

Volpaia is an originally medieval fortified town. The document that mentions it was drafted in Cintoia the 21st of April 1172: it testifies that the brothers Franculus and Galfredus from Cintoia, after securing the approval of their father and of the “Liquiritia, uxor Franculi”, drew a credit of 28 pounds of silver with Spinello da Montegrossoli, putting a lien on their estate, that were situated in the “curte et castello de Vulpaio”. The document is mentioned by L. Pagliai Regesta Chartarum Italiae. The origin of the castle is surely much older that the document.

THE ORIGINS

Probably the castle rose around the X century, as others that point out the land of the High Val di Pesa, and rose in that place, a slope of one of the hills that start from the Badia of Montemuro in the direction of Radda, since being place of the water division of the two small valleys, formed by the... affluents of the Pesa, it is easily defensible. It was a precious plus in that period (in which the feudal society was settling and that was deeply insecure) and on the other hand was part of the origin of most of the Tuscan castles risen in that period.

The strategic situation was more important for Volpaia because it was at the border between Florence and Siena. Under the political stand point, the fortified town was included, with the near pieve of Santa Maria Novella, in the “judiciaria florentina” since the XI century, but appears certainly included in the territory depending from Florence only from the second half of the XII century, time in which the first rulings for the borders among the republic of Siena and that of Florence were established. Thus, when the latter organized its territory in autonomous jurisdictions defined “Leghe”, Volpaia was included in the “Lega del Chianti”, among the peoples of the “Terzo” of Radda.

The ecclesiastical areas and the road connections depended on this setting. Volpaia in fact was part of the Diocesis of Fiesole and it's church, dedicated to S. Lorenzo martyr, depended from the pieve of Santa Maria Novella. A road started from this latter location, important Chianti road junction, that going by Volpaia, was used as connection between the valleys of Pesa and superior Valdarno (for this very reason a spedale would have risen later in the XV century for the shelter of the pilgrims). The road descended to the end of the Val di Pesa, where some parts can be seen even today, and then climbed up to Albola (location as well with a church depending from the pieve of Santa Maria Novella), and after it easily reached the edge of the mountains that separate the Chianti from the Valdarno Superiore.



THE BATTLES OF THE '400

Situated in a nevralgic area of the Chianti it had to support many times the consequence of the secular fights among the Siena Republic and that of Florence. The two states, confining right in this region, where obtrusive one with the other of their territorial expansion, and for this reason found continual pretexts to clash militarily. Their traces were left mainly by the raids of the venture captain Alberico da Barbiano, during the war among Florence and the Visconti, and the two disastrous aragonese invasions in 1452 and 1478. In several occasions, in fact, the Castle of Volpaia participated to the defense of the positions of the Florentine Republic in the Terzo of Radda. But it particularly was evidenced in the second Aragonese that it showed it attachment to Florence.

ART WITNESSES

Notwithstanding the many integrations and destructions, the Castle of Volpaia still preserves remarkable witnesses of its past of Florentine fortification in the territory of the Chianti. The fortification was formed by a surrounding walls in an almost elliptic plan, with alternating defensive towers. Most of these, situated at the side of the entrance, had the function of a Mastio. Besides some stretch of the original walls, there still is the powerful principal tower of the fortification, with rectangular plan, and one of the minor towers. A cylinder small tower, placed in the north side, is to be deems being placed in a later period, since its stone construction, accapezzato, is different from that, filaretto, of the older parts of the castle. It was probably built after the Aragonese destructions of the 1478, because in the second half of the XV century often round towers were built, that were more suitable to resist to the attacks of the new artillery.

A street ran trough within the castle, along its longer axle, dividing it into two almost equal portions. The access door to the fortress opened in correspondence to this main street, and is no longer there due to the alterations that the whole south-west side of the walls (but it is still reproduced in drawings of a Cabreo of the 1801). In the same sectore there are remarkable ruins of medeval constructions inside the castle, incorporated in buildings used for living quarters.

Within the surrounding walls was also included the old church of Volpaia, still today recognizable for having on the façade a round eye, today walled, and, over the very simple door, an



arch with sesto acuto. It has a plan that is almost rectangular, an only nave, and is covered with simple visible capriate. This construction, very rugged, could go back to the XIV century, but it is also possible that it has been build in the second half of the '400, after the destruccions of the Aragonese, on the ruins of a small previous romanic church. In fact the right side, that coincide with a stretch of the surrounding wall, is not veneered by the filaretti in sandstone as in the older pars of the castle, and instead shows an irregular wall veneering with pieces of white well carved Alberese, probably remains of a previous romanic church, alternate with fragments of sandstone. The church, that used as a steeple one of the remaining towers of the castle, has been deconsacrated in the XIV century, when the new church of Volpaia was built.

