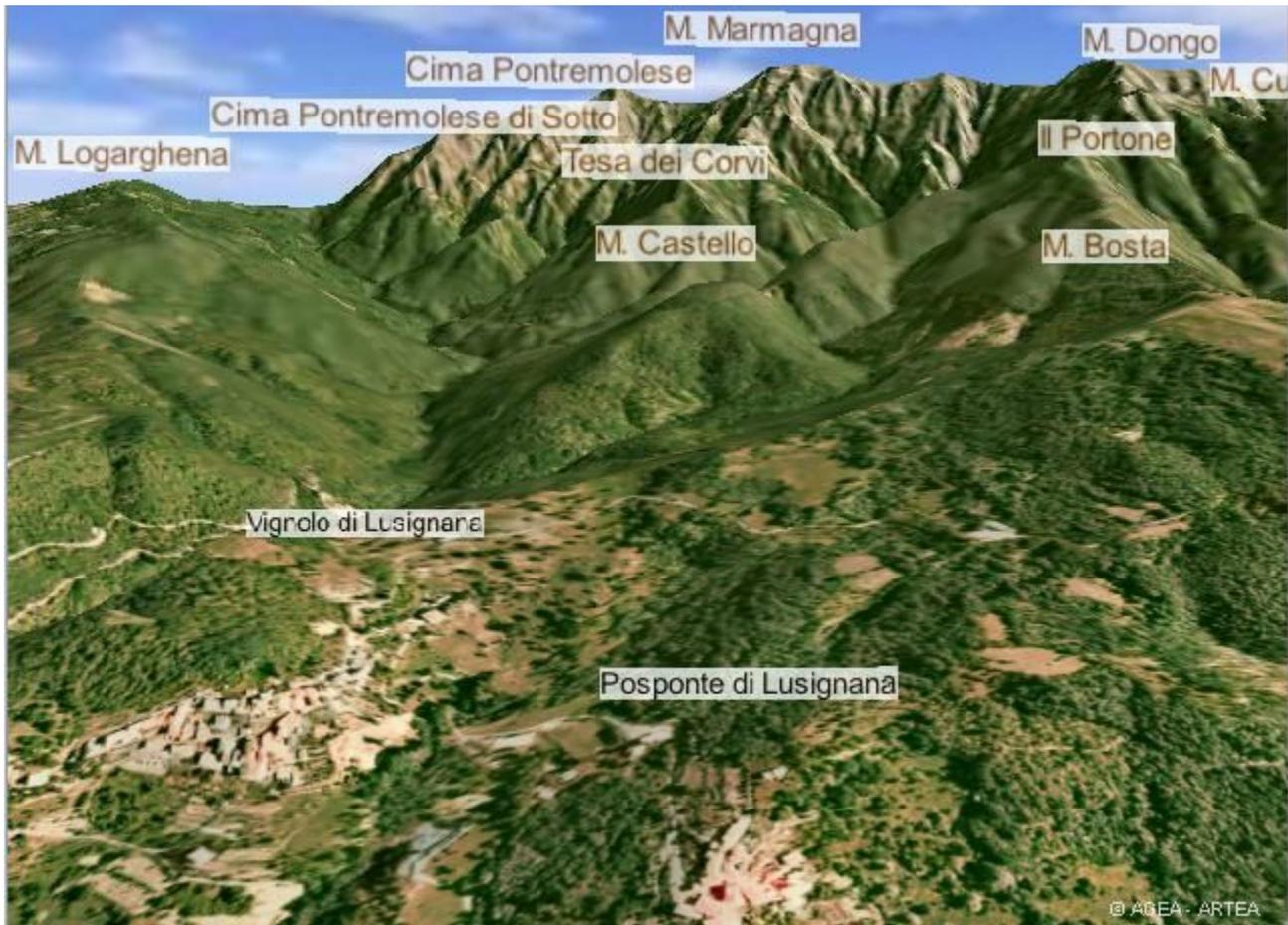


## The Village of Lusignana – History, Geography & Culture



The village of Lusignana is located in the catchment area of the river Caprio and comprises two elevated hamlets located on opposite sides of an alpine valley, about 500m apart. Vignolo (where we live) is to the North at an elevation of 544m, and Posponete is to the South. Between the two hamlets is a deep, wooded ravine containing the stream known as Rivo Lusignana. On the Posponete side is to be found the parish church which is dedicated to the Saints Vincenzo and Anastasio. The surrounding countryside is characterised by pastures, beech woods and meadows and is dominated by Monte Bosta (863m) on the summit of which a trig point and an old steel cross can be found.

