

Valdarno Superiore (Upper Valdarno)

1. Terranuova Bracciolini

Terranuova Bracciolini, once Castel S. Maria, dates from 1337, the last of the Florentine "Terre nuove" (new lands) of the Valdarno to be founded. The intention to set about the construction of a fortified centre had already appeared in the resolution of 1299.

The town lay-out remained almost intact, with the town walls, the towers and four gates until 1944. The devastations of the Second World War demolished some of the most significant architectural features of the town. Extensive portions of the town walls and mighty angular towers remain visible today.

Among the most interesting buildings in the historic centre are the Monastero delle Benedettine ('Benedictine Monastery') (seventeenth century), the Palazzo Concini (fifteenth century) and the church of S. Biagio ai Mori (mid-fourteenth century) with its fine fourteenth-century frescoes.

Outside the historic centre, the cycle of frescoes in the church of S. Maria in Campo Arsiccio, in Campogialli (fourteenth - fifteenth centuries) are of great interest.

The landscape of the "Balze", gullies formed by the erosion of old lacustrine sediments, is fascinating. Most of the Riserva Naturale ('Nature Reserve') delle Valli dell'Inferno e della Bandella is situated within the territory of the commune.

2 Loro Ciuffenna

The medieval village of Loro stands on the slope of the Pratomagno (1591 m. above sea level), on a low relief above the deep mouth of the Ciuffenna torrent. The name of the river is of Etruscan origin. The Etruscan presence throughout the land of the commune is confirmed by archaeological finds and above all by the toponomy.

In Roman times the slopes of the Pratomagno were crossed by the Cassia Vetus. Along the route of this Roman road are found the splendid Romanesque parish churches of San Giustino and of Gropina (10 km. and 2 km. respectively from Loro Ciuffenna). The point at which Cassia crosses the Ciuffenna very probably corresponds to the present settlement of Loro. Loro controlled the traffic over the so-called Ponte Romano ('Roman Bridge') or Ponte Vecchio ('Old Bridge'), the one lancet arch of which dates entirely from medieval times.

The village of Loro is one of the most charming of the whole Valdarno for the perfectly conserved irregularity of its medieval lay-out and for its picturesque position between the mountain and the torrent.

The land of the commune is densely dotted with old settlements. Of particular interest are the villages of Gropina, huddled around the extraordinary Romanesque church of San Pietro, and of Borro e Rocca Ricciarda, a cluster of houses nestled in the mountains at 1000 m. above sea level.

3. *Castelfranco di Sopra*

Castelfranco di Sopra (1591 m. above sea level) lies at the foot of Pratomagno, on the right edge of a terrace deeply incised into the mountain by the torrent Faella and the minor water courses and rivulets which account for the characteristic landscape of the "Balze". The fortified centre, according to Villani's evidence, was constructed from 1299, at the same time as San Giovanni Valdarno, in an area previously controlled by powerful feudal landowning families, the Pazzi and the Ubertini. In fact the decision to set about the construction of a fortified centre, planned, as tradition has it, by Arnolfo di Cambio, appears in the resolution of 1299.

There remains of the old fortified centre parts of the walls, and of Porta Fiorentina and Porta Aretina. The town lay-out is distinguished by its square form, the lay-out of which is contemporaneous with those of San Giovanni and Terranuova. A coherent system of orthogonal roads is organised around the large well-conserved central piazza. Important palazzi and interesting examples of fourteenth-century terraced houses are still to be seen in the historic centre.

Not far from the village walls, Badia ('Abbey') di Soffena, once the castle of the Ubertini and then a Vallombrosian Monastery, houses interesting fresco cycles by Paolo Schiavo, Liberato da Rieti and Giovanni known as "Lo Scheggia" ('The Splinter'), Masaccio's younger brother.

4 *Montevarchi*

Montevarchi, dates from the thirteenth century, situated at the foot of the old castle owned by the Counts Guidi, which is perched on a clayey spur and is now occupied by the Convento dei Cappuccini ('Monastery of the Capuchin friars'). Very soon houses were built along the valley-bottom road which replaced the hilly routes of the Cassia Adriana in the north/south direction. Nearby was the market place serving the castle and the very old Hospitale di S. Angelo alla Ginestra ('Hospital of S. Angelo alla Ginestra'). Handed over by the Counts Guidi in 1273 to the Republic of Florence, the village became part of the system of the defences completed with the construction of the "terre nuove" ('new lands') of San Giovanni, Castelfranco and Terranuova. The village, placed at the border between the states of Florence and Arezzo, was enclosed by walls at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Long stretches of the town walls and the barbican erected to protect the market place along the left bank of the torrent Dogana survive. Of the old entrances to the town the Porta del Mulino, which later became part of the former Magazzini dell'Abbondanza ('Warehouses of Abundance') survives, overlooking the Arno. The structures of Cassero, to the side of the destroyed Porta Fiorentina are imposing.

