

# Footprints of the Douglas Scotti

A Scottish Warrior Journeys to Piacenza in Northern Italy in 794

By Dr. Deborah Richmond Foulkes, FSAScot



The ancient walled medieval village and Douglas stronghold of Vigoleno

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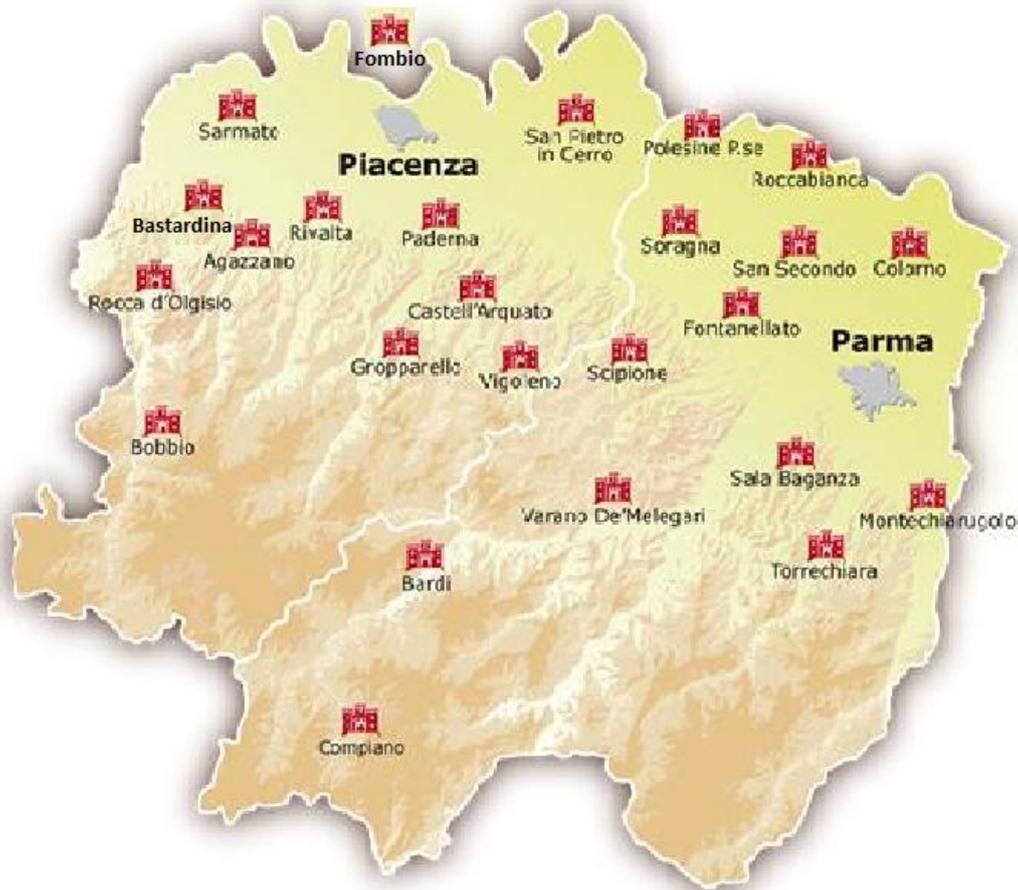
In September 2005 I set out with a fellow Douglas historian, Lt. Col. Gavin. T. A. Douglas, DFC, FSAScot and his bride of ten months Anne Douglas in search of the history of our Douglas ancestor who departed Scotland in 794 in search of adventure.

We carried in hand Scottish chronicles noting the accomplishments of one Sholto Duglas who in 770 came to the aid of Solvathius, King of Scots; defeating the king's enemies, his bravery and skills as the staunch warrior-tactician were rewarded with

Dr. Deborah Richmond Foulkes  
a large grant of land in Lanarkshire.

As our small group embarked from our starting point in Milano, Italy we reviewed the briefings for the journey; noting the Italian records that referred to one Guillelmo de Duglas, a younger son of Sholto who arrived in Piacenza Italy at the end of the 8th century; a lieutenant in service to Carlo Magno, Emperor Charlemagne. We had plans to visit some of the strongholds of the descendants of that first 'William' Douglas Scotti.

