

The legend and the truth about the nose of Federico, Duke of Urbino

PAOLO SANTONI-RUGIU and ALESSANDRO MASSEI

Division of Plastic Surgery, St. Chiara University Hospital, Pisa, Italy

The nose is a highly individualistic anatomical structure. It may show astonishing variations in width, length and protrusion: in the size of the tip, form of the nostrils, naso-labial angle and curvature of the bridge so that it is virtually impossible to claim that two noses can look alike. One of the most extraordinary noses must surely be the one displayed by Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino (1422-1482). What the contemporary painter or sculptor must have thought of the nose is pure speculation but to the plastic surgeon many other questions come to mind: was it a congenital malformation, or the

result of some disease or injury? Had any surgery been performed on it? and if so, why and by whom?

But what was Federico's nose really like? Piero della Francesca painted at least two world-famous paintings of the Duke: one can be admired in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Fig. 1), the other in the Brera Academy in Milan. Pedro Berruguete also painted an excellent portrait of the Duke which is exhibited in the Ducal Palace in Urbino. In all these paintings, as well as in many medallions and bas-reliefs, Federico is always seen in a left side profile view. (Fig. 2).

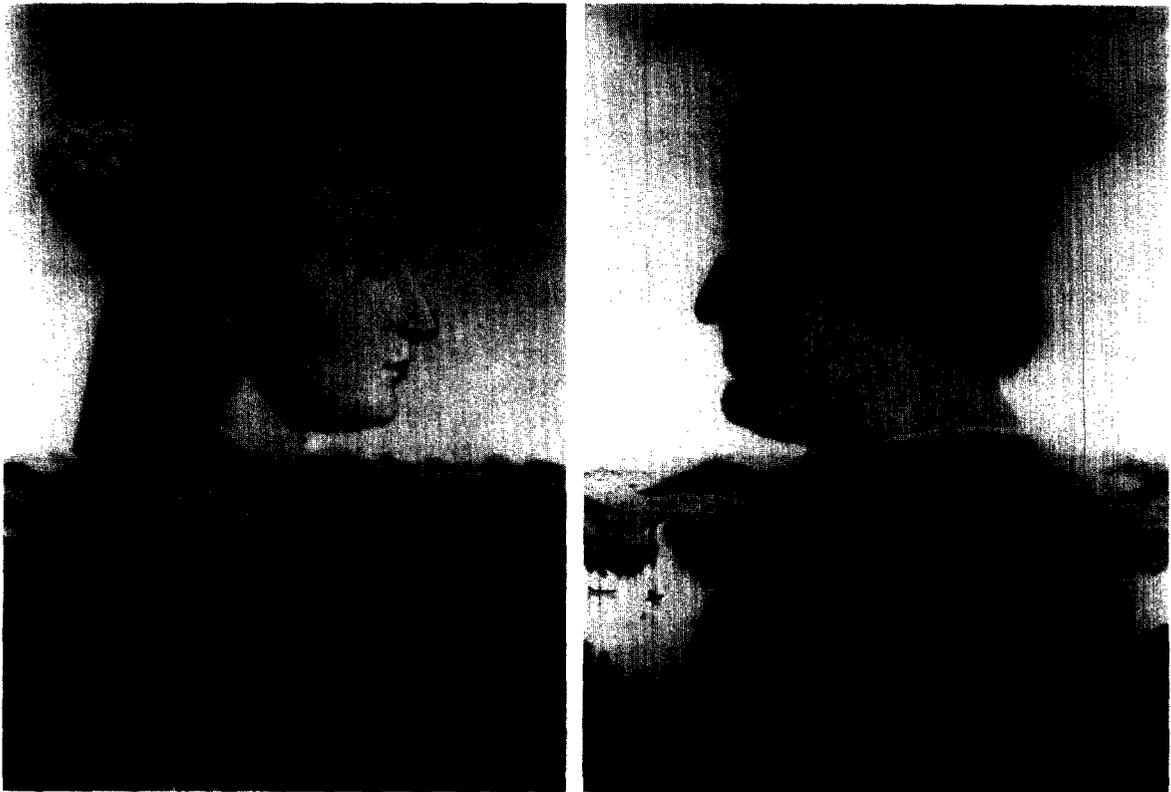


Fig. 1 Paintings of Federico da Montefeltro and his wife Battista Sforza painted by Piero della Francesca. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. The description of the Duke's nose by Robert de la Suzeranne is very accurate.



