

Via Francigena: Day One – San Miniato to Gambassi Terme

Reflection 2: May 10

San Miniato is famous for the “Bonaparte” name. Napoleon visited there twice. The first visit was as a young man seeking a certificate of aristocracy so that he could join the French Military Academy. The second time was during his military adventurism to conquer Italy. He met with one of the last of the surviving branches of the Bonaparte name at the Palazzo Bonaparte. It can lay claim to some historical significance.

The walk from there to our new base at *Gambassi Terme* was undertaken mostly in the rain but of course seasoned trekkers such as me prepare for such things. We travelled through the hills and ridges of Val d'Elsa. The rain and muddy clay made for treacherous conditions in parts, with all walkers just one misplaced footstep away from a mud bath.

We were treated with a simple and surprising delight along the way. Tucked away in a little olive grove was a farming house offering hospitality. So, we were able to keep out of the rain for a little while and take advantage of some coffee and cold drinks. It is the simple things that can delight the heart while passing through as foreigners and pilgrims.

The *Via Francigena* has its basis in a diary kept by one of the members of the company of Archbishop Sigeric who travelled from Canterbury to Rome and back to receive his Pallium from Pope John XV in 990 AD. This work is essentially a group of entries written by an unknown member of the group accompanying the archbishop. It details in Latin the stay in Rome and the return journey to Canterbury. It is now in the British Library. The manuscript mentions the 23 churches in Rome that were visited, a lunch with Pope John XV, and the stages of the return journey. It is usually given the title the "Itinerary of Archbishop Sigeric". The value of the ancient document lies in its information on the churches in Rome in the tenth century.

Ancient churches in San Miniato and Gambassi Terme are mentioned in the diary:

- Maria Glan., today *Pieve di Santa Maria Assunta a Chianni*, municipality of Gambassi Terme,
- Dionisii, today, *Borgo San Genesio*, archaeological site, municipality of San Miniato.

All of this is a living history. We know some historical “waypoints”, but we don’t really know the exact route. I know the exact route I am following because I have an App. And happy Mother’s Day to all mothers!