from Rome, ends here. In the Middle Ages a great gateway was built in front of the Arch of Augustus, but this was destroyed as were all the other gateways giving access to the city except for one still standing, though today it is partly below ground level. This was the Galliana gate, usually known as the “arch of Francesca”, near the harbour. The layout of the harbour today is still as it was planned and built at the beginning of the fifteenth century by Carlo Malatesta, who changed the course of the river Marecchia at its mouth. In those days the sea was closer to the city, reaching to just beyond this “arch of Francesca”, where the railway bridge now stands.
Crossing the river, and so the harbour too, by the Bridge of Tiberius - one of the most magnificent and best-preserved of Roman bridges, built between 14AD and 21AD - we come to Borgo San Giuliano. The layout of this one-time village, now part of the city of Rimini, still shows much of its original mediaeval character. It is dominated by the fine church of San Giuliano, once a Benedictine Abbey, much altered in the sixteenth century. The altarpiece, depicting The Martyrdom of St Julian by Paolo Veronese, dates from 1587 and is one of the last masterpieces of this great artist.

Borgo San Giuliano, once known as “the deer park”, was the Malatestas’ hunting reserve. The part nearest the sea is protected by walls and watchtowers dating from the later fifteenth century, built perhaps by Roberto Malatesta.

Rimini had a considerable number of churches and convents of various religious orders. The Augustinian hermits, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and the Servites, had all come to the city during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, aided and protected by the Malatestas. The only church in Rimini which has succeeded in keeping intact much of its mediaeval structure is the church of San Giovanni Evangelista, distinguished by its tall Gothic bell tower; it is usually known as Sant’Agostino since it was the church of the Augustinian hermits. The apse and the belfry chapel still bear traces of the early fourteenth-century frescos which once adorned them, the work of unknown Rimini artists (unknown, but probably the Zangolo brothers, Giovanni and Giuliano da Rimini). The frescos depict Christ and the Virgin in Majesty, and Stories of St John and of the Virgin. The church also has a splendid Crucifix painted on wood, while a huge fresco of the Day of Judgement, originally painted on the triumphal arch, is now in the City Museum, together with a number of other works dating from the same period.

In the early part of the fourteenth century, a characteristic “School” of painting grew up in Rimini, a movement notable for its early appreciation of the work of Giotto. The originality of the Rimini School can be seen especially in the use of soft, gentle colours, reminiscent of the Byzantine tradition, in harmony with a narrative taste inclining to the lyrical while still showing a sharp eye for the natural world. Another feature is a certain eccentricity in iconography, pointing to the free and easy manner in which these artists approached traditional subjects and to their open-minded acceptance of Giotto’s innovative style. Throughout the first half of the fourteenth century, the Rimini School was very active in Romagna, Le Marche, Emilia, and the Veneto region, and in all those areas where the
Malatestas were to be found or where their influence was felt, although it is impossible to be certain that they came under the direct protection of the Malatestas. It is tempting to attribute to the Malatestas a commission given to Giotto at the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth: the ornamentation of the church of the Franciscans in Rimini. This church is now known as the Malatesta Temple, and has been the Cathedral of Rimini since the early nineteenth century. Of the work commissioned from Giotto, only a great Crucifix survives, beautiful and touching in its immense humanity.

The Malatestas had acquired much property in Rimini, enlarging during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the dwellings strategically situated near the Cathedral and the “Gattolo” Gate, facing inland towards their ancient estates in the Marecchia valley. Malatesta the Centenarian, in his will dated 1311, refers to the house in Rimini as palatium magnum, and includes the information that this palatium had its own curia, that is to say, an audience chamber like those found in royal palaces. This palace was partly destroyed, and the remaining structure became part of the castle built by Prince Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta in the early fifteenth century.

