Malatesta fortresses and castles
in and around Rimini

A map of the places included in this Guide is printed inside the jacket flap. Keep the flap open, and you will have a diagram showing the network of castles and fortresses in the area.
Pier Giorgio Pasini

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In collaboration with

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The territory around Rimini is flat only in part. Covignano Hill stands guard immediately at the back of the town, and only a little further away is Mount Titano, a forward sentry of the Apennine hills to the south.

The hilly countryside is enlivened by numerous torrential streams with broad gravel beds. Two of these are notable: the Marecchia, which rises in Tuscany, close to the source of the Tiber, in the hills known as Alpe della Luna; and the Conca, which rises in the Montefeltro region, on the slopes of Mount Carpegna. The valleys and conoids of these two rivers, separated and kept apart by Mount Titano, make up the territory of Rimini, tapering gently off into the Lombard Plain on the one hand and wedged tightly between the Adriatic sea and the Apennine hills on the other, bordering on Le Marche and the Montefeltro region.

Montefeltro has its own special character and history, stemming partly from the morphology of the terrain, essentially hilly and mountainous, and partly from one particular diocese, the Montefeltro diocese, which held sway here from at least the sixth or seventh century onwards; in mediaeval times the jurisdiction of the diocese extended as far as the Savio and Foglia valleys, occupying a strategic position as regards communications between the Lombard Plain and the central and southern regions of the Italian peninsula. Ever since the early Middle Ages, Montefeltro has been a region of strong sectarian interests, making true political and administrative unification impossible; and so the various communities within the region guarded their autonomy down the centuries, aided by the absence of any central power capable of subjugating and organising them. It is significant that until the seventeenth century the diocese of Montefeltro did not have a stable See: San Leo, San Marino, Talamello, Montetassi, Valle Sant’Anastasio and Pennabilli were all at one time or another home to the Bishop of Montefeltro, and sometimes to his chancery and his court of law as well. One of these communities, owing to a series of favourable circumstances, has kept its autonomy right down to the present day: the Republic of San Marino, which belongs to the diocese of Montefeltro and which throughout its long history has always leaned more towards Urbino and Le Marche than towards Rimini and the Romagna region.

The road through the Marecchia valley crosses the Apennines by the easily accessible pass of Viamaggio and leads into Tuscany and thence to the Tyrrenian sea: this has made the valley a place of importance ever since ancient times. There were settlements
here in prehistoric times, as can be seen from the iron-age “Villanova” dwellings found in Verucchio, an important town along the ancient “amber road”. The Marecchia valley was fortified by the Romans and was subsequently fought over by Goths, Lombards and Byzantines for its strategic importance: a situation tragically repeated during the Second World War with the creation of the Gothic Line. The constant struggles, first between Lombards and Byzantines and then between the Frankish and German Emperors and the Pope, did much to foster the development of autonomous aristocratic dominions, especially in the area closest to the mountains. These small “states within states” frequently fought one another in the struggle to possess and rule the territory. Unity was achieved only from 1631 onwards, when the restitution of the Duchy of Urbino enabled the Church, which nominally owned the region, to exercise directly its “supreme sovereignty”. As for the ancient road through the valley, it is ineffectual and impassable in places not so much for the harshness of the terrain as for the harshness of the struggles of its the different powers and overlords: the present road was opened only in 1924!

The wealth of towers, fortresses and castles which are still a feature of the Marecchia and Conca valleys today, are a reminder of the power struggles of the early and late Middle Ages which made the inhabitants fortify every village and every strategic point, whether at the bottom of the valley (mills, fords, bridges) or higher up the hillsides. As far back as the eighth century this area was known as “the region or province of castles”. Built from the local stone, these strongholds seem to grow out of the rocky terrain like strange spontaneous flora, with no attempt at camouflage: on the contrary, they rather flaunt themselves as man-made contrivances full of menace, often boasting a strength which they do not really possess. They enliven a wild and picturesque landscape which alternates sharp ridges, harsh gullies and gentle slopes green with woodland. Isolated limestone rocks, emerging from scaly clay and often of enormous size, are another feature of the landscape. **Mount Titano** is a good example, as are **Sasso Simone** and **Simonocello** and, closer to Rimini, the beautiful crag of **San Leo**, to name only the major ones.
Ever since Roman times, Rimini has held sway over a broad belt of land, both in the plain towards Romagna and in the hills towards Le Marche. In the Middle Ages the City-State of Rimini found itself in conflict with the various possessions of the local Church, the Church of Rome, and the Church of Ravenna, and also with the numerous concessions made to monasteries and wealthy landowners by the Archbishop of Ravenna, the Pope, and the Emperor. From the twelfth century onwards, the supremacy of Rimini over the surrounding hill country was threatened by the Malatesta family, who from their seats in Pennabilli and Verucchio were able to keep a hold over the middle Marecchia valley, already dominated in its upper part by the Carpegna and Montefeltro families.

