



SAN FRANCESCO



ANNO DOMINI MCCLXI, TEMPORE DOMINI ALEXANDRI PAPAE IV ET FRIDERICI ARCHIEPISCOPI PISANI, INCEPTA EST HAEC ECCLESIA SUB INVOCATIONE SANCTI FRANCISCI

Commemorative plaque of the foundation

HISTORY

The history of this church is long and complex. It all began in 1219, when the first **Franciscan friars** settled in Pisa, reusing an ancient temple dedicated to the **Holy Trinity**. Shortly after, they built a small oratory dedicated to **Saint Francis**, which soon proved too small to accommodate the growing number of faithful. Therefore, in 1261, thanks to the will of **Pope Alexander IV** and the Archbishop of Pisa, **Federico Visconti**, it was decided to construct a new and larger church, designed by the architect **Giovanni di Simone**. Interestingly, the same key figures had already collaborated on the construction of the **Hospital of Santo Spirito** and the **Campo Santo** in Piazza del Duomo. The works were completed around 1286. The old church of the Holy Trinity remained incorporated into the convent's cloister until 1660, when it was demolished.

Over time, the building underwent many changes. New cloisters were built, and the **Chapel of Saint Bernardino** was added beside the façade, commissioned by Maria Sancasciani d'Appiano, as noted in the inscription on the front. However, the church's history was far from easy: in 1509, after Pisa came under Florentine rule, the convent was first turned into a **barracks**, then into a **university college** of the Sapienza. The Franciscans were only able to return in the mid-16th century, but in 1575 part of the building was assigned to house the **Tribunal of the Inquisition**. Later, in 1685, the Chapel of Saint Bernardino was first used as an **arms depot**, and then as a church for the military garrison.



*Engraving by Ferdinando Fambrini,
“View of the Piazza
of San Francesco in
Pisa”, 1788*

The Chapel of Saint Bernardino can be seen to the right of the façade, along with several 14th-century tombs that were then located outside.

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, new renovations were carried out, including the opening of windows to bring more light into the interior. Unfortunately, during these works, the frescoes of the central nave were destroyed; today, only a few fragments remain, hidden behind some altar paintings.

In 1786, the convent was handed over to the **Augustinian friars**, who remained until 1810, when Napoleon ordered the suppression of religious orders. The church was turned into a **hospital**, and only in 1817 were the Franciscans able to return, staying until 1860. After yet another closure, the building was used as an **artillery depot**. Finally, thanks to the efforts of a civic committee, a major restoration began in 1901 and the church was returned to the friars.

The marble façade was begun in 1300 but remained unfinished for centuries. It was only completed in 1603, as recorded by the inscription on the cornice. The rest of the church is made of brick, with 18th-century windows replacing the original ones, which are still partially visible in the cloister.

Inside, the church has a single nave and contains numerous funerary slabs dating from the 14th to the 18th century. These were originally located in the cloister but were moved to the church floor in 1788.



Some windows still preserve artistic stained glass from 1929. One curiosity can be found in the bifora on the left side: it depicts two historical Pisan figures, Pietro Gambacorta and Fra Mansueto, but their faces portray Benito Mussolini and Buffarini Guidi, a prominent local Fascist leader. This was, of course, during the oppressive Fascist regime.

Finally, note the bell tower, which leans partially against the church walls on two sides, while its other sides are supported by brackets visible from the interior, in the area of the north transept. At the top, it once had a pointed spire, which was damaged in 1788 and subsequently destroyed. It was only rebuilt much later, in 1906.

Among the many side altars, special attention should be given to the first altar on the right upon entering, where an extraordinary painting from 1602 by Ludovico Cardi, known as **Cigoli**, is preserved, depicting the Nativity.

Cigoli was a close friend and advisor to **Galileo Galilei**. This privileged relationship made him one of the first artists to be aware of the astronomical discoveries that the great scientist was developing at the time. A remarkable detail in the painting reveals this connection: behind the group of angels, in the upper right corner, there is a pale, non-idealized **moon**, shown in one of its real phases, rendered with a naturalistic chiaroscuro that sets it apart from the symbolic representations typical of the era.



It is precisely this moon that demonstrates the painter's scientific sensitivity: its appearance seems to reflect Galileo's early hypotheses about Earthshine — the light reflected from Earth onto the surface of the Moon — a concept Galileo would later describe in his groundbreaking *Sidereus Nuncius*, published eight years later, in 1610. This detail makes Cigoli's Nativity one of the very first artworks ever to incorporate a modern astronomical vision, merging Christian devotion with the new frontiers of science.