Almost all the great buildings dating from the early days of Malatesta presence and rule in Rimini have disappeared or have been radically changed. Even the ancient Cathedral dedicated to St Columba has gone, leaving behind only that small part of the enormous fourteenth-century vestry and bell tower still to be seen in Piazza Malatesta. Also dating from this period, in addition to the much-altered church of the Augustinian hermits already mentioned, is the complex known as the Palazzi Comunali, the buildings which together formed the administrative centre of the city. The Palazzo dell’Arengo (the mediaeval council chamber) dates from 1204 and has beautiful early Gothic arches and vast arcaded windows; the Palazzo del Podestà, although fourteenth-century in origin, was extensively altered at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the imposts of one arch on the side of the building are carved simple Angevin and Malatesta heraldic devices: lilies for the first, chequered bands for the second.

The greater part of public life, civil and religious, revolved around the Malatesta mansion, the Cathedral, and the administrative palazzi. Here State politics were decided, and here justice was administered. And in this area, the true heart of the city, were situated too the main economic activities of Rimini: the banks and the Jewish money-lenders, and the market, which was held around the only
fountain then existing in the city, opposite the Palazzo dell'Arenco. This fountain still stands today and, despite extensive alteration in the sixteenth century and frequent restoration work in successive centuries, it still bears traces of its mediaeval origins.

A “Malatesta trail” around Rimini could ideally begin here, in the square (now named Piazza Cavour) with its ancient government buildings and mediaeval fountain. This spot is close to the remains of the original Cathedral, the main Malatesta residence (Castel Sismondo), and the church of the Augustinians. If you walk down Corso d’Augusto, you very soon come to Piazza Tre Martiri, the site of the Roman forum. Here history is commemorated in a stone recalling Julius Caesar’s address on crossing the Rubicon, and in a small chapel recalling a famous miracle of St Anthony of Padua, the miracle of the mule. From here, turn towards the sea and you come at once to the Malatesta Temple.

In a bas-relief in the Cathedral is a striking “portrait” of Rimini as it was at the time of the Malatestas; carved by Agostino di Duccio with all his usual artistry and grace, the relief depicts Cancer, the sign of the zodiac for Rimini and her Lord Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta.
The few remaining traces of the original thirteenth-century Malatesta dwelling near the “Gattolo” Gate were incorporated into the castle built in the fifteenth century for Prince Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, of which only the central nucleus still stands.

Sigismondo began building his castle on the twentieth day of March 1437, the last Wednesday but one in Lent, at exactly 6.48 in the evening. The day and the time, down to the minute, had probably been carefully chosen by the Court astrologers. He proclaimed its official completion in 1446, but in effect work was still in progress in 1454, and it is possible that the castle was never completed according to the original plans, which included a great keep standing sentinel over the entire complex.

In the year 1437 Sigismondo at the age of twenty was already wealthy, and famous as a condottiero. His castle was planned as both a fortress and a sumptuous residence, a suitable seat for the court and the garrison and a sign of power and supremacy over the city. To create sufficient space for it, he ordered the demolition of an entire district, sweeping away not only houses and mansions but also the Bishop’s Palace, a nunnery, and the baptistery of the nearby Cathedral. Prince Sigismondo was celebrated by the Court writers as the architect of the castle, and he himself claimed this honour in the great epigraphs carved in marble and walled into the building. If by architect we mean the inspirer and inventor then we may accept this definition; Sigismondo’s considerable gifts for the arts of war and his experience as a condottiero are well known. He must however have employed a considerable number of professional and specialist people; we know that important advice was supplied by Filippo Brunelleschi, who visited Rimini in 1438.

Even in its present much-reduced state the castle has considerable presence, with its huge square towers and impressive sloping walls; its original appearance must have been truly formidable, rearing up from the depths of the surrounding moat. The entrance towards the city was protected by a rampart and a double ravelin, with drawbridges over the moat. The gateway was adorned with the coat of arms still to be seen, a shield with chequered bands surmounted by a helmet in the shape of a crested elephant, and next to it a rose with four petals. Between the coat of arms and the marble gateway is walled one of the dedicatory epigraphs, a solemn Latin text proclaiming that Prince Sigismondo built the castle from the foundations, in the year 1446, as an ornament to the citizens of Rimini, and decreed that it should bear his name, Castel Sismondo. Sigismondo’s brazen arrogance leaves one amazed: he defines the
castle *ariminensium decus*, yet one need only look at the angle of the towers, all turned towards the city, to realise that the castle was planned rather to defend its Lord and Master from any possible revolt on the part of the citizens of Rimini, than to defend Rimini and its citizens from external perils. Even considering the conceit current at the time, which identified a city and a State with its rulers, *Castel Sismondo* can only be seen as a symbol and defence of the personal power of its overlord, not at all as a symbol and defence of the city and the State.

