



# The Rocca of Vignola



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**The Fortress** is the most important and beloved symbol of geographical and cultural identity for the people of Vignola.

It is associated with the most significant historical events of the Panaro Valley: going back to when the Fortress was a bastion and an economical aggregation centre for the inhabitants, to its subsequent transformation into an elegant Renaissance castle, a magnet for artists, musicians, scholars and politicians.

The history of Vignola goes hand in hand with the history of its Fortress, thus creating a perfect osmosis between the fortified building and the surrounding urban structure. This happened during a very long period of time, from the medieval feudal struggles to World War II, when the ancient and mighty walls appeared as the safest shelter from the horrors of the war.



The name “Vignola” comes from the Latin “vineola”, meaning “tiny vineyard”. The town banner still includes this symbol. The place was first mentioned in a Nonantola Abbey document dating back to 826 A.D.

The exact year of the Fortress foundation is, instead, unknown, but we can reasonably assume that it was built in the years following the end of the Carolingian dynasty to withstand the Hungarian invasions. During that time towers and fortified walls were built to defend towns and villages.

Tradition attributes to the Nonantola Abbey the building of the first fortress. A document dating back to 936 confirms that Vignola, at that time, was subject to the rule of the Bishop of Modena. Another documentary evidence proves the presence of the Fortress starting at least from 1178.

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**Since** the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the building was a military structure. In 1401 Nicolò III of Este donated the Vignola feud to Ugucione Contrari, a nobleman from Ferrara. In the two following decades, the Fortress deeply changed its function and became a sumptuous richly frescoed residence of the Contrari family, used to the comfort and magnificence of the Ferrara Court.

After the Contrari dynasty extinction caused by the violent death of Ercole Contrari, the Younger, in 1577 the Fortress was handed over to the Boncompagni family, but they never directly administered the estate, leaving it with a governor. They just sporadically visited the feud. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the building became premises of the political and social town institutions: the City Hall, the library and the Cassa di Risparmio di Vignola





bank, which purchased it in 1965. A constant and careful restoring work in the last decades has given back to the original splendour the architectural structure and the paintings. The historical research has provided a new insight regarding the frescoes, mostly dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, decorating the ground floor halls (the Lion and Leopard Room, the Dove Room and the Ring Room) and some first floor halls (the Dame Room, the Coat of Arms Room and the Tree Trunk Room). The devices and the coat of arms on the walls pass on the story of the Contrari family, underlining the close alliance with the Estes.



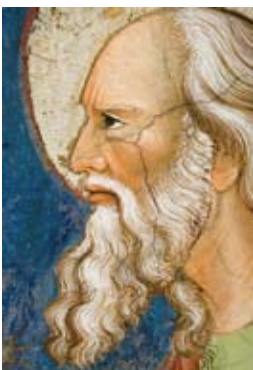


**A unique sight** is offered by the recently restored, precious series of late Gothic frescoes adorning the Fortress Chapel, commissioned by Ugucione Contrari.

The paintings portraying Christ's stories are attributed to the "Master of Vignola", leading artistic personality in the first 15<sup>th</sup> century decades, whose identity is still unknown.

It might be possible that the client, Nicolò III of Este's friend and counsellor, chose his artist among those attracted by the Este court in the first three decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The "Master of Vignola" was able to synthesize in an original way the features of the Este figurative school, reflecting the influences of Emilia, Veneto and Lombardy, of Giovanni da Modena and Gentile da Fabriano's works, and of the Ferrara miniaturists.



Another impressive Fortress hall is named “the Pavilion Room”. The hall takes its name from the painting of a big, finely decorated, open sided pavilion in front of which two persons stand. Art historians identified them as Battistina Cam-pofregoso and Ambrogio Contrari, who got married in 1461. The painting por-

trays their wedding enclosed within embattlement walls embellished by pomegranates, sprouting blossoms and leaves, beyond which one can perceive an hanging garden with a great variety of plants.