The Caprio valley is in the Comune of Filattiera which to the North is bounded by the peaks of the Orsaro chain – part of the Tosco-Emiliano Apennine mountain range.

The countryside exhibits a rich array of flora and fauna and everywhere there are signs of human activity, past and present. The local communities, much reduced in size due to forced emigration, still exhibit a strong sense of belonging and connection with the land and its traditions. To keep going they do their best to erect structures (eg the CAI refuge “i Porcili - The Pigsties”, the Museum Collection, and the Sports Complex at Lusignana) and to put on public events (eg the “Ancient Crafts” show at Ponticello & the country festival at Lusignana) that attract visitors to the area.

The Comune of Filattiera has made considerable efforts to exploit the cultural and tourist potential of the high Apennine – particularly with regard to its environmental heritage, history and traditions.

## **History**

### **Origin of the name Lusignana**

The village gets its name from the Lusignan family – their town of origin being located a short distance to the South West of Poitiers in what is now the Poitou-Charentes region of France. According to the Chronicle of Saint-Maixant, the founder of the house of Lusignan was Hugh Venator. His son and successor, Hugh Carus, built the castle of Lusignan of which first record is made in 1009. It is thought that Hugh I was chief huntsman either to the Count of Poitou or to the Bishop of Poitiers. The first person in the dynasty to be referred to as Lord of Lusignan, was Hugh Albus (Hugh III: 950-1001).

The Lusignans were effective fighters for Christianity against Islam and took part in all of the medieval crusades.

Hugh II of Lusignan (died 967) was active in the movement to eject the Saracens from the South of France (a process completed by William I, Count of Provence – “The Liberator” – after the Battle of Tourtour in 973) and Oberto II (947-1014), Lord of the Lunigiana, recognised Hugh's contribution by awarding him a fief which included Vignolo, Posponte and the area now known as Monte Castello.

In 1185 Frederick I Barbarossa transferred responsibility for Lusignana to the Bishop of Luni – an indication that by this time any direct link between the Lusignan family and the fief of Lusignana had been broken.

The Lusignan family took a pivotal role in Eastern European history and were sometime kings of Cyprus, Jerusalem and Armenia. Hugh X was indirectly responsible for the English King John's loss of his European lands. (John kidnapped and subsequently married Isabella d'Angoulême, Hugh's bride to be. Hugh appealed to his overlord, the King of France, who ruled against John. Armed conflict ensued and John was ultimately defeated).

The male line of the French Lusignans died out in 1307 with the death of Guy of Lusignan. Yolanda (Guy's sister and heir) sold the fiefs of Lusignan, La Marche, Angoulême and Fougères to Philip IV of France in 1308. The male Eastern European line of Lusignans continued until the death of the infant James III in 1474. (His Mother, Caterina Cornaro - the last Queen of Cyprus - died in 1510).

### **Renaissance period**

It is known that in 1340 the village of Lusignana became a dominion of Marquis Spinetta Malaspina of Fosdinovo (a descendant of Oberto I) and that in 1477, it became a dominion of the Republic of Florence. In 1549 the area became part of Marquis Bernabò's fief of Filattiera, and he then sold it to Cosimo I.

### **Monte Castello**

Approximately 2.4km North North East of Vignolo at a height of about 800m is Monte Castello. Here can be found the remains of fortifications originally constructed to control the road from Filattiera to Parma via the Cirone Pass. Archaeological excavations by the Istituto di Storia della Cultura Materiale di Genova (ISCUM) in the early 90s shed light on the historical development of the site. The oldest remains extend over an area of 3500m<sup>2</sup> and date back to the Byzantine period. At that time there was an imposing defensive wall about 100m in length within which was located a large building, thought to be a barracks. All that remains of this building now are the foundations. Carbon 14 dating of coals found in the fireplace indicates that the site was in use until about 590AD. It would thus appear that the site was abandoned as a result of the Lombard conquest of the Lunigiana.

Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries a building was constructed at the highest point on the mountain and a short time later a square tower was built of which substantial sections of masonry remain. It appears that these structures were erected to secure the boundary and to collect tolls. It is known that by 1357 they were no longer used for military or administrative purposes and were going to ruin, a process accelerated by the devastating earthquake of 1482. To make matters worse, to the immediate North of Monte Castello was the Rivo Sassino (stream of little rocks) on which the castle depended for its water supply. This was very fast flowing and passed over soft ground, thus generating an ever steepening ravine which undermined the castle grounds and eventually caused collapse of the level area thought to have been used as the burial ground.

On the sides of the mountain are preserved the remains of various post-medieval rural buildings that bear testament to a connection between chestnut grove management and exploitation of pastures for cereal cultivation, as in the area known as the “pianoro delle aie - plateau of the threshing floors”.

In the summer of 2000, thanks to the efforts of volunteers from Legambiente, vegetation was cut back to reveal the ruins more clearly and to protect them from further deterioration.

### **Second World War**

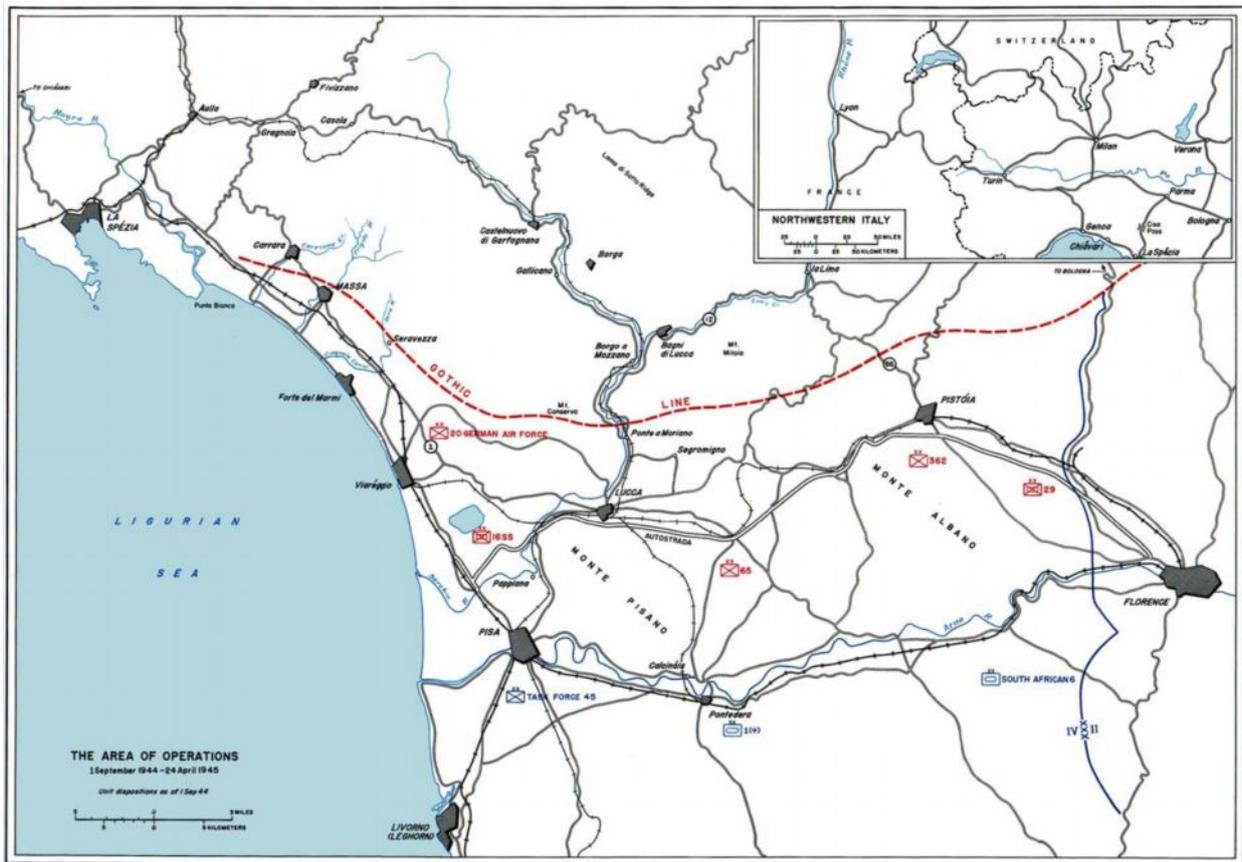
Most of the population of Italy were ambivalent about their country's entry into the second world war as an Axis power. The general view was that the conflict would be both short and relatively bloodless. Long held imperial ambitions within Europe would be realised and Italy would be blessed with enhanced status within the international community. These views turned out to be way off the mark. Although Mussolini claimed that Fascism was totally dedicated to the development of military might and operational competence, his policies were a complete failure and throughout the war Italy was unable to pursue successfully any significant military campaign. Time and again, Germany had to intervene to prevent the humiliating defeat of its partner.