Prince *Sigismondo* died in his much-loved castle on the ninth of October 1468. Records do not tell us exactly when he took up permanent residence there, but perhaps about 1446. His chancellery and guard were certainly established there at a fairly early date, and the castle became the setting for official ceremony and receptions, the exclusive residence of a Court which at the time numbered a wealth of poets and musicians, scholars and men of letters, painters, medal designers, sculptors and architects, from all over Italy. A little city, cosmopolitan and artificial, with few links to that real city beset with a thousand difficulties, lying beyond its walls and moats, between the river Marecchia and the sea.
Ten years after beginning the castle which bears his name, Prince Sigismondo commissioned the building of an aristocratic family chapel in the church which all his predecessors had chosen as their burial place: the church of St Francis. Although it had been decorated by Giotto in the early fourteenth century, this church was a very modest building, a single-celled roofed space with three small chapels in the apse. Further, in Prince Sigismondo’s day it was situated on the outskirts of the city, although it stood close to the site of the forum, the square today named Piazza Tre Martiri which was the city centre in Roman times.

The new chapel was simple and absolutely traditional in design, with a huge Gothic arch cut into the right-hand wall of the church, cross-vaulted ceiling, and tall narrow windows. It was soon flanked by a second chapel, equally simple and equally traditional in design, built at the request of Isotta degli Atti, Prince Sigismondo’s youthful mistress. The model for both chapels may have been a Malatesta family chapel built on the same side of the church, near the apse, during the preceding century. The work on these chapels, which continued for over three years, must have seriously compromised the stability of the original building, for about the year 1450 Prince Sigismondo decided to alter the church completely, at his own expense, in fulfilment of a vow made during his victorious campaign in Tuscany against Alfonso of Aragon: this much we learn from the Greek epigraphs on the side walls and the dedicatory inscription on the façade.

Architectural work was the responsibility of Matteo de’ Pasti, while the carving was entrusted to Agostino di Duccio. The former had been recruited in Ferrara, at the Court of the Este family; he was a miniaturist and medal-designer from Verona, trained in the late Gothic tastes of the school of Pisanello. Agostino di Duccio had been a pupil of Donatello, but in his work he too showed refined Gothic tones, acquired in Venice. He was Florentine but had been working in Venice and possibly came with the recommendation of the Este family, who knew him well since he had worked for them in Modena. It is to the collaboration of these two artists, and to the suggestions put forward by the Humanists at Prince Sigismondo’s Court, that we owe the interior of the Temple. Sumptuous and picturesque, it substantially follows the Court’s Gothic taste for the exhibition of pomp, wealth and refined elitist culture; a fundamental element is the adulation of Prince Sigismondo as Lord of Rimini, soldier, and patron of the arts.

The exterior was designed by Leon Battista Alberti, who in about 1450 put forward a completely new idea: a marble “casing”,...
completely different from the developing interior of the church. Alberti banned every Gothic influence and every decorative element, consciously seeking inspiration in ancient Roman architecture and attempting to give new life to the concept of architecture as a stately celebration of man and an exaltation of man's intellectual nobility. Sadly, the building was left incomplete in what should have been its most original and significant part, the apse. The apse had been planned as a circular space crowned with a dome, and this would have resolved, or at least softened, the obvious dissonance between the exterior and the interior. To get an idea of Alberti’s original plan, we need only look at the medal designed by Matteo de’ Pasti which shows the original plan with two orders and a great dome which should have crowned the end of the nave. Alberti’s work, re-inventing ancient classical forms, bending and shaping them to suit modern ideas, justifies in full the title of Temple by which this Christian and Franciscan church has been known ever since the fifteenth century.