Conflict and concord followed one another repeatedly, until finally the Malatesta family took over as rulers of Rimini in the fourteenth century, and governed it in the office of Vicars of the Holy See from 1355 until the end of the fifteenth century. For almost two centuries the history of Rimini and the history of the Malatesta dynasty were one and the same, and the Malatesta family extended their dominion over the surrounding lands: in Le Marche, as far as Ascoli Piceno, in Tuscany as far as Borgo San Sepolcro, and in Romagna as far as Cesena; but they never succeeded in getting rid of their most shrewd and powerful neighbours, the Montefeltro family. The Montefeltro dynasty probably owed its origins, like the Malatesta, to possessions carved out of the lands belonging to the earldom of Carpegna, feudatories of ancient Imperial origin who ruled Mount Carpegna and much of the region. The conflict between the Malatesta and the Montefeltro families became especially bitter in the mid-fifteenth century when the heads of the two rival families were respectively Sigismondo and Federico, especially when Federico succeeded in installing his son-in-law Alessandro Sforza as ruler of the city of Pesaro and its surrounding lands, in 1445. Until then, Pesaro had been a Malatesta possession, belonging to Sigismondo’s cousin, the inept Galeazzo Malatesta. This new state of affairs gave the territory of Urbino access to the sea while at the same time cutting into two separate sections the territory of Sigismondo, which at the time extended into Le Marche as far as Fano, Senigallia and Fossombrone.

The Marecchia and Conca valleys provide many examples of military architecture from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Villages fortified to a greater or lesser extent alternate with stout
fortresses capable of containing a small garrison and with lookout towers, isolated or surrounded at most by a small enclosure, which served to keep watch over the surrounding territory and to send signals. The constructions which have survived to the present day, however, have almost all been much altered or reduced to barely legible ruins. It must be remembered that numerous as these survivors are, they are nevertheless only a very small part of a system which had already reached its apogee of size and efficiency in the 1470s, when the territory was protected by a complete network of fortifications. The insecurity of the State regarding its enemies both within and without had compelled it to fortify every spot of any strategic importance, not simply the borders, which in any case were always ill-defined and often subject to unforeseen and sometimes substantial changes.

The Malatesta rulers continually altered their fortifications to make them more secure and to bring them into line with new methods of combat and siege. The period of major transformation was undoubtedly the rule of Sigismondo, partly because this period also coincided with the more frequent and massive use of a new and terrible weapon: artillery. Sigismondo became ruler of Rimini in 1432, when he was barely fifteen years old, and began almost immediately to restore and improve the fortifications of his territory: Marco Battagli, in his *Chronicle* written at the same time, wrote admiringly of Sigismondo “Even from his adolescence he perfected that which an entire generation could hardly have accomplished.” These works were intended to make the military constructions truly functional, not “beautiful”; or rather, to give them not abstract beauty but the beauty of complete coherence, where every part of the construction was perfectly suited to its military purpose.

A practical mind, especially well versed in the art of war, inventor of new explosive devices: this was Sigismondo, according to Roberto Valturio; and Sigismondo personally took a considerable part in designing and modernising the defences of his State. But he did ask for advice from others, and in 1438 he obtained Filippo Brunelleschi as supervisor for all the work then in progress in his territory, both in Romagna and in Le Marche. In March 1454 Leon Battista Alberti also came to see the Malatesta fortifications, together with Matteo de’ Pasti; it is certain that he visited Senigallia (a town “re-founded” by Sigismondo, then being built), and he probably made a wide reconnaissance of the Malatesta lands.
The fortifications restored or rebuilt by Sigismondo always have steeply sloping scarp walls, a certain irregularity of extension in the outer walls, and towers and bastions interesting not so much for their height as for their polygonal design, precursors of the round bastions which would be the most noticeable and most modern conceptual innovation of the last quarter of the century. Further partial innovations can be found in the shrewd use of ramparts, for the outer defences and at times even in the inner wards, where they served to facilitate passage, giving the defenders more room for manoeuvre and enabling them to barricade themselves in case of invasion.

These innovations do not usually go against tradition as regards the overall outward appearance of the fortifications: tall, solid, square; made more picturesque by the addition of towers, merlons and corbels (rather like all the castles of the Lombard Plain). They have a grandeur typically mediaeval and are exceptionally evocative, partly owing to the harsh wild beauty of the places where they stand, places chosen very carefully, to form an uninterrupted chain of strongholds. Guarding and watching, one next to the other, one over the other, always within sight of one another; they make a formidable chain of defences seemingly turning their attentions especially towards Montefeltro and San Marino.

Of course, almost all these places had been fortified previously; but Sigismondo was responsible not only for the rationalisation of the single defences, but also for a complete and thorough overall defensive project, where some of the old castles were neglected or much reduced, while others were rebuilt or enlarged and connected to one another so as to form a system. In this sense, it can be said that Sigismondo re-founded the organisation of the defence of the State; it must also be said that he never failed to point this out in the various epigraphs walled into his many castles, all of which boasted that he had built them a fundamentis, from the foundations, even when really he had only modernised them.
Rimini

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Rimini Castle is the undisputed masterpiece of Malatesta military architecture. Commissioned by Sigismondo in 1437, it was finished in 1446, according to the epigraphs with which it is adorned. Their solemn dictation and ancient epigraphic style inform the visitor that the Ruler of Rimini wished to name his castle, which he as usual claimed to have built *a fundamentis*, after himself: Castel Sismondo. The construction made use of considerable parts of pre-existing thirteenth-century Malatesta dwellings and also of the fortifications which Sigismondo’s predecessor (his brother Galeotto Roberto, known as The Blessed) had built. To Sigismondo, this castle was much more than just his palace: it was intended to be the visual symbol of his power, in keeping with a wholly traditional concept, and he had it built in the traditional style, more expressively picturesque than rationally harmonious, as can be seen from the variable perspective of the towers, the solidity of the curtain walls surmounted with merlons, the frequent use of pointed arches and stone or ceramic inserts, and the splendour of the gilding and of the pargetry coloured in red and green, the heraldic colours of the Malatestas, all of which were described by contemporary writers. The traditional picturesque style continued in the interior, in the tortuous passageways, the irrational layout of certain rooms, and perhaps too in the scarcity of large reception rooms.

