



COMPAGNIA DELLO STILEPISANO

ESPUSAL
OF THE SEA



HISTORY

Little is known about the tradition of the **Espousal of Pisa with the Sea**, which most likely played a highly significant role in the identity and public life of ancient republican Pisa. The city, a proud maritime power and stronghold of communal liberty, had over the centuries developed its own rich network of civic rites and ceremonies, often linked to the sea, navigation, and civic religiosity. These practices helped strengthen the bond between the community and its institutions, and between the people and the sea.

Unfortunately, almost no documents relating to this tradition have survived. The Florentine occupation of the 15th century marked a traumatic break in the history and collective memory of the city. The new rulers, in addition to imposing their political and military control, also undertook a deep symbolic and cultural erasure of Pisa's ancient customs. The city's decline and the consequent diaspora of noble families, intellectuals, artists, and craftsmen—forced to abandon their homeland—did the rest: many practices and forms of knowledge, passed down orally and ritually, disappeared and were swallowed by oblivion within a few decades.

Only a few precious traces have survived this loss of memory. Some have been passed down through poetic compositions and, even more significantly, through the travel notes of **Michel de Montaigne**, who stayed in Italy in 1581 and carefully recorded what he saw and what was told to him.

The scarcity of written sources might raise doubts about the actual existence of the Pisan ceremony. However, the fact that similar rituals were also practiced in other coastal towns, such as Cervia, and especially in Venice—a great maritime republic as well—provides strong support for the plausibility of Montaigne's account.

In the centuries that followed, the issue became a matter of debate. Some scholars, such as Canon Francesco Polese, considered this and other Pisan traditions to be nothing more than legends born of an oral tradition lacking genuine documentary evidence—a theory that, as we shall see, does not appear to be entirely sound. Others, like Alessandro d'Ancona, an eminent commentator on Montaigne's diary, while recognizing the seriousness and accuracy of the French writer, suggested that he may have been misled by unreliable local sources, eager to embellish events and ceremonies that perhaps were never actually celebrated.

INSIGHT: MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (Bordeaux, 28 February 1533 – Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne, 13 September 1592) was one of the leading figures of French humanist thought, as well as a writer, philosopher, and statesman.



Belonging to a family of merchants who, through the acquisition of the château of Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne in southwestern France two generations earlier, had obtained the title of *Lords of La Montaigne*, Michel received an education based on the principles of Renaissance humanism. As he himself recounts in his famous **Essays**, he was entrusted as a child to a wet nurse in a poor village in order to become accustomed early on to a simple life and close contact with the lower classes.

His political career first saw him appointed as **counsellor** at the Court of Aids in Périgueux, then at the **Parliament** of Bordeaux, and finally as a **member of the court of King Charles IX** of France. In 1570 he chose to retire from public life, devoting himself to reflection and to the writing of his most important work, *Essais* (Essays), in which he critically and skeptically addressed topics such as miracles, visions, and other supernatural phenomena. Precisely because of this critical approach, the work was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Forbidden Books).

Between 1580 and 1581, he undertook a **long journey through Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and France**, searching for a possible cure for the painful kidney stones from which he suffered, visiting numerous spa towns. It was during this journey that he arrived in Pisa, where he learned about the Marriage of Pisa with the Sea ceremony, which he briefly mentioned in his notes.

Montaigne was deeply impressed by many Italian cities: notably by Macerata, which he praised at length, but also by smaller towns such as Empoli. By contrast, he was not impressed by Florence, which he considered far inferior in beauty to Venice.

Toward the end of 1581, upon returning to France, he was elected **mayor** of Bordeaux, a post he held for two terms before retiring definitively to his estate to continue revising and expanding the *Essays*. His travel notes on Italy were published posthumously only in 1774, nearly two centuries after his death.

THE CEREMONY

The information collected by Michel de Montaigne leads us to a specific date: **July 6th**, the day on which the **Feast of Saint Peter** was celebrated. This festival took place at **San Piero a Grado**, a location situated between the city center of Pisa and the coast, traditionally considered to be the landing site of the Apostle **Peter**, who would become the first Pope. Here, Peter is said to have consecrated the first Christian altar in the West, making the site a place of major religious significance and memory for the Christian community of Pisa.



The Basilica of San Piero a Grado in an old print

Over the centuries, many places have claimed to be the first landing site of Saint Peter in Italy, particularly Otranto, San Pietro in Galatina, Santa Maria di Leuca, Gallipoli, Taranto, and San Pietro in Bevagna (Manduria). However, it cannot be ruled out that the Apostle may have visited more than one of these ports, following ancient trade routes that historically docked at these locations.