The interior decoration of the Temple eschews traditional fresco cycles for the elegant carvings by Agostino di Duccio and for the marble facings, enlivened by colour and gilding, which together constitute the principal adornments. The only fresco with human figures shows Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta kneeling before St Sigismundus, King of Burgundy; the work of Piero della Francesca, it is signed and dated 1451. For many years it was almost hidden from view in the small vestry situated between the first two Malatesta chapels, but it has now been moved to a more prominent position. At first sight this fresco could be taken for a traditional devotional painting, showing the Lord kneeling before his patron saint. Instead, the artist has given it a completely new slant: in content, seen in the free and natural, non-religious relationship between the figures, immersed in serene light and rational space; and in form, simple and harmonious, exalting as they had never before been exalted the humanity and dignity of the subjects, their nobility of intellect and their physical beauty, equating for the first time divine power and earthly power in the name of a concept of dignity and rationality common to both the sainted king and his devoted worshipper. Alberti’s brilliant white marble facing had not been begun when Piero della Francesca put his name to the fresco, which was thus the first harbinger, in Rimini and in the Romagna region, of the “true” Renaissance; a harbinger which while it flattered the prince who had commissioned its creation also confounded those artists whose only interest lay in external display, invited learned scholars to allow a little humanity into their arid research, and announced a utopian
future based on reason and illuminated by poetry.

It is likely that the enchanted silences and meditative pauses of Piero della Francesca’s style, and his presentiment of a new age, did not meet with any great interest at the Court of Rimini. The knights and ladies, the pages and musicians and improvisers of rhymes who led thoughtless brilliant lives in the castle and the Malatesta mansions during Prince Sigismondo’s frequent absences would have felt much more at home with the Gothic fancies and traditional splendours which triumphed in the carvings adorning the Temple: display shields, hanging garlands, festoons suspended from the architraves, and brilliantly painted draperies over the tombs – as if a kind of “ephemeral” decoration had suddenly become fossilised or magically turned to stone.

In such a setting, Agostino di Duccio’s beautiful delicate bas-reliefs are extremely refined and elegant. Jovial cherubs play games and chase one another; baby angels sing and play melodious music; Virtues and Sibyls compete to display their symbols and their elegant draperies; Apollo and the Muses, the Planets and the Constellations, all band together into a picturesque company clad in incredibly exotic costumes (all except Venus who triumphs naked over the sea, amidst a cloud of doves). The whole may be interpreted in traditionally religious terms, even down to the strange planets and signs of the zodiac, which are not placed here for the onlooker to cast weird and wonderful horoscopes, but simply to celebrate the perfection of the firmament which God has created. But bring with you a little malice, a little hostility, and it is easy enough to see paganism and irreligiousness everywhere. And so Pope Pius II, sworn enemy of Prince Sigismondo, held that this church was a pagan temple, full of pagan gods and profane things, and he imputed it to the disrepute of the Lord of Rimini. Which Lord, in the Greek epigraphs on the external walls, had explained very clearly that the church was dedicated to “the ever-living God and to the city” in thanks for the perils he had escaped and the victories he had won during the “Italic wars”; and in the fine inscription on the façade Prince Sigismondo had once again affirmed that he had built the Temple “in fulfilment of a vow”.

The building of the Temple was an extremely costly business, and it is difficult to believe that Prince Sigismondo undertook the work purely for religious sentiments or disinterested patronage of the arts. In effect, patronage is never, and has never been, disinterested. In the fifteenth century it was an integral part of a certain system of government: its aim was to obtain wider consensus from subjects and institutions, increase the prestige of the ruler both within and beyond
the confines of his State, and attract the attention (and if possible the envy) of other Courts; and also to put down the foundations for being remembered with admiration by posterity. The immortality which the rulers and the Humanists of the fifteenth century craved was lasting fame in the world of men down the centuries, not in the rarefied eternity of the divinity.