What we found were castelli and roccas and medieval villages that protected the ancient Ducato of Piacenza nestled in the shadows of the Italian Alps; a string of fortresses residing on original defensive positions, several established by the ancient Romans, others by one Scottish warrior from the 9th century and his heirs; sites evolving into medieval castles, some held today by the proud descendants of Guillelmo de Duglas.



Map of the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza showing the locations of Agazzano, Vigoleno, Fombio and Bastardina

## Castello di Agazzano

Our first stop was in Agazzano, a village not far from the city of Piacenza, in the province of the same name situated in the foothills of the Apennines. It was to be a family reunion of sorts with the noble house of Douglas Scotti represented by Princess Luisa Anguissola Scotti and her son Prince and Marques Maurizio Ferrante meeting their Scottish cousins, direct descendants of William le Hardi Douglas. "The first nobleman to join with William Wallace; a brave Scottish patriot martyred during the Wars for National Independence," I proudly proclaimed to our hostess, albeit in English. These Douglas Scottis were the descendants of Guillelmo, the son of Sholto Duglas. It was Giovanni Douglas Scotti, the great, great (several great) grandson of that same Guillelmo who was credited with refortifying the rocca of Agazzano in 1280, a process not unlike battlementing in medieval Scotland. The original rough draft of the 'first defensive quadrilateral' with the square keep, round angle towers and moat, a 'rivellino with ditch' was on display in the receiving hall of the family residence.



Castello di Agazzano

The main tower or keep was formed of ancient, small bricks; reminding us that we were not far from the early boundaries of the ancient Roman Empire. Though some restoration was obvious where cut stone covered or replaced the failing brick, the original structuring was still visible; the unique brick work almost delicate to the stone masonry of castles in Scotland from the same era. The innerward of the original fortress contained a well in the centre of the refurbished courtyard complete with portico on two levels. Not far from where the well once stood were stone steps leading to an underground passage that ran for miles to another smaller fortress not far from Agazzano; a design reminiscent of the pre-Norman manors that sheltered secret passageways running from the main manor house to a nearby priory, such as one I ran across in Woodham Ferrers, Essex. Entering the keep at the second level we roamed through the restored chambers of the ancient tower. On our private tour we were allowed access to a smaller withdrawing room on the same floor; a later kitchen separated that more private room from the great hall. There we found a narrow staircase leading to a lower level; turnpike stairs built to favor left-handed warriors, a design frequently found in the medieval Maxwell strongholds of the Scottish Lowlands.

The interior had been finished with a rough mortar plastering while ancient carved wooden doors were being restored and carefully returned to their original locations throughout the keep, the oldest section of the castle. And like most medieval Scottish strongholds, there was evidence of at least one latrine

closet. The construction of the cellars or caves as our Italian hosts explained ran nearly the entire length of both residences and was comprised of the same intriguing brickwork intermingled with cut stone; forming vaulted ceilings and shoulder arches that now sheltered the fledgling Gonzaga wine business. The present day residence or palace as it was described had been separated by a large moat that has since been filled in to become an elegant garden. Here the family has meticulously preserved beautiful pictorial decorations and frescoes that elegantly captured a later era than the medieval fortress portrayed. While the private residence was not opened to the public, weekend tours have been made available for the restored 13th century castle and grounds of the estate.



One of the Agazzano frescoed rooms

## **Fombio**

The second day of our research began at the Douglas Scotti residence in Fombio, a village a few miles to the west and north of Piacenza, located in the province of Lodi today. The original rocca or fortified military residence had fallen into disrepair and was now in the care of the state where an undertaking of enormous proportions had begun to restore the stronghold to its original magnificence. There was always a fortified structure in the area we were assured by our local guide, a man in charge of the Fombio renovation. The

original construction of the existing castle was initiated by Alberto Douglas Scotti in 1299. He was given charge to build a stronghold in Fombio to protect the citizens in times of war the documents read. Some of the early structure can still be discerned from viewing the exterior walls as well as by viewing the existing support structures in the caves of the family residence. That branch of the remaining Douglas nobility held the residence up until the last war and was recorded in official documents as the house of Scotti Douglas; Count Vittorio Scotti Douglas met up with our touring party in Malpensa. When we inquired as to why his name was written in reverse to the records of the rest of the family he informed us that it was something of a clerical error. Then Vittorio went on to describe his initial inquiry to correct the mistake through court actions; that he might restore his name to the original Douglas Scotti format, but he ultimately dropped the case. "Too costly for such a small matter," Vittorio explained; his Scottish heritage resounding in his every word.



