

## The Duke's Nose

Federico da Montefeltro (1422-1482) had the most recognisable profile in Renaissance Italy, distinguished by an extraordinary nose like an eagle's beak, and famously represented by Piero della Francesca. This is because he had lost its bridge (and his right eye) in a tournament accident in 1450, when he was twenty-six. Though there are a great many images of Federico's left profile in paintings, intarsias, manuscript illuminations and other media, almost all of them show him in his fifties, after 1472, the year in which he begot his only legitimate son, creating the hope of a Montefeltro dynasty.<sup>1</sup> One result of Guidobaldo's birth was clearly a vastly increased concern about his image.

However, there is one little-known image of Federico in his twenties with his nose intact, which is a medal by Paolo da Ragusa. The obverse shows Federico's bust in profile, wearing a condottiere captain's beretta and armour (fig. 1). Round the edge of the image is a Latin legend which translates as 'Federico, count of Montefeltro and Durante'. The reverse has two Latin inscriptions, in the centre, 'Royal captain general', with a collared ermine, and around the edge, 'the work of Paolo da Ragusa' (fig. 2). All of this adds up to something of a puzzle.

Portrait medals became fashionable in Italy from the 1430s, in imitation of Roman coins with an imperial profile portrait on the obverse, and an allegorical or historical image on the reverse. The first was created in Ferrara by Antonio Pisano, called Pisanello, to commemorate John VIII Palaeologus's embassy to Italy in 1438, and was more probably commissioned by the host, Leonello D'Este, than by the subject, though when this creation set a fashion, as it did, subsequent medals were usually commissioned by the individual portrayed.<sup>2</sup> Many of them offered a personal statement: the portrait on the front showed the subject's appearance, but the reverse often said something about his or her sense of self.<sup>3</sup> The medal was an excellent way for an individual to put his or her image into circulation, and they were cast in gold, silver, bronze or lead, depending on the intended recipient. Medals were sometimes circulated in large numbers, notably by the popes, or could be exchanged among equals, in which case the numbers created were likely to be small.

---

<sup>1</sup> Clough 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Scher 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Lippincott 2000.

It must have amused contemporaries to puzzle out the significance of these sometimes-enigmatic images. For example, the reverse of the medal which Federico commissioned around 1468 from Clemente da Urbino (fig. 3) shows a Montefeltro eagle balancing a beam which supports a globe in the centre, with a sword and cuirass on one end and a whisk-broom and olive branch on the other. Also shown are the astrological symbols for Mars, Jupiter and Venus. It therefore speaks of a balance between peace and war; and represents Federico, man of war, partnered by his wife Battista, woman of peace, since the whisk-broom was a Sforza emblem. The eagle represents Jupiter as well as the Montefeltro, and the globe is the world.

The sculptor of Federico's first medal, Paolo d'Antonio da Ragusa, was active around 1450. He is known to have assisted the Florentine sculptor Donatello (c. 1386-1466) in making the altarpiece of the Santo in Padua in 1447, so was evidently a man of considerable talent. He made two medals of Alfonso, king of Aragon and Naples, circa 1450, and this one of Federico.<sup>4</sup> The medal of Federico is datable on two indications. The first, obviously, is Federico's nose, which is known to have been disfigured in a tournament held at Urbino to celebrate Francesco Sforza becoming duke of Milan after a final battle on 24 February 1450. It was held because Sforza was then Federico's employer. The Medici in Florence tended to stage tournaments at Carnival, just before the beginning of Lent, and one of the things which caused Federico, at the last minute, to decide to fight at Urbino was the return to the city of an Urbinate, Guidangelo de' Ranieri, who had been the victor in that year's Medici tournament. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that, although we do not have a precise date for the Urbino tournament, it was held in spring, or at latest, early summer.