De Montaigne recounts (likely based on information provided by the chaplains of the Cathedral, who at the time also officiated at the church of San Pietro) that a solemn ceremony was once held: **the Archbishop of Pisa, bearing the precious relic of Saint Clement, would proceed in a grand procession to San Piero a Grado and from there to the sea, where he would perform the symbolic act of casting a ring into the waves.** The act represented the ancient and indissoluble bond between Pisa and the sea, reaffirming the republican city's dominion over its natural element and source of economic and political power.

By the time of Montaigne's visit (1581), the ceremony had already been significantly reduced in scale. It was no longer the archbishop who performed the ritual, but rather a **magisquolo**, a term referring to an official comparable to a master of ceremonies or administrator of the archiepiscopal Curia. The absence of the prelate reflected the decline of Pisa's maritime power and the progressive erasure of the ancient glories of the Republic.



*Pisan Ships in a panel
by Ambrogio Lorenzetti
(14th century)*

This choice was not accidental. After the Florentine conquest of 1406, all archbishops of Pisa were appointed directly by Florence, which had by then become the new hegemonic power. None of them likely wished to legitimize, through their presence, a ceremony that celebrated a civic and maritime tradition so closely tied to the past greatness and autonomy of the city.

One final curiosity concerns a possible discrepancy between Montaigne's account and the liturgical calendar: the official feast day of Saints Peter and Paul falls on June 29th, not July 6th. This difference may be explained by the fact that, much like today's Giugno Pisano celebrations (which culminate on June 17th in honor of Saint Ranieri but extend throughout the month), even in the past, festivities dedicated to Saint Peter may have lasted several days, concluding on July 6th with the symbolic ceremony by the sea.



*The Marriage of the Sea in Venice
Francesco Guardi, 1775–1780*

THE WORDS OF DE MONTAIGNE

Here is the excerpt from his *Travel Journal in Italy*:

Thursday [the 6th of July], which was the Feast of Saint Peter, it is told that in ancient time it was their custom that the bishop did go unto the Church of Saint Peter, situate four miles without the city, in solemn procession, and thence unto the sea, where he did cast a ring and espouse the sea, this city being then of exceeding might upon the waters. Now goeth thither only a master of school. Yet the priests do proceed unto the said church in procession, where is granted much indulgence. The Pope's bull, of four hundred years' standing or somewhat less (as is testified by a book of more than twelve hundred years), saith that the church was founded by Saint Peter himself; and that Saint Clement, whilst performing the office upon a table of marble, was stricken with a bleeding at the nose, and three drops of blood did fall thereon. These drops be yet to be seen as imprinted since three days past. The Genoese brake this table and did bear away one of the said drops. Wherefore the Pisans took what did remain of the said table from the church and did carry it into their city. Yet every year they restore it unto its place with procession upon the said day of Saint Peter. The folk do go thither all night by boats.

* the “schoolmaster” was a misunderstanding by de Montaigne of the ecclesiastical term *magisquolo*, which referred to the administrator of the Archbishop.



The reliquary with the blood of Saint Clement. Marble and metal, circa 1450

INSIGHT: THE CULT OF SAINT PETER IN PISA

Throughout the Middle Ages, the cult of Saint Peter held deep and widespread significance in Pisa. This strong bond stemmed both from the city's desire to maintain a privileged relationship with **Rome** and from the figure of the Apostle as a symbol of guidance and protection for sailors, perfectly in harmony with the maritime vocation of the Pisan Republic.

Numerous churches in the city and surrounding countryside were dedicated to him: **San Pietro in Vinculis**, **San Pietro Apostolo**, **San Pietro in Corte Vecchia** (now San Rocco), **San Pietro in Padule** (later Sant'Omobono, no longer extant), **San Pietro a Ischia** (now Sant'Apollonia), to name just a few. These places of worship bear witness to the widespread devotion to the Apostle, present in every corner of Pisan territory.



The peak of this veneration was reached in the 13th century under the episcopacy of **Federico Visconti**. In particular, during the sermons he delivered in the solemn setting of San Piero a Grado on the occasion of the Feast of the Ascension, the saint was elevated almost to the status of second patron of the city, alongside the Virgin Mary, to whom the Cathedral is dedicated.