In the historic centre, the original medieval lay-out in a singular oval form remains intact, with its minor roads arranged around the central via Roma and intersected by a suggestive system of passageways. Among the main monumental features of the town are the church of S. Ludovico with its annexed convent (where the Accademia Valdarnese del Poggio and the Palaeontological Museum are situated), the adjacent Baroque church of the Redentore ('Redeemer') and, on the central Piazza Varchi, the distinguished Collegiata di S. Lorenzo ('Collegiate of St. Laurence') with a museum rich in

sacred art annexed. Among the finest palazzi overlooking the central streets are notable the sixteenth century Palazzetto Alamanni and the Palazzo Martini, the latter recently restored.

On the hills above the town, on the border with the Chianti region, a visit to the Pinetum of Moncioni, one of the oldest and most interesting coniferous woods in Italy, is to be recommended.

5 *Cavriglia*

The Community of Cavriglia becomes Administratively Autonomous

The commune of Cavriglia was born officially on 17 March 1809 when the "Council of the Commune of Cavriglia" met for the first time. With this meeting the "peoples" who had previously constituted the "League of Avane" distanced themselves from the community of San Giovanni Valdarno, into which they had been incorporated.

Cavriglia before the Middle Ages

The municipal territory of Cavriglia lies on the eastern slopes of the Chianti Mountains. The first settlements date from very early times, as is confirmed by the information gleaned from toponymy as well as frequent archaeological finds. Among such finds is the fine statue of the Mitra Tauroctono ('Mitra Tauriform'), discovered a few dozen metres from the Pieve 'Parish church') di San Giovanni Battista at the end of the 1970s. The territory of the commune was also crossed by a road, the Cassia Adrianea, which connected the Valdarno with the valley of Greve, via the pass of Cintoia, in the direction of Florence. The presence of the road is confirmed by several toponyms [for example, Casa Migliarina ('Milestone House')], by the discovery of stretches of paving, and above all by the lineation of several parish churches (Cavriglia, S. Pancrazio, Gaville, the last of which is in the commune of Figline), which are well recognised as veritable signposts.

6 *Romanesque Pievi ('Parish Churches')*

The origins of the Pieve di San Giovanni Battista at Cavriglia go back to the end of the eighth century. The present-day structure, with a nave and two aisles, dates from the twelfth century, although restoration in 1779 concealed the original masonry behind stuccoes and plaster-work. The territory of the parish extended to Montevarchi. In the adjacent museum there is an astonishing processional cross of the thirteenth century.

The parish church of San Pancrazio is a Romanesque construction of a single nave, with a transept only on the left side and two apses. The presbytery, notably elevated, stands above the crypt. In the crypt is kept a rare monolithic, octagonal baptismal font, for immersion. An inscription on the lintel of a side door bears the date 1146.

Castles

In the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the territory of the commune of Cavriglia was controlled by powerful feudal families: the counts Guidi, the Ricasoli and their relations the Firidolfi, the Ubertini, the Pazzi and the Franzesi. The principal estate of the counts Guidi in the area was the castle of Montaio, a Ghibelline stronghold later conquered by the Florentine Republic. The same fate

fell to the castle of Montegonzi. Castelnuovo d'Avane (today Castelnuovo dei Sabbioni) is also of early origins.

Rural landscape

The elegant eighteenth-century villa of Castiglioncelli is of more recent origins. It lies along the statale 408 ('The A408'), known as the "chiantigiana" a few kilometres from the centre of Cavriglia. The villa overlooks a splendid "Tuscan" landscape, dotted with olive groves, avenues of cypresses, and old farmhouses, and with the slopes of the Chianti Mountains high up in the distance.

On the ridge of the Chianti Mountains a visit to the recently built Natural Park is also to be recommended.

7 *The Road of the Pievi*

Human presence along the low hilly reliefs from which rise up the peaks of the mountain chain of Pratomagno (1591 m. above sea level) from a very early date is well documented by archaeological finds and toponomy. Names of Etruscan origin and predial Latin names indicate the existence of a scattered population which gathered in small, or very small groups. The whole area was designated in Latin sources by the name Etrusci Campi ('the Etruscan Fields'), which though renowned for their fertility were far from the urban centres of Arezzo and Fiesole. The border between the two Etruscan cities crossed the Valdarno Superiore ('the Upper Valdarno') roughly at the height of Montevarchi and San Giovanni.

