



# SAN SISTO IN THE OLD COURT



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The church was founded in 1087 following the success of the Pisan expedition against the Saracens of **Al Mahdiya** and **Zawila**. This military campaign, carried out together with the Genoese, Amalfitans, and Romans, was a sort of prelude to the Crusades that would begin a few years later. It shared several features with the later Crusades: a strong religious character, papal encouragement (from **Pope Victor III**), and the prominent use of the Cross as a symbol of Christian warriors. At the time, Al Mahdiya—now a small port in Tunisia—was a powerful city with formidable defenses. Its fall, on August 6, 1087, caused a great stir among contemporaries.

Upon returning in triumph, the Pisans attributed their spectacular victory to that auspicious day, which coincided with the feast of **Saint Sixtus II and his deacons, martyrs**. They dedicated the church they built in **Corte Vecchia** (the Old Court), one of the most important sites in the city, to this saint.

The church was consecrated in 1133, as recorded by an inscription once located above the original altar. Over the centuries, it underwent numerous restorations. In 1603, the roof was rebuilt. However, the most radical changes occurred in 1786: the two side doors on the façade were closed, the interior was covered in stucco and ornamental decorations, and a barrel vault ceiling was installed. Further heavy modifications followed until 1924, when, thanks to the efforts of parish

priest Don Morgantini, all the 18th–19th century decorations were gradually removed, restoring the church to what was believed to be its original Romanesque appearance.



*San Sisto  
in a drawing  
dated 1838*

The exterior of the building, constructed entirely of local stone, has a sober appearance but features many refined architectural elements. It is flanked on two sides by adjacent structures. The façade is vertically divided by pilaster strips and string courses, following a scheme typical of Pisan Romanesque architecture. Its elevation is adorned with several ceramic basins set into the masonry and distributed across the surface.

These basins—some now replaced with replicas or restored—are glazed ceramics imported from Islamic regions of the Mediterranean, including **al-Andalus**, the **Maghreb**, **Ifriqiya** (modern-day Tunisia), and Egypt. Their use served not only a decorative purpose but also a symbolic one: displaying such fine ceramics from distant lands was a sign of wealth and a reflection of medieval Pisa's thriving maritime trade and international connections.

The central mullioned window, now a prominent feature of the façade, is the result of 20th-century restoration work. It was likely inspired by coeval models, though not necessarily based on the church's original design. The visible side of the church follows the same style as the façade, alternating plain surfaces with decorative modules.

The bell tower stands out for its mixed structure: a solid stone base supports a brick shaft that rises upward, visually lightening the tower's mass. The structure has undergone various restorations over time, especially to ensure its stability. Inside, three historic bells are still

preserved: one dated 1229, another from 1211, and a third from the 14th century—rare and remarkably well-preserved examples of medieval bell-casting, all still potentially functional.



*Side before the 1924 restoration*



Inside the church, several relics from the past testify to Pisa's deep connection with the sea and its millenary history. In the corners of the counter-façade, one can see a **mast** and a **rudder**—wooden fragments from medieval ships. The mast, dated to the 14th century, was found embedded within a column during 20th-century restoration work, while the rudder dates back to the 15th century. These elements evoke the memory of Pisan naval exploits and the symbolic reuse of maritime materials in a religious context.

Also on the counter-façade is a stone slab bearing an Arabic inscription in Kufic script, recording the death of Emir **Al Murtaḍà** (January 7, 1094). It was brought to Pisa following the conquest of the Balearic Islands by the city's fleet.

Noteworthy as well are a fresco of the *Madonna and Child*, known as the "**Madonna of Purity**", painted on the back wall of the right nave and dating to the 14th century, and a wooden crucifix from 1370 inspired by the **Holy Face** of Lucca.

A further touch of local identity is provided by the **flags of Pisa's historic districts**, hung in groups of three along the nave walls. On the right side are the flags of **Ponte**, **Mezzo**, and **Foriporta**; on the left, those of **Kinzica**, the Municipality, and the Province of Pisa. The flag of Mezzo, here shown in a curious variant, features a shield with seven red and gold stripes on a vermillion red field—the color shared by all Pisan civic banners.