Fig. 2 Portrait of Federico by an unknown painter of the 16th century. Museo Civico, Urbina (Urbino). The concavity of the upper third of the nasal bridge is a little less sharp and deep possibly because the artist was not copying from a live model.

The nasal deformity was described by R. de la Suzeranne (1972) as follows: "the humped nose... starts very low, at the same level as the lower eyelid, suddenly, without any continuity with the profile of the forehead, like a faucet emerging from a mask and then bending downward. It does not descend harmoniously from the eyebrows. One cannot believe it is a natural nose and, in fact, it is not...".

The deformity is unanimously attributed to an accident when the Duke was 28 years old. Most historians like Solari (1973), Gerolamo (1605), among others, just refer simply to the loss of his right eye, while Renzetti (1928) and Franceschini (1959–1970) also mention an injury to the nose. Indeed Baldi (1600) reported that the wound was deep and "reached the brain".

Historically it is perfectly true that Federico had an accident while jousting in 1450, during the celebrations held in Urbino in honour of his father-in-law Francesco Sforza, who had become

Duke of Milan. But whether the contour of the nose was the direct and immediate result of the accident, or was modified by secondary surgery, is not clear. Gillies and Millard (1957) claim that "...a portion of his nasal bridge was removed to increase the field of vision..." and to discourage "friends" sitting on his right side from dropping poison in his soup. Unfortunately the sources of this extraordinary item of information have never been clearly specified by the authors and cannot be checked. Nevertheless the man in the street in Urbino has no doubt whatever. Indeed we had hardly reached our hotel room before three persons (the taxi-driver, a traffic policeman and the porter) were all ready to swear that Federico's nose had been modified by a surgeon because, having lost his right eye in a tournament the Duke was left with a rather big nose and a hump that hid half the battle-field from view, a very serious drawback for a professional soldier. This was an opinion not far removed from that of Gillies!

Could such an operation have been carried out in Urbino in the middle of the 15th century? Medicine in Urbino was quite advanced compared with the standards of the time: surgery and traumatology were particularly well developed no doubt as a result of the almost exclusive occupation of the population: warfare. Federico da Montefeltro was undoubtedly the most brilliant and active military leader of his time and had fought as a mercenary since the age of 16 (Paltroni, 1966). In 1451 he became the leader of the Florentine and Milanese armies when he was hired by Ferdinand the 1st of Naples, in whose service he fought for several years against the Angevins (1451–1461). He supported the Pope in 1462 and 1463 but in 1466 he became leader of the Italian League against the Papal and Venetian armies led by B. Colleoni, who was defeated in July 1467. In the following years he continued to fight against the Papal Kingdom protecting the Malatestas of Rimini. The Papal army was finally defeated in August 1469 at Melazzano and Federico obtained the legal recognition of his dukedom from Pope Sixtus the 4th. Under the Florentine flag he conquered Volterra in 1472 and died in 1482 of malaria while campaigning in Northern Italy. These battles undoubtedly produced an enormous number of casualties and it is interesting to note that doctors in Urbino held the title of: "doctore: physicus et moderator delle ossa" which means "doctor: physi-