A few years after Hannibal and his troops crossed the Valdarno Superiore, the Romans consolidated the ancient routes at the foot of Pratomagno by constructing the Cassia Vetus which connected the Etruscan centres of Fiesole and Arezzo. The lay-out of the present 'statale dei sette ponti' ('The A road of the seven bridges') is substantially the heir to the old Roman road. The human population of this part of the Valdarno seems to have grouped itself, over the centuries, along the 'statale dei sette ponti' with impressive historical continuity. The present-day road connects a veritable chain of Romanesque parish churches which arose in connection with the old settlements crossed or passed by the Roman road. The names of these churches are often very old: Gropina and Soffena are undoubtedly Etruscan names, while Cascia marks the area where the Cassia Vetus passed at the foot of the present settlement of Reggello.

Parish Church of San Pietro at Gropina

The parish church of San Pietro at Gropina can be reached directly from the village of Loro Ciuffenna, at a distance of about 2 kilometres. The church is nestled tightly amidst the houses of the small village, and overlooks the route of the 'statale dei sette ponti' to which it is linked with a by-road.

The splendid Romanesque structure of the church remains intact. The plain façade in uniform rows of sandstone blocks presents certain telling architectural and asymmetrical irregularities which enable an understanding of the complex history of the church. The present Romanesque structures rest on the site of the remains of a Roman "farm", which can be visited in the crypt area of the church. Upon the Roman ruins lie the remains of a very small early Christian church, which was replaced by a little church with two aisles of the eighth century. The present-day church stands upon

the remains of the pre-existing eighth-century building, and itself also originally had two aisles. The later left hand aisle dates from the end of the twelfth century.

The highly suggestive interior of the church holds a marvellous pulpit adorned with reliefs. The splendid capitals of the columns of the right hand aisle are of great interest, and are undoubtedly due to the same masterly craftsmanship responsible for the creation of the pulpit.

Badia di S. Salvatore at Soffena

Along the 'statale dei sette ponti', coming from Loro Ciuffenna and before arriving in Castelfranco, the remains of the Badia di S. Salvatore at Soffena stand out on the left. It was originally a castle owned by the Ubertini. Portions of the old castle walls, where there are embrasures, remain today at the base of the bell-tower. During the second half of the eleventh century the castle went to ruin. A few years later, a monastery was built upon the ruins of the building. It was called S. Salvatore de Sophena and was subject to the Abbazia ('Abbey') of S. Trinita in Alpe on the Pratomagno, and later to the Abbey of Vallombrosa.

The sober fourteenth-century lay-out of the church remains intact. It is in the form of a Latin cross, based on the model of the early church of Vallombrosa. On the exterior, simple windows with one light, of a pleasantly rural character, alternate with solid buttresses which support the weight of the ceiling and the vaults of the church.

The monastery was suppressed in 1779 and limited to agricultural uses. In recent years the church has been restored and re-consecrated. The restoration has enabled the full restitution and appreciation of the important frescoes which decorated the simple austere interior: L'Annunciazione ('The Annunciation') by Giovanni, known as lo Scheggia ('The Splinter'), La Strage degli Innocenti ('The Massacre of the Innocents') by Maestro Liberato da Rieti, Madonna col Bambino ('Madonna with Child') by Paolo Schiavo, S. Giovanni Gualberto e storie della sua vita ('St. Giovanni Gualberto and scenes from his life') by Bicci di Lorenzo.

Parish Church of S. Maria. Piandiscò

Along the 'statale dei sette ponti', after passing through Piandiscò on the road from Castelfranco, on the left stands the parish church of S. Maria, of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The bell-tower and the three apses of the church still overlook the modern road which follows the route of the old Cassia. The church with its nave and two aisles, underwent two stages of construction as the face of the wall on the left side still clearly shows today. The original face of the wall in very precise and regular rows of sandstone blocks is still well conserved near the façade. In this area the left side is still composed of a series of small suspended arches standing alternately on corbels and pilasters rising from a high plinth. The area of the presbytery, including the apses, was rebuilt in roughly hewn stone after it collapsed. The façade is contemporary with the first stage of the construction of the church. The church is characterized by the low elevation of the nave, the five blind arches which surround the portal, and two one-light windows which date from the restoration in 1932.

Inside the church there is a fine Madonna col Bambino ('Madonna with Child') by Paolo Schiavo.

Parish Church of Cascia

Cascia is near Reggello and reached, coming from Piandiscò, directly by a side-road which runs to the left off the 'Statale dei sette ponti'. The edifice with a nave and two side aisles in regular rows of sandstone blocks ends in a single apse. The mighty bell-tower, set slightly apart from the right side of the church, rises up in the village of Cascia. In front of the façade there is a highly unusual portico with five arches supported by massive columns with classical-style capitals. The portico was entirely re-built in the course of restoration in 1930 which resulted in the all but complete substitution of the original stone, which was by then consumed and dilapidated.

Among other works of art, the particularly solemn interior of the church holds, at the end of the left aisle, the first known work by Masaccio, the celebrated *Trittico di S. Giovenale* ('St. Giovenale Triptych').