Disillusion with the war was not long in coming and eventually, following the successful invasion and occupation of Sicily by the Allies in the summer of 1943, Mussolini was overthrown and an armistice was signed on 3<sup>rd</sup> September. When this news was announced on 8<sup>th</sup> September the Germans invaded, and from September 1943 to May 1945 the country was both occupied and controlled by foreign forces.

Mussolini was released from captivity by the Germans on 12<sup>th</sup> September and was later installed as the head of a particularly nasty and brutal fascist puppet state known as the Salò Republic (named after the town on Lake Como where it was based). This was totally dependent on German patronage and had few independent decision making powers. Civil war ensued with the fascists facing a coalition of various disparate politically affiliated partisan groups. Like all civil wars, the conflict was divisive, brutal and merciless. Altogether, over 45,000 partisans lost their lives and at least another 48,000 were wounded.

After the Allied invasion of mainland Italy the Germans were (very) slowly pushed further and further North until eventually in August 1944 they fell back to their last major line of defence – the Gothic Line - which stretched from the Mediterranean (near Carrara) to the Adriatic (at Pesaro).

From mid 1944 to the end of the war, the Lunigiana was torn apart. Aulla and Villafranca Lunigiana (both key railway towns) were devastated by Allied bombing, though the ancient town of Pontremoli was spared. The destruction of Aulla was completed when in April 1945 a partisan mortar shell hit a German ammunition train standing at the station – the resulting explosion razed virtually every remaining building to the ground.



If you look hard enough you will find memorials to the partisans at many road junctions. In addition, many churches contain plaques which record atrocities carried out by German and their associated Italian Fascist forces – the one shown here is on the external wall of the church at Ponticello and records the deaths of five innocent family members mown down while working in the fields. In all hundreds of men, women and children were murdered in reprisals for partisan attacks.



After the war there was mass emigration from the area – the result of wartime destruction, a shortage of food and damage to the chestnut groves caused by virus attack. Even today, most houses within the hill villages are unoccupied for most of the year or have been simply abandoned.

### The Future

There are very few permanent residents in the village and nearly all of them are more than 60 years old. In the summer large numbers of Italians who have family connections with the village arrive for holidays. The place is then full of noise, conversation and activity – just as it would have been before the War.

Two houses within the village are owned by English couples but there is very little foreign ownership overall. Until recent times the village had its own bar/shop where local produce could be purchased, but now the nearest facilities are a 12 minute drive away at Scorsetoli.

Currently, certain parts of the Lunigiana are undergoing rapid economic development – notably Aulla which has a burgeoning financial services sector. It remains to be seen whether the young professionals who currently live in apartment blocks will come to appreciate the benefits of village life once more. If they do, then a prosperous and lively future for Lusignana is probably assured.

## ***Lusignana Museum of Local Life***



Located adjacent to the church in what was originally the presbytery is a small museum of local life. This was created in 1981 by Mario Nadotti (to whom it is now dedicated) with the help, support and cooperation of the parish priest, don Fortunato Cavellini. Entry is free but the museum is normally open only during the annual Sagra of Saint Rocco (the feast of the consecration of the parish church held between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of August each year).

The museum contains exhibits contributed by local people which record the way of life of peasants who occupied the high Caprio Valley in years gone by. The objects and tools are no longer in use and many are now unique. The themes of the museum are the family, religious faith, work in the fields and domestic life.

### **Publications**

The collection is currently being catalogued and a descriptive booklet is in preparation.

The history of the Lusignana area is well described in the 1993 publication:

*Lusignana: Segni, Figure, Ricordi di Religiosità e Tradizioni Contandine: Il Monte Castello*  
(*Lusignana: Remains, illustrations, recollections of religious observance and farming tradition*)

available from the museum.