cian and moderator of bones". Indeed traumatology must have been so important at that time in Urbino that even a man like Costanzo Felici, the most successful physician of the century and a world famous botanist (a specialty often associated with medicine and particularly with therapy), was refused the appointment as public doctor just because he did not want to practice traumatology (Leonardi, 1979). Medical students from Urbino in the 15th century studied almost exclusively in Padua and Bologna. In the latter city, some 75 miles north of Urbino, surgery on the nose must have been known since only a few decades later Gaspare Tagliacozzi was to publish in Bologna his famous textbook on nose reconstruction. In those few decades surgery would presumably have shown very little progress and it is unlikely that Tagliacozzi would have been unaware of the attempts of earlier and less famous surgeons in nasal surgery. It is therefore perfectly possible that surgical removal of the nasal bridge could have been carried out in the middle of the 15th century with the aim of increasing the field of vision but who then was the surgeon?

In the "Ordini et Offitji alla Corte del Serenissimo Signor Duca d'Urbino" an official publication of the Ducal Palace giving the duties and titles of all those appointed to the Count of Federico, there is a list of 203 names but not a single doctor is mentioned despite the fact that in chapter 10 the duties and privileges of a Court doctor are fully and accurately described. It is therefore likely that, in the absence of an official Palace doctor, it was the public doctor of Urbino who treated the Duke's injury, but his name is not known.

Federico might well have called for a doctor from outside Urbino as he had done on other occasions. For instance in the Archives of the State of Florence there is a letter from the Duke to a certain doctor Battiferro da Mercatello, asking him to come to the camp and treat an infirmity of the Duke which was most probably gout. But gout was, no doubt, far less prevalent than trauma in warlike Urbino and there is no good reason why he would have found it necessary to go beyond Urbino for a good accident surgeon.

Some light on the nature of the Duke's nasal deformity can be provided by a study of the art of jousting. If one accepts that the injury was produced by a wooden lance, the blow must have

come from the left, for according to the rules of jousting the contestants were required to ride along the left side of the barrier. Any blow could come only from the left and therefore a thrust aimed at the face would penetrate first the nose and then the right eye.

However the lances used in jousts were purposely made of fragile wood and it is hard to understand how such a weapon could penetrate the helmet and reach the face of the Duke. Federico's helmet is exhibited along with his complete suit of armour in the "Studiolo", a fabulous and intricately designed little room in the Ducal Palace with walls of inlaywood. The identical helmet appears in the portrait of the Duke by Berruguete in the Duke's bedroom (Fig. 3) and in the painting "Madonna dell'Uovo" by Piero della Francesca shown in the collection of the Brera Academy in Milan (Fig. 4). As a rule professional soldiers did not joust often, leaving this sport to more amateurish fighters. It is difficult to believe that a fragile wooden lance could have penetrated such a helmet which, properly worn would have given the Duke as much protection in jousting as it did in battle. But as we shall see, there are certain extenuating circumstances on that particular day which may explain why Federico jousted with the visor lifted, exposing the middle third of his face to his adversary's lance.

It is strange that many details concerning the joust and the Duke's injury are historically vague or even completely ignored. It is particularly strange that historians like Paltroni, who was a secretary of state of the Dukedom and a very close friend of the Montefeltro family knowing and describing so many intimate events of the palace life, as well as Giovanni Santi, father of the famous painter Raphael Sanzio from Urbino, who had been appointed by Federico to write in verse a chronicle of his life for his little son Guidobaldo, both living in Urbino and with free access to the Palace, do not describe the event. According to Bernardino Baldi (1600) the outcome of the tournament caused a great deal of excitement throughout Italy and "there was no prince who, either by letter or by sending ambassadors, did not express his sympathy; and even the Pope..." sent a message of encouragement to the Duke. That such an event should be neglected by the two official chroniclers to the Court is remarkable. But perhaps the records of both Paltroni and Santi deserve closer scrutiny



Fig. 3 Portrait of Federico and his son Guidobaldo painted by Pedro Berruguete. Ducal Palace, Urbino. The helmet is an exact copy of the one exhibited in the Studiolo in the Ducal Palace.