Dilapidated Fombio in 2010

The castle at Fombio was of a rectangular plan surrounded by layers of outer walls of defence that included a moat. Water still flowed through sections of the original medieval ditches during our visit in September but descriptions and drawings from the 1796 battle between Napoleon's army and the Austrian forces that took place at Fombio depicted a moat that was very deep but dry in the 18th century. The same painting also revealed the positioning of a taller central tower within the fortress walls that was possibly the remains of an original keep.



The Battle of Fombio, May 1796

We roamed the existing stronghold at Fombio to the far end of the innerward and here our guide led us through the older sections of the castle. At the same location suggested by the drawing of 1796 and painting completed six years later, we were informed that the chambers made up the earliest existing part of the castle, likely the remains of the ancient tower of Fombio. The wall walk and battlements were no longer visible from the outside but within the walls of the forth level we followed our guide through a darkened maze of fallen timbers and crumbled stone walls of what was now a pigeon infested 'attic' area; to our delight we discovered the remains of defensive walls that were once battlemented; the wall walk enclosed in an earlier century, we were told.



It was recorded that during the mid 14th century the family took the Guelph side of the conflict during the provincial wars and that required them to alter their armorial bearings of three stars to two separated by a bend; the blazon properly described (many thanks to Stuart Morris of Balgonie for this): "Azure, a bend Argent, between two mullets of six points Or."

Motto: Lock Sicken<sup>1</sup> - Nunquam retrorsum - Quid verisimili verius

<sup>1</sup> The Douglas motto is Lock Sicker. Is this an error?

In other sections of the 13th century stronghold frescoes and vaulted ceilings with arched doorways created an atmosphere of elegance from another yet later time. There was also an unusual tiled floor that dominated the receiving hall; just barely discernable in the middle of the foyer was an enormous seal of the Douglas Scotti family that was undergoing restoration. The seal embedded in the tiles also included the strap and buckle.

Throughout every castle we visited, especially in the Ducato of Piacenza, the armorial bearings of the Douglas Scotti family were prominently displayed yet the use of the strap and buckle was only found at Fombio. The innerward rounded out the tour of the castle. Characterized by a portico that was part of a later renovation referred to as "the extensive modernization in the 17th century," the courtyard was once more designated for refurbishment to meet the growing demands of local wedding patrons seeking a romantic atmosphere for their nuptials.



The Armorial Bearings of the Douglas Scotti as seen in the restored foyer at Fombio complete with the Scottish buckle and the Motto NEVER RETREAT, NUNQUAM RETRORSUM

Prayer and religion played a major role in medieval Italy just as it did in Scotland. A parish church was located [but] steps from the front gates of the Fombio stronghold; built in the 11th century, it was dedicated to St. Columba; an earlier monastery dominated the village until the 13th century. Near the family chambers on the third level there was a small oratory dating to medieval times. The Douglas Scotti family built their private chapel within the confines of the fortress where it dominated the second level of the double entrance way that overlooked the village in one direction and the protective moat in the other. The front gate was the first line of defence and originally boasted a portcullis built into the guard tower. An arched stone bridge led to the double entrance as it crossed over a moat. A guard tower separated the access to a second gate that opened to the castle courtyard; not unlike the design of Prudhoe Castle in Northumbria that was built around the same time.



Barstardina

## **Barstardina**

Barstardina was the third Douglas Scotti castle we visited and it was located not far from the castello and rocca at Agazzano. A private estate, it was host to several residences, private dining accommodations and a golf club but the original 13th century buildings were still visible; the setting surprisingly most unaltered from the earlier days when it was a medieval stronghold. The fortress was once again of the typical rectangular plan with angle towers. Remnants of the original gate and portcullis comprised the entrance and passageway that opened to the courtyard; an innerward we had come to expect, dominated by the lower level portico. We enjoyed lunch in one of the rectangular corner

towers, sitting under the ribbed vaults of the intricate ceilings on the second level where private dining was offered. Sadly the owners were no longer allowing for private tours and we were restricted to only exterior viewing of the remainder of the castle. We did discover similarities to the Fombio stronghold noting the use of a deep water filled ditch with a stone arched bridge over the moat that was once used for defensive measures. The corner towers that were still standing afforded excellent views of the surrounding area and appeared to have been open on the top levels in earlier times while surrounding walls and other defensive ditches had been set aside for the construction of the more romantic garden areas.