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**The building** includes also the Armiger rooms, the walkways and the three towers called: Torre di Nonantola (Nonantola Tower), Torre delle Donne (Women's Tower) and Torre del Pennello (Paintbrush Tower). Undergrounds, two congress halls were obtained out of the old cellars. Noteworthy events and festivals happen to be organized here: the Contrari Room for meetings, concerts and theatrical performances while the Grassoni Room is perfect for technical seminars and training courses.

The combination of inique and original art works with the restoration of the old castle, makes the Fortress a valuable preserved symbolic building which can be used any time the town wants to put on its most distinguished image.

This prestigious cultural event receptacle is the coveted destination chosen by thousands of visitors who decide to admire one of the 15<sup>th</sup> century best preserved castles in the region and one of the most interesting artwise.

On the other hand, the Vignola Foundation, owner of the Fortress since 1998, aims to enhance its potentials making it available to cultural, social and educational activities of Vignola and of the neighboring townships. Additional efforts are carried on to make it known as an historical and artistic landmark, suitable for hosting a conscious tourism and important cultural events in collaboration with top national organizations.





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## *Chronology*

**8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.** According to tradition, dates back to these days the decision to build a fortified construction on the spur stretching out on the gravel banks of the Panaro River, around which the town of Vignola now lies.

**10<sup>th</sup> century.** Starting from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Fortress of Vignola and the Savignano Castle were included among the bishopric most consistent assets and came under the direct jurisdiction of the Modena Bishop.

**1178.** Dates back to this year the first document bearing witness to the presence of the Fortress of Vignola.

**1227.** Modena Municipality started to rule by episcopal investiture on Vignola and its Fortress.

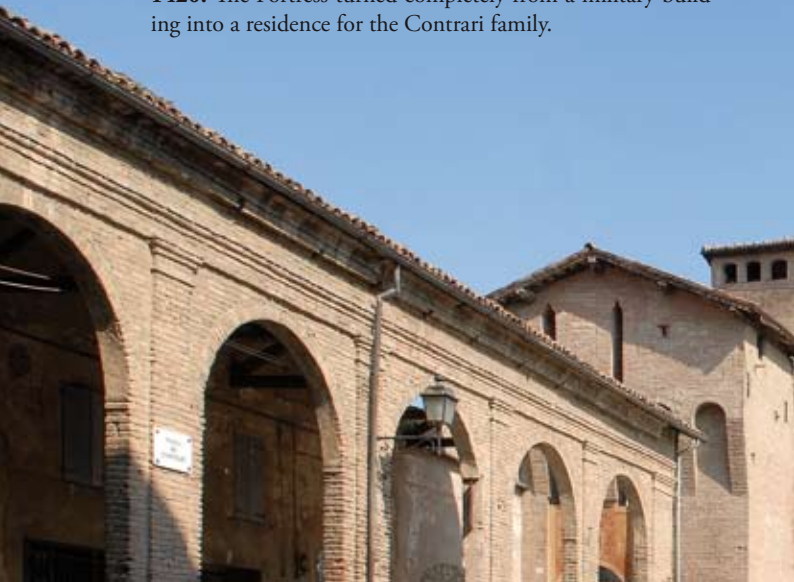
**1247.** In between the struggles of the Bologna Guelphs with the Modena Ghibellines, after going through many hands, the Fortress was burnt down by King Enzo, son of Emperor Federico II. Gherardo Grassoni rebuilt the Fortress and decided to settle in it with other political refugees from Modena.

**1336.** Obizzo III of Este, Lord of Ferrara, extended his rule on Modena including the Fortress of Vignola.

**1396.** The Fortress was conquered by Giovanni da Barbiano with the help of members of the Grassoni family. Three years later Vignola was again under Nicolò III of Este's rule.