INSIGHT: GIOVANNI DI SIMONE

Giovanni di Simone, often identified as the designer of the Church of San Francesco, the Camposanto, and the Hospital of Santo Spirito (later incorporated into the Santa Chiara complex), remains a somewhat enigmatic figure.

His name appears only three times in contemporary documents, which is why scholars consider him a kind of “convenient reference figure” to whom some of Pisa’s most significant 13th-century architectural works are attributed, even in the absence of concrete evidence.

What we do know for certain is that he was working for the **Opera del Duomo of Pisa** during those years and that, by 1266, he had already attained the title of **capomagister**. In that role, he contributed to the construction of the **Cathedral’s bell tower**, bringing it up to the second-to-last level, just before the bell chamber was built.

It is worth noting that in the Middle Ages, the title **magister**, as applied to Giovanni, referred more accurately to a **worksite director** or master builder. In the 13th century, the distinction between **architect** (designer) and **builder** (executor) was not as clear as it is today: the creative aspect was not emphasized, and documents rarely distinguished between the designer and the actual builder.

In the case of the Hospital of Santo Spirito, the only clearly identified individual is a certain **Enrico**, credited with crafting the entrance steps.

As for the Camposanto, ancient sources refer to a “Giovanni,” but it is unclear whether this refers to Giovanni di Simone or **Giovanni di Nicola, better known as Giovanni Pisano**. The attribution therefore remains uncertain.

Regarding the Church of San Francesco, the presence of Giovanni di Simone is more concretely documented: he was officially tasked with sourcing marble and stone for the construction of the façade. However, it is not known whether he also participated in the design or in the building of the rest of the structure.

INSIGHT:

GIOVANNI "DELLA PACE"

Blessed Giovanni Cini was born in Pisa around 1270. In his youth, he served as a soldier of the Pisan Republic and, according to sources, led a life far from exemplary. The turning point came on October 8, 1296, when he took part in an attack against Matteo, the archbishop-elect of Pisa. This serious episode marked the beginning of his conversion: after serving his sentence, Giovanni embarked on a path of penance and joined the Franciscan Third Order, devoting himself to a life of charity and prayer.

From 1305, Giovanni Cini became president of the **Pia Casa della Misericordia**, a charitable institution devoted to helping the poor. He introduced an innovative and deeply humane practice: delivering alms at night, out of respect for those who were ashamed to receive them publicly.

In the final years of his life, he withdrew into hermitage near the **Porta della Pace** (the Gate of Peace, a medieval gate in the walls of Pisa"), which is why he is often remembered as "Giovanni della Pace."

His example attracted numerous followers. To welcome and guide them, he founded an autonomous congregation: the Congregation of Franciscan Third Order Hermits, also known as the "**Fraticelli**," which no longer exists today.

In the last years of his life, Giovanni had himself walled into a small cell, receiving Holy Communion through a small window. He died there between 1331 and 1340.

He was buried in the **Campo Santo**, in a reused ancient Roman sarcophagus. Above his tomb, the famous painter Buonamico Buffalmacco created the renowned fresco of the Thebaid, filled with hermit saints. The tomb was originally covered by a wooden canopy, now lost; its presence is still evidenced by the outline left on the plaster, visible above the sarcophagus. Later, the area was completed with additional frescoes to fill the void left by the removed structure.

In 1856, Giovanni's relics were transferred to the Church of San Francesco, which at the time was home to the Conventual Franciscans.

The following year, on September 10, 1857, Pope Pius IX officially approved the cult of Blessed Giovanni Cini, establishing his liturgical memorial on November 12.



THE CLOISTER

At the end of the 13th century and in the early decades of the 14th, a large covered portico was built to allow the friars to move easily, and sheltered, between the church and the various areas of the convent. This portico, constructed over an older 13th-century courtyard, soon took the form of a true cloister, with frescoed arcades and orderly paths, becoming not just a passageway but a central space in convent life.

Over time, the cloister also took on the function of a burial ground. In the central open ground, the less wealthy were buried directly in the earth, while richer and more influential families had their loved ones laid to rest along the side walkways, beneath elegant marble slabs engraved with inscriptions and coats of arms. The most prestigious burials extended into the interior of the church itself.

The cloister was also richly decorated with frescoes, said by sources to have been painted by great masters such as **Francesco Traini** and **Taddeo Gaddi**. Very little of these frescoes survive today, but some fragments have been recovered and are preserved in the National Museum of San Matteo.

Among the tombs once found here were that of **Francesco di Bartolo da Buti**, a prominent scholar and one of the first commentators on Dante's Divine Comedy, and that of **Giovanni Castracani**, son of the famous Lucchese military leader Castruccio Castracani.