To get an idea of the castle’s original appearance today, one has to refer to the medals cast by Matteo de’ Pasti to celebrate its construction, and to a detail of the fresco by Piero della Francesca in the Malatesta Temple (the Cathedral of Rimini), which shows the design exactly; or to a page of De Re Militari by Roberto Valturio dedicated to the description and praise of this construction and of Sigismondo. The inner nucleus of the castle was distinguished by five towers which surrounded a tall keep (the *palatium*); the broad moat which marked the outer circuit of the walls extended into the present Piazza Malatesta as far as the rear of the nineteenth-century theatre.

The castle’s immense size, mighty appearance and irregular shape, designed as a series of fortified enclosures surrounding central living quarters, make it striking even today. Some irregularities of design can be explained by the exploitation, necessary or convenient, of pre-existing structures: some, but not all. For example, the positioning of the towers may be attributed in part to this rationale, but can be also partly seen as an attempt - early and so rather uncertain - to create a system of defences with shooting and observation points which were to stand side by side and support one another; a necessity much felt since the
introduction of artillery.

An inventory drawn up immediately after the death of Sigismondo gives an idea of the furnishings of the residential part of this great construction: tables, benches and chests, beds and wardrobes, tapestries and hangings, were all noted and numbered by the notary who on the 13th day of October 1468 toured and inventoried rooms great and small, rooms bearing picturesque names deriving in part from their mural decorations – the Garland Chamber, the Juniper Chamber, the Death Chamber, the Chamber of the Crucifix. The chests and wardrobes contained books and written documents, jewellery and garments in strange styles often made from precious fabrics, bed covers and linen. In the store-rooms were weapons, banners, tents and standards, horse harness and dog collars, equipment for traditional hunting (bows and arrows) and for modern warfare (mortars and bombards).

All of this has been lost. The only authentic piece of furniture surviving from Malatesta times is a small cypress-wood chest datable to the mid-fifteenth century richly carved with Sigismondo’s coat of arms among decorative motifs. It comes from the castle of Montegridolfo, and is now in the city museum.

With the fall of the Malatesta dynasty at the end of the fifteenth century, Castel Sismondo ceased to be a princely residence and was used for purely military purposes; with the passing of time it had to be altered as defensive needs dictated, especially for defence from firearms, which had made enormous progress in just a few decades. In the seventeenth century, after thorough restoration work and the inclusion of additional embrasures, it took the name Castel Urbano, in honour of the reigning Pope, Urban VIII. It was subsequently used as a barracks, a storehouse, and finally a prison.

It is destined to become a cultural centre, and has been the subject of restoration work for some time. These works have uncovered a number of pre-existing constructions; one especially interesting find is the remains of the Roman city walls with a gateway, incorporated in the foundations of the castle; this was probably the late-Roman Porta Montanara, the “mountain gate”, which in the Middle Ages was replaced by another gate, in the same place but at a higher level, known as the Porta del Gattolo. This gate belonged to the bishopric throughout the thirteenth century, that is until it fell into the hands of the Malatesta family, whose dwellings were close by.
There is documentary evidence that the Malatesta family possessed lands in the territory around Rimini from the twelfth century onwards, especially in the Marecchia and Conca valleys, from the hills of Rimini to the promontory of Gabicce. Their history, however, is uncertain until they became citizens of Rimini, a century later. About the year 1220 Malatesta “dalla Penna” emerged as head of the family; he was succeeded after his death in about 1247 by his son Malatesta “da Verucchio”. Penna (Pennabilli) and Verucchio dispute the honour of being the birthplace of the Malatesta dynasty. In past centuries local scholars, at times basing their premises on false diplomas, have spilled rivers of ink to argue the question, which is certainly not of fundamental importance. Probably Verucchio was just another stage on the road which led eventually to the city for the ever more powerful and ever more wealthy family. Whatever the truth, the “cradle” of the Malatesta dynasty was somewhere in the middle Marecchia valley, unless it was even higher up the valley in Tuscany (where it appears there may be traces even older, although still very uncertain, as Currado Curradi has recently suggested).

Pennabilli and Verucchio are similar in structure. Both extend along a saddle crossed by a road and both overlook the river Marecchia with two castles each. Of the Pennabilli castles only a few almost shapeless ruins remain, with traces of cisterns, crowning the two peaks known as Il Roccione (the great rock) and La Rupe (the crag) which were home to two separate villages, Penna and Billi, unified in the fourteenth century. Traces of a polygonal bastion on the Great Rock suggest a fifteenth-century Malatesta construction, while the remains of fortifications on the Crag form part of the convent of the Augustinian nuns, built at the beginning of the sixteenth century from the stones of the demolished fortress. In the village, remains of the outer walls can still be seen, together with two gateways, both altered, bearing the coats of arms of the Malatesta and Montefeltro families. These bear witness to the transfer of the town from Malatesta to Montefeltro rule, which became definitive in 1462, the year before the final defeat of Sigismondo Malatesta by the Papal troops under the command of Federico da Montefeltro.