Work continued assiduously on the Malatesta Temple until about 1460, when the hostility of Pope *Pius II* towards Prince *Sigismondo*, a courageous soldier but a terrible politician, grew too great. The year 1461 brought financial difficulties and Papal excommunication, followed by the defeat and diminution of the State in 1463; and so the grandiose building remained incomplete for ever after. Even today this incompleteness, clearly visible both inside and out, proclaims to the world the misfortune of Prince *Sigismondo* and underlines the fragility of his power and the insubstantial nature of his ambitious dreams of glory. And the Temple itself may be seen as a dream, a broken dream for Prince *Sigismondo* who so desired to build a splendid temple to the glory of God and the city, but above all to secure the immortality of his own name and his own dynasty; and a broken dream too for *Leon Battista Alberti*, who hoped to make of the Temple a monument exalting the nobility of human intellect; and for Humanism, which believed that the dramatic contradictions of the age could be concealed behind a curtain of intelligent cultural rediscoveries and refined works of art.
Ambition and conceit led Prince Sigismondo to make a number of wrong choices and mistaken political decisions, which were often interpreted as traitorous and which could only increase the historic conflict with his astute rival Federico da Montefeltro and the hostility of Pope Pius II, desirous of regaining direct possession of the lands now in Malatesta hands and which he almost certainly wished to entrust to the vicarship of his Piccolomini nephews. The outcome was the excommunication of the Lord of Rimini in 1461, swiftly and inevitably followed in 1463 by total defeat at the hands of the Papal troops, under the command of Federico da Montefeltro. Prince Sigismondo was left with his city only, deprived of the surrounding territory, and was consequently compelled to sell his services as a mercenary captain. The Venetians hired him to fight the Turks in what is now the Peloponnese, where he stayed from 1464 to 1465. He returned a broken man, to receive a proposal from the new Pope, Paul II: the vicarship of Spoleto in exchange for Rimini. He died in 1468, humiliated and disheartened, leaving in his will part of his remaining property to finance the continuation of work on the Malatesta Temple.

It is possible that the last work commissioned by Prince Sigismondo on his return from the Peloponnese was a Pietà by Giovanni Bellini, which was probably completed only after his death and was given to his chief councillor, Rainerio Meliorati, who left it in his will to the Franciscans. It now hangs in the City Museum, the brightest jewel in the entire collection. It is a work of great art and great poetry, where the figures, portrayed with graceful elegance against the black background, are shaped by gentle yet decisive lines and illuminated by a soft still light which surrounds them with warm tender colour. If the body of Christ, abandoned in death, seems to conceal the mystery of death itself, the angelic children who support Him conceal the mystery of life. A sense of deep, pure compassion surrounds the painting, the exaltation of human dignity and human beauty which not even suffering and death can erase.

The City Museum contains numerous other exhibits from the time of the Malatestas, including ceramics from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, frescos, coats of arms, lapidary fragments, sculpture, and a collection of outstandingly fine medals cast by Matteo de’ Pasti in the mid-fifteenth century for Prince Sigismondo and for Isotta. There is also a fine altarpiece from the church of San Domenico, now destroyed; it was commissioned from Domenico Ghirlandaio by Pandolfo Malatesta IV, known as il Pandolfo, nephew to Prince Sigismondo and last Lord of Rimini. This painting shows Saints Vincent Ferrer, Sebastian and Rock, with the entire
Malatesta family kneeling at their feet: Pandolfo IV himself, his wife Violante Bentivoglio, his mother Elisabetta Aldobrandini, and his brother Carlo. It appears to have been a huge ex voto painting in thanks for having escaped the plague. It was commissioned in 1493, towards the end of Ghirlandaio’s life (he died in 1494), and was completed by his brother David helped by Fra’ Bartolomeo, who worked on the family portraits. These did not please the sitters, who had them painted over, to be revealed once more only during restoration work in 1923.

This altarpiece represents the last act of patronage on the part of the Malatesta seignory, which had now reached its twilight years. The worthies of Rimini engaged in a conspiracy against Pandolfo IV in 1498; it failed and was followed by ferocious reprisals by the hated young Lord, who shortly afterwards was forced to flee the city by the imminent arrival of Cesare Borgia, known as Duke Valentino. Pandolfo IV returned in 1503, but only to sell his seignory to the Venetians, who were forced to return it to the Church in 1509. Pandolfo IV persisted until 1528 in his unsuccessful attempts to return to Rimini as Lord, despite the hostility of the people.

