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THE MALATESTA COATS OF ARMS

A coat of arms originated as an identification sign and soon became one of prestige, designed as a guarantee of the reputation and role of a family or lineage within society, until over the years it became a symbol used to underline a clan's ownership of and power over land and movable property. A coat of arms could be engraved on buildings, city gates and fountains. It could be engraved on silverware and furnishings, or painted on large majolica display plates. Usually handed down from father to son according to the principle of inheritance, it generally took the form of a large shield of different shapes and sizes, on which figures and symbols were reproduced as a simple ornament or as an honorary sign. The surname Malatesta or Malatesti, according to tradition, seems to have been originally attributed to a certain Rodolfo, who lived in the 10th century, due to the stubbornness and boldness with which he stood up to popes and emperors in battle. However, the coats of arms and symbols that tell the Malatesta story are many and varied. They included shields surmounted by crosswise chequered bands to indicate the art of war with the game of chess as a metaphor. A second coat of arms charged with three heads is more difficult to interpret. One hypothesis speaks of three heads of Moors or Ethiopians, people with dark skin and hair to indicate the stubborn and obstinate character of the family's members and hence the surname mala testa (literally "bad head"). However another hypothesis would seem to recognise the three heads as the three male sons of Pandolfo III Malatesta, Sigismondo Pandolofò, Galeotto Roberto and Malatestino Novello, who ruled together for a time. Even more curious and fascinating is the coat of arms of Domenico Malatesta (1417 - 1468), found sculpted or engraved

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in several places in the Malatestiana Library in Cesena: an Indian elephant, a mosquito and a long ribbon marked with the Latin motto “elephas indus culices non time”, written on it, translated as “the Indian elephant does not fear mosquitoes”. Some historians interpreted it as the strong do not care about the pettiness of the weak, but for the people of Cesena, the motto was intended to mock the Da Polenta lords of Ravenna, a swampy, unhealthy and notoriously mosquito-infested city.

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