In some ways Verucchio was more fortunate. Here too, one of the castles (Rocca del Passerello) was almost completely destroyed and became a nuns’ convent, but the other castle, Rocca del Sasso, still stands: staunch and visible from far away, it
dominates the town and the surrounding countryside. Although much altered and restored it nevertheless remains one of the most interesting of the Marecchia valley castles, together with Montebello, San Leo and Santarcangelo. Sigismondo fortified it in 1449, as two fine inscriptions record, adding a huge scarp and rearranging the edifices around a massive central keep. Excavations have revealed capacious underground passages and imposing construction work dating perhaps from the twelfth century, certainly much earlier than Sigismondo’s work. The fine square stone tower, partly solid and with an exceptionally precise face, is older too. Recently (in 1975) an ancient pathway was unexpectedly reconstructed. This led steeply down the side of the cliff where the castle stands, and was shielded by the castle keep; it served as a link with the surrounding territory in case of emergency. The rooms of the castle have been much altered and transformed, first to adapt them to the needs of the small courts of the various rulers who held Verucchio in fief from 1518 to 1580: Zenobio de Medici, Ippolita Comnena, Leonello and Alberto Pio da Carpi; and finally to accommodate a small theatre built in the interior of the castle in the eighteenth century.

As with Pennabilli, so with Verucchio: lost by Sigismondo in 1462 after an exhausting siege. Rocca del Sasso, well fortified and defended by troops faithful and devoted to their lord, had no intention of surrendering to Federico da Montefeltro, who found himself compelled to resort to one of those stratagems of which he was a master: a letter bearing the forged signature of Malatesta Novello, announcing the imminent arrival of reinforcements. The reinforcements duly arrived, and only when it was too late did the castellan realise that they were in fact Federico da Montefeltro’s soldiers in disguise.

Verucchio overlooks the river and all the plain as far as Rimini, keeps watch over much of the territory of San Marino, and communicates directly with the castle of Scorticata (now re-named Torriana) which stands opposite, and with the castles on the plain of Rimini. Its position, highly strategic for keeping control over the territory, explains the pains taken by Sigismondo to improve and strengthen its defences, which today are peaceful balconies giving stunning views over one of the most picturesque and enchanting landscapes in the world, “a mixture of valleys, mountains, plain, villas, and sea”, as Monsignor Gian Maria Lancisi, chief physician to Pope Clement XI, wrote in 1705.
The territory between Pennabilli and Verucchio still has many interesting tokens of art and history. At the foot of the hill of Pennabilli, between the present road and the river Marecchia, stands the twelfth-century Romanesque Pieve, or parish church, of San Pietro in Messa, built entirely of stone. The interior has a nave and two side aisles, and there is a fine façade. In the year 1200 Giovanni Malatesta gave some land to this church.

On the other side of the river is the fascinating village of Petrella Guidi, almost uninhabited today but still showing intact its mediaeval structure, dominated by a ruined castle with a huge tower built by the Tiberti family in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In many places on the walls of this tower its original white plasterwork can still be seen, proof that these ancient fortifications were pargeted and painted, usually with the heraldic colours of the families who owned them, making them clearly visible in the surrounding landscape. The gateway in the castle wall has a Malatesta coat of arms, that of Galeotto Malatesta, and next to it the coat of arms of the Oliva family, who held it under Malatesta protection until the beginning of the fifteenth century, and a Church coat of arms (crossed keys).

The little road beyond Petrella leads over the crest of the hill to Sant’Agata Feltria in the Savio valley, where there is a beautiful Malatesta castle built on a huge crag known as “Sasso del Lupo”, the rock of the wolf. This castle was altered first by Federico da Montefeltro, who added a bastion designed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, and subsequently by the last feudatories, the Fregoso family, who built additional storeys on to the existing castle.

Following the Marecchia valley from Pennabilli down towards Rimini and the sea, on the right after Novafeltria can be seen Mount Maiolo, where stand two polygonal bastions and a curtain wall, all that remains of a Malatesta castle destroyed in 1639 by a lightning bolt which struck the gunpowder store. Maiolo, the fortified village on the hillside in the shadow of the castle, was fought over at various times by the Faggiola family, the Bishop of Montefeltro, the Church, the Malatesta family, and the Montefeltro family, before it was completely destroyed by a landslide on May 29th 1700, leaving a gash still clearly visible on the hillside.

A little further on, the level road which follows the broad river bed gives a magnificent view of San Leo, built on a rocky limestone crag and dominated by an almost impregnable fortress rebuilt by Francesco di Giorgio Martini for Federico da Montefeltro. San Leo,
the Mons Feretri of ancient times, is in a sense the historic capital of the Montefeltro region, the origin of the region’s name and possible the place of origin of the House of Montefeltro, who fought over it with the Malatesta family throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. San Leo is undoubtedly of great strategic importance for keeping control over the surrounding territory, and was for this reason the object of long-running battles between Lombards and Byzantines. It was in San Leo that the conflict between Berengarius II and Emperor Otto I came to an end when the Emperor succeeded in conquering and taking possession of the town on December 26th 963, after a lengthy siege. In San Leo there is genuine, unchanged evidence of the Middle Ages, in the castle and, even better, in the Cathedral and the ancient Pieve (the parish church), magnificent examples of Romanesque architecture.