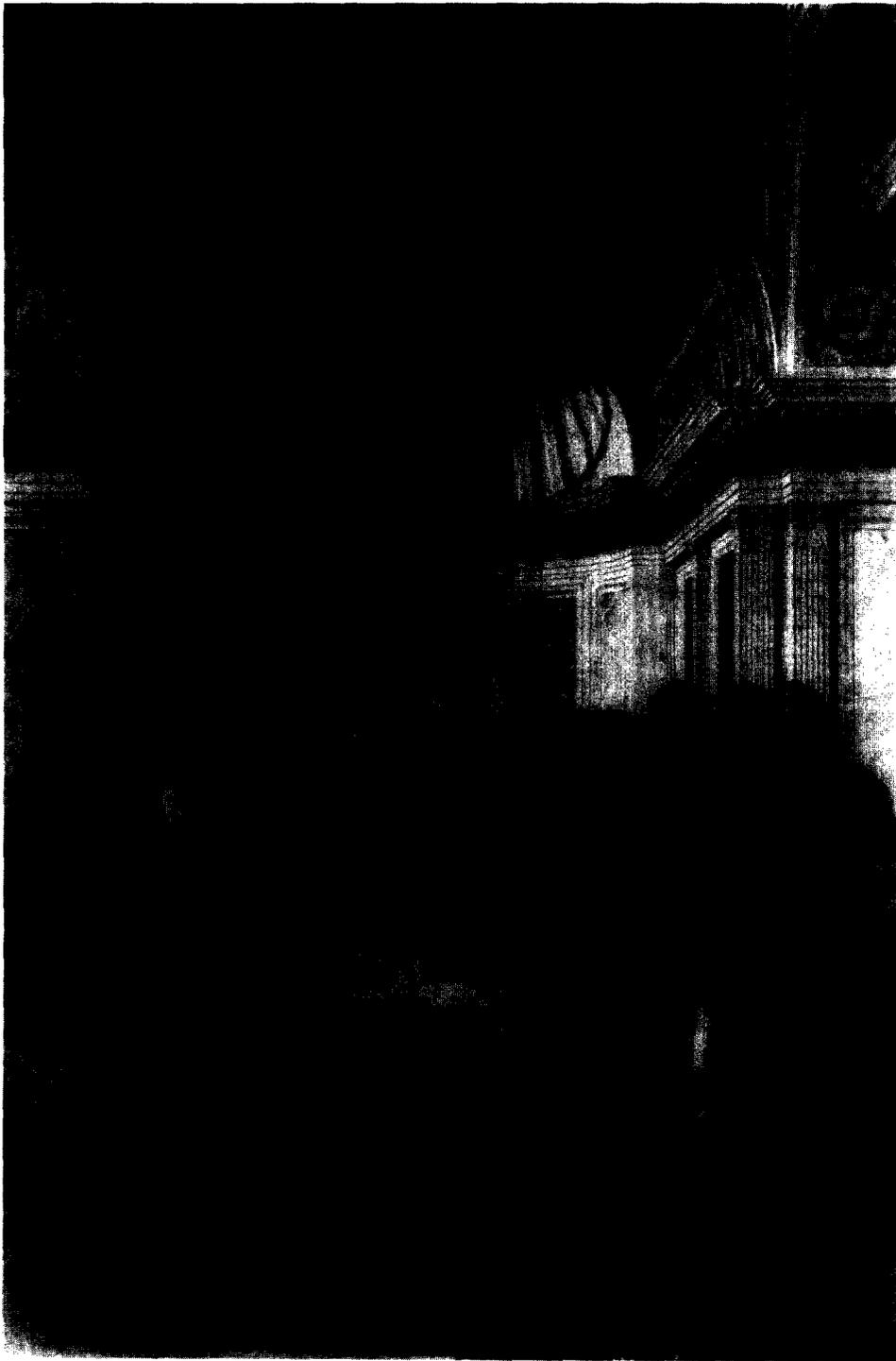


Fig. 4 "Madonna dell'Uovo" (Madonna of the egg) by Piero della Francesca. Pinacoteca of the Brera Academy, Milan. Some art experts consider the painting to be the work of a pupil of Piero della Francesca but Kenneth Clark ("Piero della Francesca", Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 1969) considered it the last work of Piero della Francesca. It seems, however, that the hands were painted by a Flemish painter living in Urbino in 1470.