# INSIGHT: THE EPITAPH OF AL-MURTADĀ



**Abū Naṣr ‘Abd Allāh Bin Aghlab** was a Muslim ruler who reigned over the Balearic Islands, particularly **Mallorca**, between 1076 and 1093. He belonged to the Aghlabid dynasty, and his rule took place during a time of political fragmentation in the Iberian Peninsula, characterized by the presence of numerous independent Muslim kingdoms known as *ṭawā’if*.

His existence is attested by numismatic sources: silver dirhams minted in Mallorca during his reign bear his name along with that of the Aghlabid dynasty. These coins are among the few surviving material testimonies of his sovereignty. He died on January 7, 1094.

His epitaph was brought to Pisa after the **conquest of the Balearic Islands**, sometime after 1115, and is preserved in the Church of San Sisto. It is inscribed in **Kufic script**, an early form of Arabic writing typically used for

monumental or decorative inscriptions.

The translated text of the epitaph reads as follows:

“IN the name of Allāh, the Compassionate, the Merciful:  
O people, the promise of Allāh is true].  
Let not the worldly life [deceive you], nor let  
the deceiver distract you from Allāh!”. The Em[ir Abū] Naṣr  
– May Allāh cause his face to shine upon Muḥammad! –  
‘Abd Allāh Bin Aghlab died at dawn on the day of Saturday,  
fourteen nights  
before the end of Dū al-Ḥiġġa in the ye[ar]  
six and eighty and [four hundred]  
[his] birth took place  
five [nights] before of [...]  
in the year eight and fou[rty and four]  
hundred. May Allāh have mercy upon him...  
[...]

# INSIGHT: THE HOLY FACE

The **Volto Santo** (Holy Face) is a wooden sculpture and reliquary, probably created between the late 8th and early 9th century. It is a monumental representation of Christ, approximately 2.65 meters tall. This type of image is known as **Christus Triumphans**, as it depicts Jesus not at the moment of death, but in triumph on the cross: standing upright, with open eyes, dressed in a long decorated tunic, and crowned in gold.



According to tradition, it was carved by **Nicodemus**, a member of the Sanhedrin—whose relics, along with those of **Gamaliel** and his son **Abib**, are kept in the Cathedral of Pisa. Nicodemus is said to have carved the body but did not dare to sculpt the face; it miraculously appeared on its own, making the work an **acheropita**, or “not made by human hands.”

After various adventures, the crucifix arrived in Lucca, where it is still housed today in the Cathedral of San Martino and remains an object of deep veneration.

However, the cult of the Volto Santo was not confined to Lucca. It also spread to Pisa, where it gained significant following. A

fresco fragment from the Church of **San Giovanni in Spazzavento**—now preserved at the Museo di San Matteo—bears witness to the Holy Face’s presence in Pisan ecclesiastical iconography. Additionally, records mention two wooden crucifixes inspired by the Lucchese model in the churches of **San Sisto** and the **Carmine**. Unfortunately, the one from the Carmine has been lost.

The Crucifix of the Triumphant Christ in San Sisto, however, has survived. An inscription still preserved in the church clearly documents its origin:

HOC OPUS FECIT FIERI FRANCISCUS PRIOR  
ISTIUS ECCLESIE PRO ANIMA SUA ET SUORUM —  
ANNO DOMINI 1370 DE MENSE FEBRUARII  
FECIT CONSACRAT

Translated: “This work was commissioned by Francesco, prior of this church, for the salvation of his soul and that of his loved ones. In the year of Our Lord 1370, in the month of February, it was consecrated.”

The date is to be understood according to the Pisan style of dating, which began the year in March, so it coincides with the modern calendar.

With the development of communal institutions during the 12th century, the city center of Pisa underwent a profound urban and functional reorganization. This process led to the creation of the city courts and the **Palazzo del Comune** (Town Hall), civic buildings constructed near the Church of San Sisto, in an area already significant for earlier Lombard institutions. The physical proximity between the seats of religious power and the emerging civic authority helped to establish the church as a central place in the life of the community—not only spiritually, but also politically and socially.