Beside the road which runs alongside the river Marecchia (the Strada Marecchiese), two picturesque crags stand guard over the valley towards Rimini and the Romagna region: Pietracuta and Saiano. Saiano is a tall rock rising out of the river bed, crowned with an ancient church dedicated to Our Lady. The church has a trefoil presbytery (with Renaissance frescos, sadly surviving only in part) reminiscent of the Byzantine “celle tricore”, and a huge tower faced with beautiful sandstone ashlers, cylindrical like the bell-towers of the Ravenna churches. Cylindrical towers are not uncommon in the Montefeltro region, and although they follow an ancient Roman and Byzantine pattern, none of them appears to date from before the thirteenth century. Examples can be found in the territories of Pennabilli (Maciano), Casteldelci (Torre di Monte), Badia Tedalda (Cicognaia), Montegrimano (Ca’ Manente), Sestino (Monte Romano), and Borgo Pace (Torre di San Martino).

Just a little further on, almost as if to make a clear boundary between Montefeltro and Romagna, there stands a fortified barricade: the twin hills of Verucchio and Scorticata (now renamed Torriana), on opposite sides of the valley, equipped with defences intended to make the road impassable. These two castles also served for sending to Rimini (using fire and smoke as signals) information about the vast territory they were able to survey, both towards the sea and towards the hills of Romagna and Le Marche and San Marino. The tower of Scorticata, an outpost of the castle, was able to send messages via the nearby castle of Montebello to San Giovanni in Galilea, thus activating a whole chain of castles and fortresses in the Uso and Rubicon valleys and in Rimini.

It is a good idea to cross the river Marecchia at Ponte Torriana Malatesta Fortress via Castello, 15 tel. 0541 675232 ristoranteduetorri@libero.it • opening times: the exterior and surrounding viewpoints can be visited

Montebello Guidi di Bagno Fortress (privately owned) castello di Montebello tel./fax 0541 675180 • open all year

Above: the fortress of San Leo. Below: the cylindrical tower of the little church of Our Lady of Saiano.
Verucchio and follow the road uphill to Torriana and Montebello, an attractive village with an interesting castle, much altered by the earls of Bagno, worth visiting both for its architecture and for the magnificent views from its terraces overlooking the Marecchia and Uso valleys. Then descend the valley keeping to the left of the river, where the landscape is gentle. On the left, in Poggio Berni, is Palazzo Marcosanti, standing guard over the road on a small hill. This was originally a fortified farm belonging to the Malatesta family, and part of the original fourteenth-century building can still be seen. Notice the attractive escarpment and the ogive gateways in stone and terracotta, in the centre of the main building, altered in the seventeenth century, and the great courtyard.

A little further down the valley, where the hills have given place to the plain, stands the beautiful thirteenth-century tower - crowned with Ghibelline merlons - of the Battagli, an important family in mediaeval Rimini. This tower served to defend a fortified farm, called a “tomba”, consisting of a walled enclosure within which stood the homes of the farm workers, the stables, and - most important - the storehouses for the crops, once gathered in, and for the farm tools. Needless to say, the farm stood at the centre of a huge country estate.

Just a few kilometres away is Santarcangelo, built on a hill between the Marecchia and Uso valleys. Its unpretentious architecture and picturesque narrow streets, climbing the hillside and opening into quiet little squares, make this one of the best preserved and most attractive little towns in the area. The oldest part is still mostly surrounded by its fifteenth-century walls, restored and partly altered in 1447 by Sigismondo, who left behind some inscriptions in marble. He was responsible too for building the castle which stands at the edge of the hill next to a huge tower built by Carlo Malatesta in 1386. This tower was immensely high, and according to contemporary writers was considered one of the wonders of Italy for this reason. So imposing and so beautiful, it was still a source of wonder even half a century later; but by then siege warfare was carried out more often with bronze bombards than with wooden catapults, and Sigismondo did not hesitate to reduce its height. He used the lower part as the corner keep for a new fortress (partly built from materials reclaimed from the demolition work), four-sided with polygonal towers, large enough to contain a fair-sized garrison, in view of the restiveness and intolerance of the people of Santarcangelo towards their Malatesta overlords, and the need to keep constant watch over the lower
Marecchia and Uso valleys and the Via Emilia close to Rimini.

Like many others, this castle too is ornamented with Latin inscriptions in beautiful antique script, according to a Humanistic fashion then beginning to spread; sadly, however, it has lost completely its crown of merlons and corbels. The picturesque cobbled courtyard, covering a mediaeval cistern still in use, gives access to the keep, which is the base of Carlo Malatesta’s great fourteenth-century tower, and to part of the ancient spiral staircase concealed in the huge walls. These stairs allowed independent access to the various upper floors, of which four remain. In a room of this tower, at dawn on October 10th 1432, Galeotto Roberto Malatesta (known as The Blessed) died at just twenty-one years of age. He was nephew and successor to Carlo Malatesta, and brother to Sigismondo and Malatesta Novello. Certain fanciful nineteenth-century writers chose Santarcangelo Castle as the setting for the events which led to Gianciotto Malatesta’s “crime of honour”, the murder of his wife Francesca “da Rimini” and his brother Paolo “il Bello”.