ADI 2. GENNAIO 1777
ALLE ORE 8 DELLA SERA LA PIENA
D'ARNO SALZO A QUESTO SEGNO

Over the centuries, the cloister suffered severe damage—on one hand due to the transformation of

the convent into a military barracks, which altered both its structure and its function, and on the other from the frequent floods of the Arno River, including the disastrous one in 1777. Following these events, in 1788 it was decided to cover the entire cloister floor with a thick layer of fill material, about half a meter high, which ultimately buried all the funerary slabs. It was only in 1817 that an attempt was made to reverse this decision: the slabs, originally numbering 354, were recovered, catalogued, and transferred into the church, where they are still visible today, laid out along the nave.

The main cloister was originally connected to a second cloister, built at the same time, located on the north side of the complex. The two spaces were once freely connected, but this link was interrupted at the end of the 19th century, when part of the convent was repurposed as a museum space. In 1893, under the direction of **Iginio Benvenuto Supino**, the **Pisa Civic Museum** (Museo Civico di Pisa) was established in those very rooms. The museum housed paintings and sculptures from various city collections, including one begun as early as 1796 by Canon **don Sebastiano Zucchetti**. The Civic Museum remained open until 1949, when it was permanently closed and its collections were transferred to the new **National Museum of San Matteo**, where they are still preserved today.



THE CHAPTER HALL

From the convent cloister, one enters the **Chapter Hall**, also known as the **Hall of Saint Bonaventure**, through an elegant portico with a wooden coffered ceiling adorned with painted panels.

In the language of religious orders, the "*chapter*" was the official assembly of the friars, the designated space for solemn gatherings such as elections, legislative decisions, and moments of communal reflection. It was here that the most important decisions regarding convent life were made.

The interior of the hall is richly frescoed and represents one of the most significant pictorial cycles in the convent. The frescoes were painted in 1392 by **Niccolò di Pietro Gerini**.

The entire cycle unfolds along the walls in a narrative sequence, from left to right, illustrating the key episodes of Christ's Passion. It begins with the *Last Supper*, followed by the *Washing of the Feet*, the *Agony in the Garden*, and the *Betrayal by Judas*. Then come the *Flagellation*, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, the *Crucifixion*, the *Deposition*, and the *Entombment*. The cycle continues with the *Resurrection*, the *encounter with the women at the tomb*, the *Ascension*, and *Pentecost*. It concludes with images of *Saint John the Baptist* and a *female saint*, sometimes identified as Mary Magdalene or a Franciscan saint.

The hall's wooden ceiling is also decorated, divided into coffers that contain painted medallions depicting God the Father, the Four Evangelists, and the Apostles.



INSIGHT:

FRANCESCO DI BARTOLO

Francesco di Bartolo da Buti (1324–1406) was a Tuscan scholar, literary critic, and Latinist. Born in Buti, a village on the slopes of Monte Pisano, he lived and worked mainly in Pisa, where he held prestigious roles as an **ambassador of the Republic** and **professor at the Studio Pisano**, the city's ancient university.

In the academic field, he distinguished himself as a **grammaticus**, an expert in Latin language and literature. Among other works, he commented on the Satires of Persius and Horace's *Ars Poetica*, showing remarkable mastery of the classical tradition and refined exegetical skill.

However, his lasting fame is primarily due to his **commentary** on **Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy**, which at the time had been written just over fifty years earlier. Francesco was one of the first and most important commentators of Dante's work, composing his commentary in the **Pisan vernacular** between 1385 and his death in 1406.

His interpretation often takes a moralistic tone, aiming to explain and communicate the poem's ethical and civic message. For example, in his commentary on the *Inferno* (III, 1), he writes:

"Here begins the first canto of the book, in which the author, in order to be heard and listened to by everyone, begins with words of great sound and terror, so that all may focus their minds on hearing such weighty matters."

With this opening, Francesco invites the reader not only to understand the verses, but to prepare morally for the journey through the poem, like someone entering a sacred or judicial space.

Francesco di Bartolo is buried in the cloister of the Church of San Francesco in Pisa.

In Buti, he is remembered with pride: both the **municipal theater** and the **middle school** are named after him, a testament to the enduring legacy of his contribution to Tuscan and Italian culture.



Tomb of Francesco di Bartolo in the cloister of San Francesco

THE CHAPELS

Inside the church are several chapels sponsored by various noble Pisan families: six are located in the apse area of the building, while an additional chapel is found on the right side of the nave. The latter, dedicated to **Saint Philomena**, is



still used today for the daily celebration of Mass and houses the funerary monument of the Maggiolini family (1414), created by an unknown artist.