The father of Pandolfo IV, Roberto, known as il magnifico, had been arrogant and cruel like his son but unlike his son he was no inept. After the death of Prince Sigismondo he succeeded in a very short time in eliminating Isotta’s brothers, and he governed alone in Rimini. He had succeeded too in recovering some of the territory lost by his predecessor, partly through his marriage in 1475 to Elisabetta, the daughter of Federico da Montefeltro. He was a great general and died prematurely in 1482 while fighting in the service of the Pope, who had a huge monument made to him in St Peter’s, Rome. The City Museum has some mementoes of his rule, notably a collection of ceiling panels decorated with coats of arms and symbols, which came from one of his mansions in Rimini.

A visit to the Malatesta relics preserved in the City Museum brings to an end this brief journey in the footsteps of the Malatestas, taking in the city walls, the mediaeval centre with the palaces of government, the castle, and the Malatesta Temple. However, the visitor who feels inclined to make a pleasant little excursion to Covignano hill can admire another Malatesta church. Covignano hill stands as it were at the back of the city; in the fifteenth century it was thickly wooded and belonged for the most part to the Malatestas, and it is here that we can find the ancient parish church of San Fortunato, adorned with stone coats of arms of Roberto Malatesta. He was responsible for rebuilding in the Renaissance style the façade
of the building which had formerly been the Olivetan monastery of Santa Maria di Scolca, built by Carlo Malatesta at the beginning of the fifteenth century and destroyed during the Napoleonic suppression, its shattered stones sold as building materials. The coat of arms of Carlo Malatesta can still be seen in the centre of the caisson ceiling above the simple nave, flooded with clear light and ornamented with seventeenth-century stucco work. The church also contains works of art which, although they have no connection with the Malatestas, are nevertheless among the most interesting in Rimini. They include an altarpiece depicting The Adoration of the Magi painted by Giorgio Vasari in 1547, which hangs in the apse; and a fresco cycle in the vestry chapel by Girolamo Marchesi di Cotignola, dated 1512.

In front of the church is a fine square of Renaissance proportions, giving a view of the sea and part of the Malatesta possessions towards Le Marche, from the promontory of Gabicce to the first castles crowning the hills of the Conca valley. It is a view which invites the onlooker to search out the roots and the remaining traces of this great and powerful family which dominated the area for three centuries.
It seems that Malatesta patronage was extended solely or mainly to the capitals and chief cities of the State. Traces can be found in Cesena, Pesaro, Fano, Fossombrone, and Senigallia, as well as in Rimini; and also in Bergamo and Brescia, much more distant places which were centres of Malatesta influence for only a few decades. In the territory of Rimini, these traces consist mainly of castles and fortresses, specimens of military architecture which can be found everywhere, on hilltops or the outskirts of villages. The roads through the Marecchia and Conca valleys make two perfect routes for anyone interested in understanding the features of these buildings.

These castles, however, served not merely for the defence and control of the surrounding territory; they were often home to illustrious personages and the birthplaces of members of the Malatesta dynasty. They therefore served as places of residence, albeit sometimes temporary, and as the setting for official functions.

A number of sources tell us that Mondaino castle was on several occasions the venue for diplomatic meetings; that the fortresses of Gradara, San Giovanni in Marignano, and Saludecio were often used as residences by the Court when they wished for a change of scenery; and that the castles in the Conca valley, especially Montefiore, were favourite retreats for hunting. In the fortresses of Montescudo and Saludecio, the Lord’s private apartments were kept always in readiness, and the same was true of most of the principal castles. There must have been a wealth of furniture, fittings, and works of art of notable quality and value, spread over the Malatesta lands; and there must also have been considerable movement of artists and craftsmen. But of all this, no trace remains, direct or indirect. The one exception is the fortress of Montefiore, which contains fragments of fresco work, commissioned by Malatesta the Hungarian and painted by the Bolognese artist Jacopo Avanzi about the year 1370, in a room known as “the Emperor’s room”, which was decorated throughout with scenes and figures from ancient Roman history.