The terrace of the keep was until recently adorned with a small cypress tree, most picturesque but a mortal danger to the cohesion of the stonework. From here the view is splendid: the Marecchia valley opens out to the hills and San Marino on one side, and to Cesena and the sea on the other. Near the river, the careful observer can see the Pieve, a single-cell Byzantine basilica built in the sixth century near the Roman settlement. This is the most ancient and the best-preserved Pieve in the whole of Romagna.
From Rimini it is advisable to reach the Conca valley at the beginning of its hilly part, cutting diagonally across the Rimini countryside as far as Morciano di Romagna. Take the Coriano road, which unfurls soothingly between hills as carefully cultivated as if they were gardens: fields, vineyards, olive groves, all follow one another along the gentle slopes brightened by scattered farmhouses, little country churches, and willow and poplar trees growing along the banks of the streams which cut deep into the land.

In Coriano can be seen the remains of a castle which had scarp and curtain walls with corbels, and a gateway still bearing clearly visible traces of the ancient drawbridge, crowned with the stone coat of arms of the Sassatelli family of Imola, who held Coriano in fief from 1528 to 1580. The inner entrance to the fortified polygonal enclosure is older, and consists of an ancient gateway tower, tall and straight, topped with a few surviving merlons. Much of the castle has been restored recently and contains an Antiquarium with various finds, artefacts and ceramic fragments, brought to light during the restoration work.

Just beyond Coriano a minor road drops steeply down on the left into the little valley of the Mordano brook, as far as Scaricalasino bridge, then climbs sharply up to the hamlet of Castelleale. This was a fortified farm belonging to Bishop Leale Malatesta, who died there in 1400. To the attentive observer, the outer walls of this little huddle of buildings reveal fourteenth-century walls and arches, ancient windows with stone jambs, and the remains of enclosure walls and of a tower with a Gothic archway. On the side towards the hill are substantial remains of the carriage gateway and next to it a smaller gateway for pedestrians, both of an elegant ogival design. Bishop Leale bequeathed to the Cathedral of Rimini a fine monstrance, later converted to a reliquary for the “Holy Thorn”, on whose base Leale is pictured in prayer before St George, the patron saint of chivalry. On the opposite hill is a settlement similar to Castelleale, possibly even older, surrounded by tumbledown walls hidden by vegetation, its one gateway dominated by a tall tower, half of which collapsed in recent years: Agello.

After Castelleale is San Clemente, where too are the remains of fortifications, and then the road begins to descend to the Conca valley, which is reached at Morciano. The twisting descent gives views across the valley to Saludecio, Gemmano and Montefiore, fortified villages crowning green wooded hilltops. From Morciano, go up the valley at least as far as Montescudo and Montecolombo,
two well-fortified villages on the left of the river which (together with Gemmano) were partially destroyed during the Second World War.

In Montescudo, notice the imposing walls of the castle: huge and steeply sloping, they made attack practically impossible. On the south tower can still be seen a marble plaque with a high-sounding Latin inscription, engraved with the usual attention to the form and arrangement of the letters. Sigismondo declares here that he has built the great castle from the foundations, to serve as a “scudo”, that is to say, a shield, for the town of Rimini. The year: 1460. Montescudo, dominating as it did all the middle Conca valley and the valley of the Marano brook, exactly facing the enemy fortifications of San Marino, was truly the keystone of the entire Malatesta defence system and a vital shield for the defence of the city of Rimini, to which it was connected by a good road along the crest of the hill, barely twenty kilometres long, with no special defences.

On March 31st 1954, restoration work on the east walls of Montescudo brought to light twenty-two medals bearing the effigy of Sigismondo. These are some of the famous and truly magnificent bronze medals cast by Matteo de’ Pasti in the mid-fifteenth century. Others have been found elsewhere, always in the walls of Malatesta constructions; we know that the Lord of Rimini used to have them concealed in the walls so that the memory of his name and his face would be sure to survive the destruction of what he had built, just as the memory and the effigy of the ancient Roman emperors survived, through their coins, the destruction of even their greatest building works. Naturally, such forethought was incomprehensible to ordinary people, who invented all kinds of fairy tales to explain these finds, interpreting them as treasure troves. Various legends concerning treasure hidden in the walls of Malatesta castles were current even in Sigismondo’s lifetime; and in Montescudo they still day-dream about it.

The opposite side of the valley is mostly dominated by Gemmano, where the fortifications have been destroyed, and by Montefiore (see below), both of which are easily reached from Morciano. Also leading from Morciano is the road for Saludecio, which crosses the ridge where stand Mondaino and Montegridolfo and then descends to the Foglia valley, most of which is in the region of Le Marche.

Here once more is a border region of huge strategic significance, and consequently well fortified. Saludecio was always part of the Malatesta circuit, although it had its own domicelli, or overlords, the Ondidei family, murdered in 1344 by a rival family,
possibly at the instigation of the Malatestas. Here little remains of the old fortress, and that little has been incorporated in the nineteenth-century Palazzo Comunale, the Town Hall, where a fourteenth-century Malatesta coat of arms can be seen, decorating the outer wing.

Mondaino, after the defeat of the Malatesta family, gravitated towards Fano. The town walls, the north gate, and the fortress (constructed on a scarp foundation) are still in evidence. The fortress is now the Town Hall. The walls, the gate and the fortress now surround a theatrical nineteenth-century market place, semicircular and bordered with arcades, and the whole is most picturesque. Recently a long, steep underground tunnel was discovered, and has been partially excavated; it leads from the fortress and presumably went to the river. It may have been a means of escape, or perhaps a secret passage for messengers. The literature concerning the fortifications makes many references to secret passages, but this is the only one found so far.