**1401.** Following the consolidation of the Este's dominion, the Fortress and Vignola Feudal land were donated by the Marquis Nicolò III to the Ferrara nobleman Uguccone Contrari, who, in 1409, became Lord of Monfestino and Savignano farmlands

**1420.** The Fortress turned completely from a military building into a residence for the Contrari family.



**1453.** The Duke Borso d'Este after setting up the feud, conferred to the brothers Ambrogio and Nicolò Contrari the title of counts.

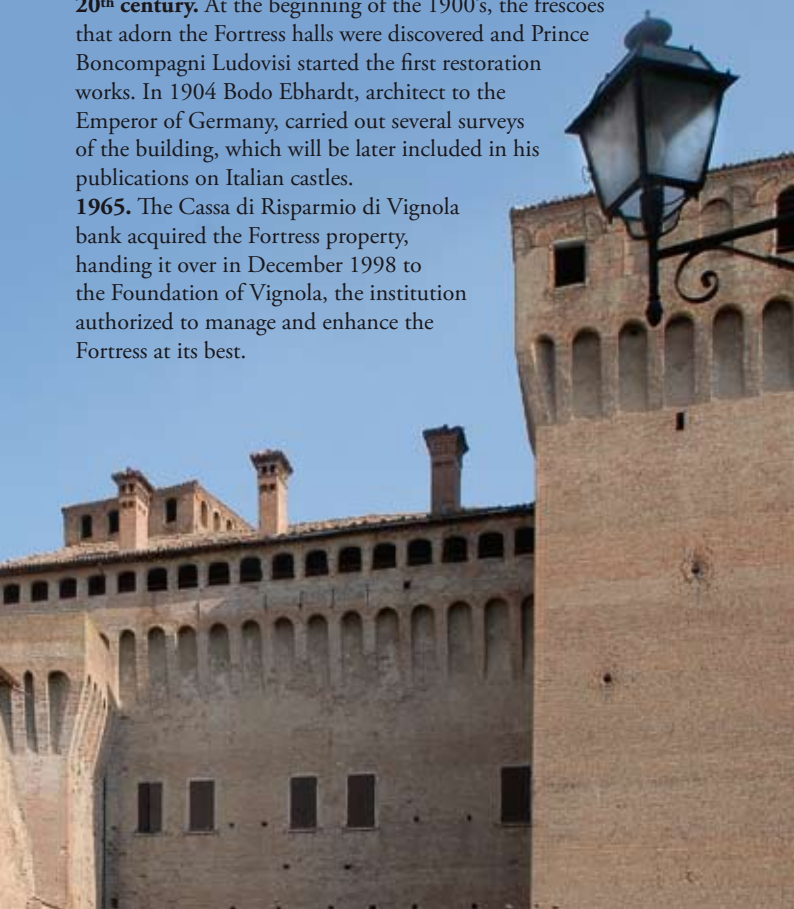
**1575.** Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, established Vignola as a Marquisate, consequently granting the title of Marquis to Ercole Contrari. A few months later, after the assassination of Ercole Contrari, the feudal property returned immediately under the dominion of the house of Este for two years.

**1577.** Alfonso II of Este sold the rights to the Marquisate of Vignola to Giacomo Boncompagni, natural son of Pope Gregorio XIII.

**1796.** The arrival of the French marks the loss of the feudal rights to the Marquisate of the Boncompagni Ludovisi family and all their properties were confiscated, including the Fortress, which was again listed among their possessions several years later.

**20<sup>th</sup> century.** At the beginning of the 1900's, the frescoes that adorn the Fortress halls were discovered and Prince Boncompagni Ludovisi started the first restoration works. In 1904 Bodo Ebhardt, architect to the Emperor of Germany, carried out several surveys of the building, which will be later included in his publications on Italian castles.

**1965.** The Cassa di Risparmio di Vignola bank acquired the Fortress property, handing it over in December 1998 to the Foundation of Vignola, the institution authorized to manage and enhance the Fortress at its best.



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