The total absence of fine architectural interpretations or of sculpture decorations makes and exact dating of the ruins of the castle of Volpaia problematic. Nevertheless, in the older wall structures, perfectly veneered with filaretti, the fortification can be dated way back tot the XII century. Due to the neighbouring sandstone quarries (used up to a few years ago), the constuction is prevalently made with that stone. And this gives it a gilded brown aspect, unusual in the Chianti, where, also in the fortifications, the solar clarity Alberese prevails.

Instead timing of the most important building, pride and symbol of Volpaia, is not a problem; the tower-church named after Sant'Eufrosino, preacher of the Chianti, declared “National Monument” in 1982. It is commonly named “La Commenda” because it was linked originally to a “Commenda”, or benefice, of various farms, established in 1443 by Ser Piero della Volpaia, that had invested Fra Bartolomeo Canigiani, knight of Jerusalem.

The plan and the structure of the Commenda of Sant'Eufrosino (it's façade is reproduced on the label of the Chianti Classico of Volpaia) are of the 400's, of typically Michelozzo inspiration. But the inspirations from Michelozzo are read in a style close to that of Giuliano da Maiano. The monument – built between 1443 and 1460 – is in any case so important to deserve it's own mongraphic study. Up to 1932 (year in which the church was deconsacrated) the church conserved one of the most important pieces of Cosimo Rosselli, carried out in 1480: a big reredos with a carved and painted architectural frame, now placed at the National Centre of Renaissance in Florence.



A turnaround, also under the architectural point of view of the castle, occurred in the XVI century, with the decline of the Siennese power that led to the fall of the republic in 1555. A long period of peace began for the Chianti and the Castle of Volpaia, having lost its originally defensive post, slowly lost its battle some look: some of the late renaissance doors open into living quarters within the castle, witness this change, that led to the vanishing of large stretches of walls and to the construction of living quarters.

Nearby the castle, specially with the Counter-Reformation, oratories and small churches developed. Two of these minor architectural buildings, both of the XVII century, are still present: we are talking of the chapel called Ceppetto, very simple and with no artistic pretence and of the chapel of the Madonna del Fossato, a graceful small rectangular plan church, foregone with a columned porch supported by pillars in sandstone accessible by a short but steep stairway. In the interior of this latter, a fresco of the second half of the XV century is preserved, with the image of the Madonna and Child, previously situated in a tabernacle, pre-existing to the chapel.

FAMOUS PEOPLE

The Florentine family that took their name from Volpaia came from here: a family that in the XV and XVI century bred a series of learned members, artists and clock builders, armillary spheres, compasses and astrolabes.

As a fact these types of precision mechanics, typical aspect of the science before Galilei, was usually referred to as proper of the Della Volpaia. Among them the first known were Benvenuto and Lorenzo, of the XV century.

This latter, friend of Leonardo da Vinci and often his confidant in technical matters, is known to have built for the Medici, the planetary clock that is currently placed in the Palazzo Vecchio. He had three sons, Benvenuto, Eufrosino and Cammillo. Most of the instruments came from a son of Cammillo, Girolamo.

The museum of History and Science of Florence, owns many works of the Della Volpaia, and mostly of Girolamo, and particularly a night and sun clock signed and dated 1568 and an armillary sphere, that too with signature and date (1564). Other instruments are at the Science Museum of London, at the National Maritime Museum of Greenwich, at the Adler Plan-



etarium of Chicago and other important Museums of history and science. Of particular importance are also the three Codes of Della Volpaia, (Codex Marciano n°5363, Codex Magliabechi cl. XIX, n°90, Codex Antinori n°17) that are typical example of the manuals (secret and very personal) written by the artisians of the Renaissance.

Other famous people of the same family were: Ser Piero Della Volpaia, who in 1443 funded and financed the Commenda of Sant'Eufrosino; Lorenzo di Frosino della Volpaia, prior of the Hospital of Innocenti in Florence in the years 1456-58; Francesco di Frosino dalla Volpaia, elected Judge of Radda in 1633.

The fortunes of the vine and wine economy of Volpaia had a great increase beginning from the XVI century, when the long peace following the fights among Siena and Firenze allowed the Chianti wine to spread and be appreciated not only in Italy, but in wide areas of Europe as well. And the hills of Volpaia, that passed from one great family owner to another such as the Capponi Counts, the Canigiani and the Marquis Bartolini-Baldelli, still today can claim the enological primacy since they have always been defined, as a name, the “poggi viniferi” (wine hills), according to the definition collected by Repetti in his Geographical Historical dDiction-ary of Tuscany appeared in 1841.