The rise of the **Comune di Popolo** in the second half of the 13th century brought further transformation to the urban fabric. The new ruling class, drawn from guilds and trade corporations and opposed to the traditional aristocracy, demanded more representative and functional public spaces. This led to the expansion of civic buildings and the redefinition of areas assigned to key political authorities such as the **Anziani** (Elders), the **Capitano del Popolo** (Captain of the People), and the **Consiglio del Popolo** (People's Council).

Due to its strategic location and civic relevance, the Church of San Sisto became an integral part of this new structure. The area was subjected to specific legal and social restrictions: nobles were forbidden from purchasing property within the boundaries of what had become the political heart of the **Comune di Popolo**, in order to prevent interference or control by traditional elites. The church itself was used as a meeting place for the **Consigli del Popolo** and as a venue for assemblies of communal magistrates, thus enhancing its institutional as well as religious role.

This function continued until the fall of the Pisan Republic and the Florentine occupation in 1406, which led to the dismantling of communal political structures and marked the beginning of a new chapter for the city and for the buildings that had once embodied its civic identity.

# LO DIE DI SANTO SISTO



August 6 is dedicated to Pope **Sixtus II** and his seven deacons, martyrs. For Pisa, this date has long been considered “**memorable**,” as many battles fought during the republican era on that day were gloriously won. It was not so much the figure of Saint Sixtus himself that was seen as auspicious, but rather the day dedicated to him.

For example, in his *Annales Pisani*, the chronicler **Maragone**, when describing the 1063 expedition to Palermo and the subsequent construction of the new cathedral, writes: *"1063. The Pisans went to Palermo; by the grace of God they defeated them on the day of Saint Agapitus. The Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the City of Pisa was built"*. Saint Agapitus, in fact, was one of the seven deacons martyred with Saint Sixtus and is commemorated with him on August 6.

This long tradition of victorious battles on the “fortunate day” lasted until 1284, when, precisely on August 6, Pisa suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Genoese—the infamous Battle of Meloria. Although, contrary to common belief, this did not mark the end of the Republic, it was nonetheless a heavy blow to Pisan forces. From that point on, August 6 was no longer chosen for major military undertakings.

In modern times, August 6 has been revived as a day of remembrance. A **Mass is celebrated in memory of all Pisans who died in war**, attended by the city's political representatives.



*The Crypt of the Popes in the Catacombs of San Callisto in Rome, where the tomb of Saint Sixtus II is located*



# THE OLD COURT

From the Lombard era up to the early 11th century, the Corte served as the center of Pisa's public institutions. It was the place where the city's main political figures, known as **gastaldi**, would gather. These officials, appointed by the Lombard king, held broad civil, judicial, and military powers. They administered justice, managed public assets, maintained order, and acted as direct representatives of royal authority at the local level.

According to some theories, the so-called Corte Vecchia corresponded to the area of the ancient **Roman forum**, at the intersection of the cardo and decumanus—a location that can be roughly identified near today's Via Corsica and Via della Faggiola. Over time, this space retained a central role in the city's public life. Even as Lombard influence declined and communal institutions emerged, the Corte remained a point of civic reference, earning the name **Vecchia** ("Old") to distinguish it from the new centers of power.

From the second half of the 13th century, with the rise of the **Comune di Popolo**, the structure of civic authority was profoundly reshaped. This new form of government aimed to represent the popular classes, particularly the guilds and craft corporations, positioning itself in opposition to the power of the aristocratic families. As a result, the seats of power were also redefined: the **Palazzo degli Anziani**, the **Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo**, and other institutional buildings became the new administrative hubs of the city.

In this context, the **church of San Sisto** gained a central role. Located near the civic power centers, it was placed under the direct patronage of the Commune and designated as a meeting place for the **Consigli del Popolo** and communal assemblies. This civic use of the church continued until the pivotal event of 1406, when the Florentine occupation ended Pisa's independence and its centuries-old tradition of self-government.

# SAN ROCCO IN THE OLD COURT



The church is attested as early as 1027 under the name **San Pietro in Corte Vecchia**. Of Lombard origin, it is oriented along a west–east axis, like San Sisto, but with its façade facing east—unlike most Romanesque churches, which are typically oriented westward.