The main chapels are adorned with large stained-glass windows and frescoes. Unfortunately, many of the original decorations have been lost. The stained-glass windows were redone in the early 20th century by the master glazier Francesco Mossmeyer; only some medallions from the main window have survived, and today they are replaced by replicas.

The frescoes, too, have largely deteriorated: in some cases, only the sinopie (preparatory drawings) remain, while others have disappeared entirely. Among the notable artists who worked in the chapels are **Taddeo Gaddi** and **Spinello Aretino**.

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Despite these losses, the chapels still preserve an intimate and evocative atmosphere, offering visitors a profound sense of the spirituality once felt here over the centuries. Some of the liturgical furnishings were restored or repositioned during 20th-century restorations, helping to enhance their original structure.





During the Fascist period, many chapels were restored or rebuilt in a so-called “antique” style. This is particularly evident in the **Della Gherardesca Chapel**, where the tombs of **Count Ugolino** and his sons and grandsons—who died in the infamous ordeal recounted by Dante—were

relocated. The walls of the chapel were decorated with the coats of arms of the royal House of Savoy, the Fascist regime, and the local symbols of the Pisan cross and the eagle. Particularly noteworthy is the reconstruction of Ugolino’s face, created through the study of his remains.

Many of these chapels once housed valuable painted panels by great masters, including **Cimabue** and **Giotto**. Unfortunately, during the Napoleonic period, these works were looted by the French. One of the most famous, the panel depicting *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, is now held at the Louvre in Paris. In the chapels, replicas have replaced the missing originals.



The main chapel still preserves a large polychrome marble altarpiece created by **Tommaso Pisano** around 1370.

I DELLA GHERARDESCA

The Della Gherardesca family is one of the oldest and most prestigious noble lineages in Tuscany. According to genealogical tradition, the family has Lombard origins: the progenitor is said to have been **Wilfredo**, a nobleman and monk, son of **Ratchauso**, gastald of Pisa, and nephew of the Lombard king **Ratchis**.

However, the first historically documented member was **Gherardo**, who lived in the 10th century and was lord of Volterra and feudal lord of the Castle of Donoratico—from which the family name **Della Gherardesca** is derived.

Within the Church of San Francesco in Pisa, the family had a monumental tomb, where **Gaddo** (a shortened form of Gherardo) and his son **Fazio Novello** (a diminutive of Bonifazio), a pivotal figure in the city's history, were buried.

It was Fazio Novello Della Gherardesca who, in 1338, founded the **Studio Pisano**, the original core of today's **University of Pisa**. The institution was officially recognized in 1343 by Pope Clement VI through the bull "*In supreme dignitatis*". Thanks to him, Pisa acquired a center of higher learning destined to endure through the centuries.



For more on Fazio Novello:

https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/della-gherardesca-bonifazio-novello_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/

The splendid family tomb of the Della Gherardesca, attributed to the sculptor **Lupo di Francesco**, was unfortunately dismantled over time: the upper decorative portion is now preserved at the National Museum of San Matteo, while the lower part, containing the sarcophagus, is located in the Camposanto.

During World War II, the latter section was severely damaged by bombing. It was later restored and partially altered, as no images or documentation of its original appearance had survived.

The Della Gherardesca Tomb by Lupo di Francesco, as it might have appeared in the Church of San Francesco (hypothetical reconstruction).



The part of the tomb in the Camposanto damaged during the war

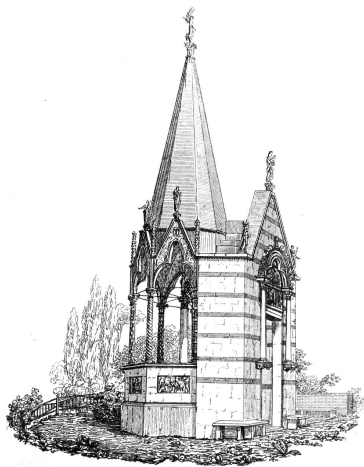


The part of the tomb in the Camposanto today

The part of the tomb in the San Matteo Museum



A little-known but significant episode concerns the architect **Alessandro Gherardesca** (not related to the noble family): in 1825, during landscaping work on the garden of **Palazzo Venerosi Pesciolini** (now the seat of the **Cottolengo** Institute), he built a small neo-Gothic temple. As was common at the time, he adorned it with ancient marbles that had come from the Church of San Francesco, previously purchased by the Venerosi Pesciolini family. Those marbles came from the dismantled tomb of the Della Gherardesca family! The temple itself was later damaged during the war and never rebuilt, but the surviving fragments were reused to help re-compose the two remaining sections of the tomb.