Saludecio and Mondaino, like the other villages in the area, were the scene for internal strife within the Malatesta family during the first half of the fourteenth century. Ferrantino Novello, son of Ferrantino and nephew of Malatestino “dall’occhio”, argued acrimoniously with his cousins Galeotto and Malatesta “Guastafamiglia”, the sons of Pandolfo I (who was the brother of Malatestino). The dispute ended in the defeat of Ferrantino, who had allied himself to the Montefeltro family and had made a little kingdom of his own on the Romagna hills towards Urbino. An entire village fell victim to this dispute: Montegridolfo, destroyed by Ferrantino in 1337, was rebuilt five years later by Galeotto and Malatesta, an example of town planning which has remained substantially intact down to the present day. On top of the rampart, levelled and surrounded with high sloping walls, the simple buildings are carefully lined up along three parallel streets; access to the village is by a single tower-gate with a drawbridge, now altered. On the opposite side of the village stood a small fortress; traces still remain, partly incorporated in a mansion which is now a hotel. This is perhaps the castle which was generously donated by Cesare Borgia, known as “Il Valentino”, to his beloved “executioner”, don Micheletto. The entire village has recently been restored with great attention to detail.

Just outside the once-inhabited part of the village stands the little church of San Rocco, which has frescos dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, showing the Virgin and Child with
Saints Sebastian and Rock; and a seventeenth-century altarpiece by Guido Cagnacci, on the same subject. There are other frescos of great artistic merit dating from the last quarter of the fifteenth century to be found in the Conca valley. Mondaino Town Hall has a Virgin and Child Enthroned with Angels Making Music, which was originally in the convent of the Poor Clares; while the little church of the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Misericordia in Montefiore has fragments of decoration showing the Last Judgement and Paradise.

Returning downhill to Morciano, follow the road alongside the river bed towards the sea. This road soon leads through another important Malatesta family dominion, San Giovanni in Marignano, founded by the Benedictines, with walls and a gateway tower dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The area of plain enclosed by the Conca, Ventena and Tavollo watercourses, from Morciano to the sea, was marshland until the early Middle Ages, when it was reclaimed by the Benedictines who had settled there and had a number of abbeys and vast possessions, partly the former property of the church of Ravenna.

The road ends in Cattolica, where the ancient church of Sant’Apollinare belonged to the Benedictines of Classe; just a few kilometres away is the great castle of Gradara, in the territory of Pesaro.
By the second half of the fourteenth century, the Malatesta dynasty had consolidated their dominion and obtained the official post of “vicars”. Now they could turn their attention to modifying some of their castles to make suitable accommodation for their court, which in terms of wealth and elegance now rivalled the great courts of central Italy. Gradara especially, and also Montefiore, both virtually impregnable, became sumptuous temporary places of residence - holiday homes, we should call them today - especially during the hunting season. It is worth noting that there were also castles constructed originally as “places of pleasure” and subsequently transformed into fortresses: for example, Villa delle Caminate, three miles from Fano, which was built by Galeotto in 1365 and decorated by Pace da Faenza; sadly this has been totally destroyed.

Montefiore can be seen clearly from Rimini and all the surrounding plain. It dominates the middle Conca valley and all the Ventena valley, and belongs to the strongest and most coherent chain of the whole Malatesta defence system. To appreciate the strategic significance of Montefiore, compare it - or rather, contrast it - with the Montefeltro family castles of Tavoleto and Sassofeltrio. Montefiore is perhaps the most distinctive of the Malatesta castles, prism-shaped, decidedly unusual, almost surreal; smooth and many-sided; compact and crystalline. It is no wonder that Giovanni Bellini was so impressed by it: he perhaps made a note of it in his "travel diaries", and certainly he reproduced it in the background of at least two of his paintings. Seen at close quarters, the castle is sadly a little disappointing, owing to the extensive alterations made to the original construction during the years following the Second World War; alterations carried out in such a Philistine fashion as to wipe out or distort many of the original elements which could have supplied evidence useful for understanding the castle and for rebuilding it more reliably in the mind's eye, at least.

Even in the thirteenth century, the castle must have been impressive in size and functional in disposition, with a tower standing close to the residential quarters. Both were protected by a walled enclosure, having as its centre a courtyard with a cistern, and stood on the summit of a hill. During the following century the castle was extended considerably, and walls were built all around the village, forming a great defensive complex with the fortress at its heart. There is evidence of various alterations and restoration work carried out by Sigismondo and before him by Malatesta Ungaro, who had a preference for this castle and had it decorated.
with a beautiful stone coat of arms complete with a crest, still in
existence, and with paintings still surviving, miraculously, in part.
In the great “Chamber of the Emperor” (near which were to be
found also a “Throne Room” and a “Hall of the Pope”) can be seen
a number of “portraits” of ancient heroes, and two fragmentary
battle scenes, frescos painted by Jacopo Avanzi in about 1370.
These are the only surviving remains of decorative painting in
private Malatesta family constructions. Frescos and paintings are
documented in many other Malatesta castles and residences: in
Pesaro, Montelevecchie, San Costanzo di Fano, Brescia, Rimini,
Gradara; but no trace remains of any of these. Before leaving
Montefiore, notice the buildings which make a semicircle at the feet
of the castle, and the parish church with a fine Gothic doorway and
a Crucifix of the thirteenth-century Rimini school. Walled on the
gateway to the village, to which was added a drawbridge in the
Middle Ages, is a stone tablet with the coats of arms of Pope
Piccolomini, Pius II, and of the Cardinal Legate Niccolò Forteguerri.
This, the work of one Giacomo, a stone-cutter from Ferrara, was
placed here in 1464 after the defeat of Sigismondo Malatesta, in
place of a Malatesta coat of arms.

