Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino (1422–1482): the story of his missing nasal bridge

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The National Museum of Ireland in Dublin (Ard-Mhúsaem na h-Eireann) is famous for its collection of precious Celtic-Irish antiques. It also houses a large collection of medals and among them a familiar face caught my eye (Fig. 1). My memory flashed back to my plastic surgery training in the 1960s and to "The Principles and Art of Plastic Surgery" written by Gillies and Millard (1957). In the first volume of that remarkable book Sir Harold Gillies had written:

"There was the one-eyed Duke of Montefeltro, who had a portion of his nasal bridge removed to increase his field of vision. Thus his one good eye peeking through the notch in his nose discouraged friends sitting on his blind side from trying to poison him".

The illustration which accompanied this paragraph was a copy of the famous painting of the Duke by Piero della Francesca (Fig. 2). Yet another surprise was in store, for in the same showcase was a smaller and less impressive medal portraying the same Duke, but with this important difference: the nasal bridge line was intact! (Fig. 3). Was Sir Harold's story true or
not? For even if one closes one eye and produces a maximal contraction of the internal rectus muscle of the other eye, it is unlikely that absence of the nasal bridge line will substantially increase the field of vision on that side: it would hardly justify a painful and hazardous operation in the 15th Century.

Biographical details of Federico da Montefeltro have been supplied by Dr Paolo dal Poggetto, Soprintendente Reggente of the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino and his sources of information are listed at the end of this paper. Urbino is a fortified city in the Appenine mountains some 200 kilometres east of Florence.

Originally belonging to the Roman Church State in 1213 it came under the control of the Montefeltros who were designated Counts of Urbino. Count Guidantonio da Montefeltro, Federico’s father, became the first Duke of Urbino and in due course Federico inherited the title and the duchy.

The 15th century in Italy was the era of the “Condottieri”, leaders of mercenary bands of military adventurers. Federico, forced to wage open warfare with such bandits and brigands, soon gained the reputation of being the most distinguished general of his time and in 1450, at the age of 28, was promoted General-in-Command of the Neapolitan army. During the 1470s he served the Church of Rome as Commander of the Papal Troops. In 1474, the English King, Edward IV, made him a Knight of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. This was part of Edward’s policy of surrounding his arch-enemy, France, with well-known and influential allies. In return, Federico used his influence with the Pope to secure a grant of indulgence and remission of sins to all visitors to the Garter Chapel (the Chapel of St George) at Windsor. The Garter is clearly recognisable in the painting of the Duke by Justus van Gent and Pedro Berruguete (Fig. 4).

Like so many wealthy noblemen of the period, the Duke was a patron of the sciences and arts. He was famed for his library of precious books.
Artists were invited to live and work at his court like the Flemish painter Justus van Gent, so that several representations of the familiar face still exist in portraits and medals. It is noteworthy that all these representations show the Duke in the left profile view which suggests that he might have had a deformity on the right side of the face, possibly even blindness or the loss of the right eye. On the left side of the face one can easily distinguish scars left by a near-fatal illness of unknown origin during his early youth somewhere between the year 1424 and 1433. As for the missing nasal bridge; was it really removed for the reasons postulated by Sir Harold, bearing in mind the crude surgery of that time, without analgesia and with high risks? Is there not a more honourable explanation for the nasal deformity?

According to Mr Michael Kenny of the National Museum of Ireland, there may be a very simple explanation. Citing Forrer (1912) he explained that the Duke of Urbino had injured his nose and lost an eye while jousting in 1450, whilst taking part in a tournament he had organised to commemorate the accession of Francesco Sforza to the Dukedom of Milan. Dr dal Poggetto supported this point of view.

At that time jousting had become a tolerably respectable sport and, at least in Northern Italy, had been made somewhat safer by the inventive genius of the metalworkers in designing well-balanced and safer harnesses and helmets. As late as 1559 the French King Henri II, sustained a fatal wound in the neck by his own-chosen Captain of his Scottish Guard, Montgomery, when wearing an open caged helmet! It is highly likely that Federico used a Milanese sallet-type helmet with a neck-protecting bevor and a visor (Fig. 5). According to the rules of the sport, a barrier was erected along each side of which the contestants rode. The barrier thus prevented a head-on collision. Each Knight kept the barrier on his left side and with his lance in his right hand, supported by a bracket on his breast-plate, tried to knock his opponent off his horse. The wooden lances were made of ash and were liable to break on impact (Fig. 6).

If we can trust the historical sources of information, it is possible that the splintering lance of the Duke's opponent unfortunately dislodged and lifted his visor, shattered the nasal bridge and plunged into the right orbit, destroying the eye.

I find it difficult to accept Sir Harold's version that this outstanding nobleman and soldier Federico da Montefeltro should ask for an operation on his nose for fear of poisoning. I would rather believe that here we have a courageous general who lost his eye and part of his nose in a jousting competition from a broken lance.

References
Poggetto, P. dal (1980). Personal communications listing the following references:
Fig. 6 Medieval drawing of a jousting tournament to show the barrier and the breaking and splintering of the lances. (By courtesy of Professor T. Gibson).


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