Il tempietto del giardino Venerosi-Pesciolini in un disegno di Alessandro Gherardesca

One of the most famous members of the family is **Ugolino della Gherardesca**, a tragic figure immortalized by Dante Alighieri in the *Inferno*. Accused of treason and imprisoned, he died of starvation together with his sons and grandsons in the Torre della Muda. For this reason, he was not buried in the family tomb, but in the cloister of the Church of San Francesco.

After the fall of the Pisan Republic, the Della Gherardesca family managed to retain their prestige even under Florentine rule. A key episode was the marriage between **Ugo della Gherardesca and Costanza de' Medici**, sister of Cardinal Alessandro de' Medici, who would later become Pope Leo XI.

Even after the end of the Medici dynasty, the family retained its noble titles, Counts of Donoratico, Pietra Rossa, and Bolgheri, and continued to play an active role in social and political life.

The Della Gherardesca family still exists today. Among its most well-known contemporary members are: **Costantino Della Gherardesca**, a television personality known for his cultural and entertainment programs, and **Gaddo Della Gherardesca**, an entrepreneur active in the wine and communication industries, especially in the Bolgheri area.

INSIGHT:

UGOLINO DELLA GHERARDESCA

Count Ugolino della Gherardesca was a Pisan nobleman, politician, and military leader. His family, of ancient lineage, was traditionally aligned with the **Ghibelline** faction; however, as often happens in politics, Ugolino eventually switched sides and joined the **Guelphs**.

He took part in numerous military campaigns, especially in **Sardinia**, following the division of the **Giudicato of Cagliari**. From these campaigns, he gained control of one-sixth of the territory, the **Cixerri**, where he actively promoted development: he founded the mining town of **Villa di Chiesa**, today known as **Iglesias**, and financed the construction of important buildings, including the **Castle of Salvaterra** and the **Cathedral of Santa Chiara**.

He also clashed with the imperial podestà, but was captured and sentenced to exile. This punishment lasted only a few years, thanks to the intercession of Charles I of Anjou. Upon his return to Pisa, Ugolino became one of the commanders of the city's fleet. The most famous and tragic period of his life coincides with the Battle of Meloria (1284), where the Pisan fleet suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Genoese. Ugolino was blamed as a scapegoat for that humiliation.

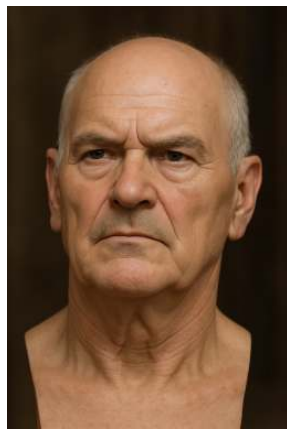
Despite this, he managed to rise to power, becoming first **Podestà** and then **Captain of the People**. In a critical moment for the city, he sought to preserve its stability by ceding castles to the Lucchese and money to the Florentines, thus easing tensions with both powers. These choices, however, were seen by many Pisans as acts of betrayal and helped fuel growing hostility toward him.

He soon made an enemy of Archbishop **Ruggieri degli Ubaldini**, a leading figure of the Ghibelline faction. After a series of political upheavals, Ugolino was arrested and, accused of treason, imprisoned in the **Torre della Muda** along with his sons and grandsons. There, condemned to starve, he met his end. The episode, distorted and magnified by popular rumor, was immortalized by **Dante** in the Divine Comedy, where both Ugolino and Ruggieri are placed in Hell.

His residence, once located along the Arno River, was demolished. To this day, that spot remains the only open space along the riverside, near the current headquarters of the Consorzio di Bonifica del Basso Valdarno.



Coat of Arms of
Della Gherardesca



Facial reconstruction
using AI based on the
model displayed in the
Church of San Francesco

The presumed bones of Ugolino and his descendants, originally buried in the cloister of the Church of San Francesco, were unearthed during excavations and transferred to the family chapel in the 19th century. A recent anthropological study allowed for a facial reconstruction of Ugolino and revealed that, at the time of death, he had not eaten meat and had very few teeth—thus disproving the rumors that he had resorted to cannibalism. However, it must be noted that the identification of the bones remains uncertain: as often happens, the desire to attribute remains to famous figures can cloud scientific rigor. It is therefore more accurate to say that the remains buried in the chapel are presumably those of Count Ugolino, the tragic figure immortalized by Dante.



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