## **Vigoleno**

Our last Douglas Scotti fortress was actually much more than a medieval castle; the Italians characterized Vigoleno as a more of a suburb or walled medieval village.



Castello di Vigoleno

The present fortress was originally commissioned by Francesco Douglas Scotti or Scoto as some records indicated in 1300 and contained certain elements linked to nearby Linigiana offering a Tuscan influence to the architecture we were told. The original stronghold dated to the 10th and 11th centuries with the Douglas Scotti family transferring their seat of power to Vigoleno around 1252. The entrance to the mastio as the tour guide explained to us was fortified by a series of trap doors. Above the 'rivelin' the donjon or massive keep dominated

the view with an imposing grimness. The fortress sat proudly on Saint Stefano's hill, as it hovered above the Stirone River; the walls unbroken to this day, it was said that the medieval stronghold was nearly unassailable "in the crossbow centuries". The massive curtain wall, the expansive wall walk, the numerous corner towers and the imposing keep defined an unusual complex that ushered in feelings of walking through time as one entered the gates on cobble stone paths leading to the innerward to a way of life long gone from us.

Our little group was later ushered to a private tour of the former family residence that was described as the Castle of Vigoleno, distinguishing it from the donjon or keep. The construction of that part of the suburb was begun in October 1389 by 'Francesco Scoto, son of Christoforo' as we noted from the original charter. Here we also found stone carvings of the Douglas Scotti armorial bearings as well as an unusual fresco that detailed the enormity of the fortress that existed in the 16th century. Vigoleno was and is today an imposing stronghold with layers of defensive walls surrounding a massive keep; a design not unlike Edinburgh Castle or Stirling Castle with many ancient details yet intact. On the west side of Vigoleno was the original drawbridge that led to the imposing curtain wall that closely followed three sides of the keep, the forth opening to the innerward. The wall walk was protected with merlons constructed of brick of an ornate design; most unlike any seen in Scotland and appearing almost flimsy in their construction as if they were a folly.



Castello di Vigoleno is a medieval fortified village

Curiously in 1414 Emperor Sigismondo granted to Alberto Scotti the title of Lord of Douglas and Vigoleno; the castle and lands remaining in the possession of the Douglas Scotti family until the 20th century when Umberto Scotti sold the castle in 1908. The village settlement of Vigoleno had very ancient beginnings predating the arrival of Douglasses; the surrounding lands protected by a fortress of some design going back centuries with several of the churches within the suburb dating the settlement to the year 750 or earlier. And for the strategic location, the stronghold was always at the center of hostilities even as late as 1806 when the mountain population formed the big revolt against the French power during Napoleon's time.

The trip was an exciting adventure for us all, as present day Douglasses. Following in the footsteps of our Scottish ancestors, specifically one Guillelmo de Duglas in the late 8th century proved a curious yet gratifying search of the history of our family. I have often felt that our Scottish castles were built in the earlier centuries out of bare necessity much like Freskin of Moray in the Highlands; constructing his great fortresses on moats, using the materials available which were usually timber with some rubble stone. What great records of design could have survived had Freskin been able to build his fortresses of brick and cut stone as the Douglas Scotti family did in northern Italy; something I often pondered. As our Scots travelled from their homeland to the Levant during the years of the Crusades they many times travelled through the Ducato of Piacenza. How many of those knights and squires returned home with some exciting new ideas of construction or plans for renovations of their family strongholds that may have been initiated by visiting these villages and strongholds? And how intriguing it was for me to contemplate the possibility that these 'new ideas' were actually Scottish innovations; contrived by Scots coming to Piacenza in search of adventure; the surviving evidence of the powerful Douglas family of the Scottish Lowlands yet visible in Italy today.