



The Castle of Villafranca

VILLAFRANCA

Location: The ruins of the castle of Malnido stand on a rocky height close to the Magra River, at the confluence with the Bagnone. The castle was located in the western extremity of the fortified village of Villafranca, along the Roman road.

Type of castle: Marquis castle in a fortified village.

Construction period: The origins of Villafranca date back to the 12th century, whereas the first mention of the place name occurred in 1202.

First appearance in historical sources: The castle appears in documents from the 12th century and the village of Villafranca was mentioned for the first time in 1191.

Strategic role: The castle of Malnido protected and controlled the village below, which was a place of commerce, passage and toll along the Francigena road. It was the bridgehead of this important thoroughfare of the Malaspina di Mulazzo or dello Spino Secco.





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Further use: The events of the 20th century – among which was the earthquake of 1920 – the railway's construction and the bombing during the last World War are the main causes of the abandonment and destruction of this castle, which has been a ruin for more than 50 years.

Current condition: Ruins covered with vegetation.

Viewing: The castle cannot be visited.

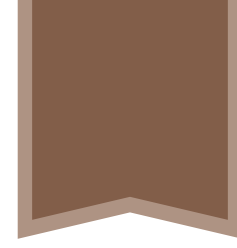
History: The origins of Villafranca are linked to the nearby Malnido castle of the Malaspina, which stood on top of a small hill and controlled the Francigena road. In 1164, Frederick I assigned the fief to Obizzo Malaspina "Malvidum sim nota curia". Then in 1221, after the division of the Malaspina property between Corrado di Mulazzo and Opizzino di Filattiera, Villafranca was again under the rule of Corrado and so subject to the Marquis dello Spino Secco.

It was in the middle of a vast fief that detached itself from that of Mulazzo, and was then extended up to the Taverone valley by annexations from the middle of the 14th century, due to a debt of the Marquis of Olivola with the Spino Fiorito family.

In 1416, the Marquis of Villafranca killed the Genoese pro-vicar of La Spezia, Oderico di Biassa, and thus provided Genoa with the pretext for invading Lunigiana and for conquering that important territory. Thus they plundered and occupied Villafranca and 15 other castles for a period of time. We know that the 15th century was characterised by wars led by the Malaspina to recover their property, and they were opposed by the Genoese Campofregoso family who succeeded in establishing themselves in Lunigiana.

Only at the end of the century, with the help of the Dukes of Milan who were lords of Genoa between 1464 and 1478 and to whom they were subjected, the Malaspina recovered their castles and also Villafranca, where they remained until the French Revolution.

The castle and the village suffered some destruction due to the troops passing through. The longest occupation, lasting almost a year, was in 1524 by Giovanni delle Bande Nere, who conquered Villafranca, Bastia, Podenzana, Licciana and Suvero.



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Structure: During the centuries the marquis residence has been divided into smaller private houses. The ruins of the castle are currently covered with vegetation. Its structure has been transformed and it did not adapt to the technological and military innovations of the 20th century. The fortress was then enlarged in the 16th and 17th centuries to construct houses for the descendants of the Lords of Villafranca. By the 19th century the appearance of the fortified residence had completely changed.

The plans of the castle show a large rocky spur, on which probably stood the original structure, which was equipped with other buildings on the southern side. The place influenced the shape of the castle and gave it that impressive and picturesque style that we recognise from the few pictures we have.