for on page 54 of Paltroni's account there appears an indirect reference to the accident where whilst praising the many virtues of the Duke, the author writes that the only cause for the Duke's loss of self-control was sexual attraction for women "and this drawback and missing virtue caused a great disaster in that tournament". To which tournament and which disaster he was referring we do not know.

The verses by Santi were later translated into German by H. Holtzinger (1893) and in this version too the jousting accident is completely ignored. An explanation for this very striking omission has been given by Papini (1946). He discovered that some of the original sheets of Santi's manuscript had been covered by plastering a second sheet over those describing other events in the Duke's life. It is now clear why any description of the joust and other related events had been neglected for so long. For in the original pages written by Santi, Roberto Papini (1946) had discovered that the Duke had met one day in the country a young lady of the court and had seduced her "in the shadow of a dried oak". This rather futile love affair did not proceed further despite the attempts by the Duke to see the lady again. However, on the fateful day of the joust, which had been organised by the Duke but in which he had not intended to take part, he saw the lady in the crowd. At once he decided to participate in the contest jousting against a very clever knight named Ranieri Guidagnolo, or Odasi, who had recently won an important tournament in Florence. To make it secretly clear to the desired lady that he was dedicating the joust to her, he hurriedly sent a servant to find some branches of dried oak and with them adorned his own head as well as his horse's. But to fix this decoration to his helmet, he had to raise the visor and leave it open. This mistake and possibly other risks taken in order to "show off" to the object of his passion may explain why the Duke was struck through the open visor.

Of course the motives behind Federico's behaviour were a little too "delicate" and immoral to be read to his little son Guidobaldo for whom Santi's verses had been written or to be divulged in an official chronicle. This may account for the reticence of Paltroni and also explains why Gerolamo when writing the history of Federico in 1605 recalls that "he had so shamefully lost one eye in a joust".

Conclusions

There is historical proof that Federico da Montefeltro sustained an injury to the middle third of the face while jousting in 1450, losing his right eye and the upper third of the nasal bridge. The event has been reported by many historians and study of the rules and aims of jousting shows the manner in which the injury is likely to have occurred.

However many details of the accident were not divulged at the time, because the official records were censored to hide some aspects of the Duke's behaviour that were considered immoral.

Secondary surgery on the Duke's nose, as reported by Gillies and Millard, although technically feasible in Italy in 1450, was probably never performed and has never been properly documented. The legend still widely held is probably a fantasy born in the 17th century when the baroque influence on all the aspects of culture encouraged the tendency to embellish historical events to make them seem more heroic.

Federico da Montefeltro surely had no need of any such artificial adulation. His personality as leader, protector of the Arts, wise politician and sound jurist was great enough to dominate the Italian history of the 15th century without the introduction of any legend to embellish the truth.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Rev. Father Don Corrado Leonardi, keeper and librarian of the Sottosezione di Archivio di Stato of the town of Urbania (Urbino). Without his guidance and help with the bibliographic references this article would never have been written, to Mr Michael Tempest, Editor of the British Journal of Plastic Surgery for encouraging us to write the article and to Mrs Barbara Andreotti for help with the English text.

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The Authors

Paolo Santoni-Rugiu, MD, Clinical Professor of Plastic Surgery, University of Pisa, Italy.

Allesandro Massei, MD, Department of Plastic Surgery, Santa Chiara University Hospital, Pisa, Italy.

Requests for reprints to: Prof. Paolo Santoni-Rugiu, MD, Via Giovanni di Simone 12, 56100 Pisa, Italy.