The second clue to the medal's date is the description of Federico as 'royal captain general' on the reverse, accompanied by a collared ermine. The ermine was the badge of Alfonso of Aragon, king of Naples, and the adjective 'royal' could only refer to him, since none of the other great powers of mid-fifteenth-century Italy was a king. Federico was courting the wealthy and powerful Alfonso as early as 1442, since he sent the king a medal by Pisanello that year, accompanied by verses by his court poet, Angelo Galli.<sup>5</sup> The two men first met in 1443, when Federico was twenty-one, and Alfonso was forty-seven. The king was affable but dignified, self-controlled, and even-tempered. He dressed plainly, drank only

---

<sup>4</sup> There is a copy of a signed version of the Alfonso medal in Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1957.14.615.a,b, and an unsigned version is recorded in Hill 1930, I, no. 46. The medal of Federigo da Montefeltro is Hill 1930, no. 47. Hill and Pollard 1978, no. 55, suggest that the medals were produced in or shortly before 1450.

<sup>5</sup> Angelo Galli wrote two poems to accompany it, preserved in Vatican City, Urb. Lat. 699, f. 18, printed by Dennistoun 1909, I, pp. 436-7.

diluted wine, was deeply religious, and had a passion for books. All of this was also true of Federico, and they took to each other.<sup>6</sup> This would turn out to be one of the most useful relationships of Federico's life.<sup>7</sup>

Alfonso offered Federico a condotta in 1448, but he was forced to refuse because his existing contract with Francesco Sforza still had some time to run. He finally signed a condotta with the king on 2 October 1451. But the state of Federico's nose in this medal suggests that sixteen months or so before his relationship with the king was ratified, Federico felt secure enough to have a medal struck proclaiming himself as royal captain-general, thus giving him a concise way of circulating the information that, though he was scrupulously working out his time with Sforza, both he and the king regarded his next condotta as a done deal. Alternatively, since Paolo de Ragusa's other known medals are of Alfonso, it was the king himself, rather than Federico, who commissioned it. Either way, Federico was thus publicly announced as a supporter and protégé of the king of Naples. This medal therefore appears not commemorate an event, but to foreshadow it; it appears to be the political equivalent of an engagement ring. If it had not been for Federico's disfiguring accident, scholarship would automatically have assumed that the medal was struck in or after 1451, but the telltale nose shows us that this cannot be the case. Is it unique in this respect? Perhaps there are other Italian medals which similarly play tricks with time.

Fig. 1: Paolo da Ragusa, Federico da Montefeltro, obverse (Source: Archaeological Museum of Bologna online collections)

Fig. 2: Paolo da Ragusa, Federico da Montefeltro, reverse (Source: Archaeological Museum of Bologna online collections)

Fig. 3: Clemente da Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro, reverse (Source: Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Karsten Dahmen [Public Domain Mark])

## Bibliography

Clough, Cecil H., 1973. 'Federigo da Montefeltro's Patronage of the Arts, 1468–1482', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 36, pp. 129–144

Clough, Cecil H., 1992. 'Federico da Montefeltro and the kings of Naples: a study in fifteenth-century survival', *Renaissance Studies* 6, pp. 113–172.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ryder 1976, pp. 27, 77.

<sup>7</sup> Clough 1992.

- Dennistoun, James, 1909, *Memoirs of the Duke of Urbino, illustrating the arms, arts and literature of Italy*, ed. Edward Hutton, 3 vols (London)
- Hill, George Francis. 1930. *A Corpus of the Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini*, 2 vols (London)
- Hill, George Francis, 1978. *Medals of the Renaissance* rev. and enlarged by Graham Pollard (London)
- Lippincott, Kristen, 2000. 'Un Gran Pelago: the Impresa and the Medal Reverse in Fifteenth-century Italy', Stephen K. Scher (ed.), *Perspectives on the Renaissance Medal: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance* (New York), 75-83
- Ryder, Alan, 1976. *The Kingdom of Naples under Alfonso the Magnanimous* (Oxford)
- Scher, Stephen K., 2000. 'An Introduction to the Renaissance Portrait Medal', Stephen K. Scher (ed.), *Perspectives on the Renaissance Medal: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance* (New York), 1-9