**Gradara** is another mighty fortress which served both as a
defence and a sumptuous residence. Like Montefiore, it was an
allodial possession of the Malatesta family – that is to say, a
property bought by them, not held as a Papal concession. To
appreciate its defensive significance, it should be viewed in
connection with Rimini and as part of a system which included the
fortresses of Gabicce, Casteldimezzo and Fiorenzuola on the cliffs
along the coast, and Tavullia inland. In 1364 Malatesta
“Guastafamiglia” willed Montefiore and Gradara respectively to
his sons Malatesta Ungaro and Pandolfo. Pandolfo was a friend of
the poet Petrarch and the father of Malatesta “of the sonnets”
who died in Gradara castle in 1429. He is known to have been
interested in painting as well as in poetry; he sent a painter to
Petrarch to take his portrait secretly and recruited artists from
Florence (among whom was the young Lorenzo Ghiberti) to
decorate his residence in Pesaro. In all probability, the frescos
depicting heroes and battles of antiquity which documentary
evidence shows were painted both in Gradara castle and in the
Pesaro residence, were commissioned mainly by Pandolfo, and
were perhaps not so different from those commissioned by Ungaro
for Montefiore.

In the **fortress of Gradara** there are still fifteenth-century
frescos of heroes and battles, but these were commissioned by the Sforza family who held the castle from the year 1463. At the entrance to the village, the coats of arms of Alessandro Sforza can be seen on the old gateway, together with those of Guidobaldo II Della Rovere and Vittoria Farnese, while on the gateway to the castle itself there is a triumphant inscription commemorating major restoration work carried out by Giovanni Sforza in 1494. The castle doubtless needed restoring, even though Sigismondo Malatesta had already repaired the damage caused by the merciless siege carried out in 1446 by Francesco Sforza in an unsuccessful attempt to capture the castle and give it to his brother Alessandro, the new ruler of Pesaro, installed there in 1445 with the connivance and complicity of Federico da Montefeltro.

On the whole, both the village with its surrounding walls and the castle are in good condition, and there are numerous original parts still to be seen, despite extensive restoration work; the work effected in the 1920s was particularly heavy-handed, albeit necessary. The castle is reached by crossing a drawbridge and passing a number of defences; the inner quadrangle courtyard is surrounded on three sides by a portico with an upper loggia, dating from the early fourteenth and late fifteenth centuries, with the coats of arms of Pandolfo Malatesta and Giovanni Sforza. The keep, once separate from the rest, now stands at a corner of the courtyard; mighty and unadorned, this is the oldest part of the entire complex. In the mid-eighteenth century, under the floor of what is now a picturesque Torture Chamber, the body of a warrior was found, armed from head to foot and standing upright: perhaps condemned to death by suffocation under a heap of earth, three centuries earlier. The keep was certainly used as a prison and as a court of law; the inscription on the outside of the lower-floor window designates it “the antidote to dishonesty”.

The courtyard gives direct access to the chapel, which has a fine altarpiece in blue and white majolica by Andrea Della Robbia, showing the Virgin and Child with Four Saints; the predella shows the Annunciation between St Francis Receiving the Stigmata and St Mary of Egypt Receiving Communion from an Angel. A sixteenth-century staircase leads to the upper floor and a number of rooms containing an eclectic collection of antique furniture, rooms adorned with mediaeval-style decorations, entirely and often irritatingly false, dating from the early twentieth century. Also completely false is the so-called Chamber of Francesca, which was furnished in the 1920s with all the ingredients (bed, reading-stand,
curtains, trapdoor, secret passageway, balcony, etc) needed to create the appropriate atmosphere for the tragedy of Francesca and her brother-in-law, which took place - if it took place at all - elsewhere. The whole setting is evidently late-Romantic, even decadent, in taste; more suited to a magazine serial than to any respect for historic truth. Fortunately however, the castle itself is on the whole authentic, as are some of the fascinating Renaissance frescos: see the Chamber of Lucrezia Borgia (who for some years was the wife of Giovanni Sforza), the Cherub Chamber, and the loggia, which also has some fragments of sculpture. The true charm of the construction lies, however, in its complexity: in its structure made up of layer on layer; in its grandeur; in its relationship with the fortified village and the surrounding countryside.

Gradara, “laid out along the crest of the hill in a kind of armed and watchful idleness, like a wild beast at rest but ready to spring” (Luigi Michelini Tocci), looks towards the east and north, towards the sea and the Romagna region. Romagna begins in the plain immediately beyond the Gabicce promontory, where stands Cattolica, founded in 1273 between the Ventena and Tavollo rivers almost as if to replace the ancient - or rather legendary - sunken city of Conca, and to create a visible boundary to the territory of Rimini. Gradara belongs equally to the Malatestas and Le Marche; it breathes the sea breezes and the last mists of the plain, where re-echo the voices and music, where fade the colours and manners, of the great Courts of the north: Este, Gonzaga, Visconti. More than in any other Malatesta castle, in Gradara the cruel and courtly wind of Chivalry still blows, bringing remembrances of reckless, fearless Sigismondo and his last feats of daring before his decline.
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