Although some of the fortresses contained sumptuously ornate and perhaps comfortable apartments, they were invariably inaccessible to the majority of the Lord’s subjects, and were perceived as powerful, severe, and mighty places, their shape and size inspiring respect and possibly also fear.

None of the local families, not even the noble and wealthy, appear to have left behind any trace of artistic patronage in the area during the time of the Malatestas. This may be because although they had notable possessions and financial interests in the surrounding countryside and villages, the statutory laws of Rimini compelled them
to reside in the city, where they could be more easily watched and kept in check by the Lord.

Apart from their castles and fortresses, then, there remain very few visible traces of the presence of the Malatestas in the country around Rimini. It may be that the churches of the mendicant orders, who were under Malatesta protection from the thirteenth century onwards, had works of art originating from their patronage; but there are very few sacred buildings of mediaeval origin still in existence, either because they were abandoned and left to crumble, or because they were altered beyond recognition, together with all their furnishings, at some later date (usually during the eighteenth century). Today the most important works of mediaeval religious art in the Rimini area are a number of crucifixes painted on wood by early fourteenth-century Rimini painters. Splendid well-preserved examples can be admired in Montefiore, Misano, Verucchio, and Santarcangelo, but the oldest is probably that in the parish church of Talamello. It originally hung in an ancient church belonging to the Augustinians, and was long attributed to Giotto; in reality it is the work of Giovanni da Rimini and was painted at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The most recent of these crucifixes hangs in the Collegiate church in Verucchio; signed by the Venetian artist Nicolò di Pietro and dated 1404, it too came originally from an Augustinian church. However, there is no foundation for believing that these works were commissioned by the Malatestas. A curious feature of the nineteenth-century Collegiate church in Verucchio is the dominant presence in the aisles of stucco effigies of Malatesta da Verucchio and Prince Sigismondo Malatesta: although neither of them enjoyed a reputation for good, in life or in death, they seem here to be numbered among (and worshipped with) the lares and penates.

In the decoration of a chapel (certainly worth a visit) near the cemetery in Talamello is a Malatesta coat of arms, clearly visible at the centre of a lunette, which suggests that the work may have been commissioned by some member of the family. It was not, however, one of the initiatives of the Lords of Rimini, but of the Franciscan Giovanni Seclano, Bishop of Montefeltro, friend and supporter of the Malatestas whose coat of arms he used. All the decoration was done by the Ferrara painter Antonio Alberti and dates from around 1437. The cross vault is painted a glorious shade of blue and ornamented with the four Evangelists; the lunettes show the Adoration of the Magi, the Annunciation, and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. Lower down are twelve male and female Saints, and the altarpiece depicts Our Lady of Humility with the Donor and Two Saints. The original
coloured plaster of the simple Gothic dome has been partly lost, but the overall effect is nevertheless striking in its gentle, rather rustic sumptuousness and in the liveliness of the scenes depicted, representing the chivalric world of the time, which the artist seems naively to have seen as a model of perfection. A similar fresco, not so complete, can be seen in the church of San Cristoforo in Pennabilli. Probably painted by a follower of Alberti, it shows the Annunciation and the Virgin and Child within the framework of a fine Renaissance shrine in the Urbimo style, dating from 1528.

Following the road through the Marecchia valley brings the traveller to a Renaissance church deserving of a visit: Santa Maria d’Antico. Over the doorway is a beautiful fifteenth-century lunette in which is carved in archaic style Our Lady of Mercy. The ornate presbytery, with stone pilasters, cornices, and caissons, is a harmonious example of Renaissance architecture dating from the years 1484 to 1504, and recalls the style of Urbino. The church is illuminated by the splendour of a gleaming white sweet-faced Madonna in majolica, attributed to Andrea della Robbia. We owe these works of art to the patronage of the Counts Oliva di Piagnano, who for many years were loyal allies of the Malatestas.
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