In 1575, the church was entrusted to the **Compagnia di San Rocco**, from which it takes its current name, and underwent complete reconstruction: the ceiling was rebuilt as a barrel vault, and side altars were added.

In 1786, the wooden crucifix of the Triumphant Christ, originally from San Sisto, was transferred here. The chapel that housed the sculpture was thereafter known as the Chapel of the Holy Face. The crucifix was returned to San Sisto in the second half of the 20th century.

Between 1594 and 1603, the church was incorporated into the adjacent buildings of the Compagnia di San Rocco: notably, an oratory was constructed above the church at the first-floor level—today transformed into rooms for the **Casa dello Studente** (Student Housing). Further modifications were made later to integrate the structure more fully with the nearby Church of San Sisto.

In 1782, after the Compagnia di San Rocco was suppressed, the church was purchased by Giovanni Domenico Castellini. At the bishop's request, it was then used as the mortuary chapel and sacristy for San Sisto, until it was reopened for worship in the 19th century. The original 18th-century altar was moved to San Sisto in 1786; the current altar, also from the 18th century, comes from the Church of Sant'Antonio Abate. The organ loft was removed in 1918 and transferred to the Church of San Lorenzo alle Corti.



# INSIGHT:

## THE ORIENTATION OF CHURCHES

The east–west alignment of churches is a widespread traditional and symbolic practice in ancient and medieval Christian architecture. Though not an absolute rule, it has always carried strong theological and liturgical significance. Typically, the apse, where the altar is located, faces east, while the main entrance opens to the west. This orientation evokes the rising sun—symbol of the Risen Christ and the divine light that conquers darkness.

The verb “**to orient**” an architectural structure derives from this very liturgical and symbolic practice: it means “**to face east**.”

In early Christian liturgy, the faithful prayed facing east, toward the earthly Jerusalem. This direction had clear symbolic meaning:

- East represented light, resurrection, and paradise (Eden is described in Genesis as being “in the east”)
- West symbolized sunset, darkness, earthly life, and sin.

For this reason, entering from the west and proceeding toward the east also held catechetical value: a spiritual journey from darkness to light, from death to life.

However, this orientation was not always strictly followed, for various reasons: the presence of dense and irregular urban settings, topographical constraints, or the reuse of preexisting structures such as Roman temples, domus, or civic buildings.

In some cases—especially in the early Christian and pre-Romanesque periods—churches are found with reversed orientation: the altar was placed at the west, and the faithful prayed facing westward. In these instances, the priest, celebrating while facing east, still preserved the solar symbolism. Only starting in the Romanesque era did the east-apse / west-entrance alignment become standard across much of Europe.

This explains why the Church of San Sisto, built in the late 11th century, follows the canonical west–east orientation—with its façade to the west and apse to the east—while the Church of San Rocco, founded earlier, presents a different alignment, likely due to the preexisting urban layout or to a more archaic original plan.



# THE EXCAVATIONS

The garden area next to the church of San Sisto was the site of an archaeological **excavation campaign** between 2020 and 2022, which yielded extensive information and over 500 crates of artifacts ranging from the 7th century BCE to the modern era.



Of particular interest was the discovery of a Roman-era dwelling, abandoned in the 6th century, whose area was later used for Lombard-period burials. The house was connected to a portico and to a structure located beneath the current Church of San Sisto, which likely served as the early medieval royal court. A stone hall within this complex was used for judicial proceedings. The site also contained silos for agricultural products, and from at least the 8th century onward, a church that would become known from 1027 as San Pietro in Cortevecthia—today's Church of San Rocco.

When the Church of San Sisto was built, it included a fortified cloister, within which were large brick tomb enclosures, likely used as family burial vaults. Unfortunately, after the Florentine occupation, this entire structure was demolished and looted.

Official excavation website:

<https://sansistoproject.cfs.unipi.it/>



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*Map extract with San Sisto and San Rocco from the Pisa map by Giacinto Van Lint (1846)*

*Regional Storic Cartographies (CA.STO.RE.) - Tuscany Region, State Archives*

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