It is important to remember that only in 1632 was Saint Ranieri officially proclaimed Patron of Pisa. The figure of Saint Sixtus, sometimes mistakenly considered by the Pisans to have been the original patron, was in fact linked to a historical coincidence: August 6th, the day of his liturgical feast, coincided on several occasions with major military victories of the Republic of Pisa, conferring upon him an aura of benevolent protection but without formal recognition as a patron saint.

For further insights, see the interesting article (in Italian language) by Maria Luisa Ceccarelli Lemut: *Il culto di San Pietro a Pisa*.

https://www.academia.edu/45175053/Il_culto_di_San_Pietro_a_Pisa

INSIGHT: SAINT CLEMENT

According to a tradition deeply rooted in Pisan religious history, in 44 AD the **Apostle Peter** first landed in Italy at the settlement of **Gradus Arnensis**. The very name of the place, meaning “*landing on the Arno*”, attests to the presence in Roman times of a small commercial and transit harbor located near the river’s mouth, between the marshes and the sea, in what is now known as **San Piero a Grado**.

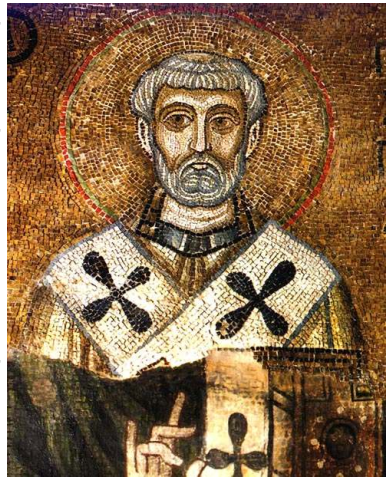
It is said that Peter, coming from Palestine and on his way to Rome to begin his mission of evangelization, found his first point of arrival in this spot. Here, according to legend, he erected the first Christian altar on Italian soil, symbolically consecrating the peninsula to the new faith.

On the site where Peter celebrated his first Eucharist in the West, a church dedicated to him was built in later centuries. The official consecration of this first temple is said to have been performed by **Saint Clement**, the fourth pope of the Church, who held the papacy between 88 and 97 AD.

According to Christian tradition, Saint Clement was a direct disciple of Saint Peter, one of the first apostolic fathers, venerated as a martyr and author of the famous *First Letter of Clement* to the Corinthians. Legend holds that at the solemn moment of the consecration of the altar of San Piero a Grado, Saint Clement was suddenly afflicted by an abscess on his nose, and three drops of blood fell onto the stone of the altar.

This slab, which became a relic, was venerated for centuries by the faithful of Pisa. Initially kept in the basilica of San Piero a Grado, it was later transferred to **Pisa Cathedral** to ensure its safety, especially after the Genoese, during one of the many raids and rivalries between the two maritime republics in the Middle Ages, managed to steal a fragment of it.

Today, the precious relic is displayed inside the **Museo dell’Opera del Duomo**, protected in an elegant 17th-century marble reliquary.

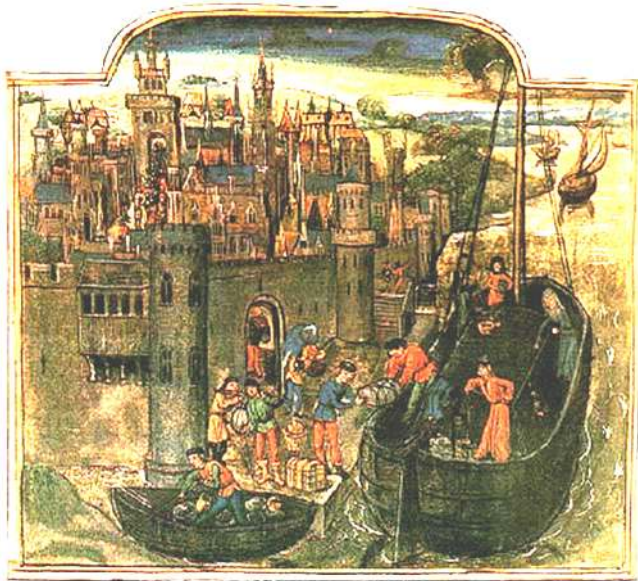


THE LEGACY

After the sorrowful date of 1406, when Pisa definitively fell under Florentine rule, the Marriage of the Sea ceremony rapidly declined. As we have seen, it was gradually forgotten by the population and, above all, deliberately ignored by the city's new rulers, who had no interest in preserving a ritual so symbolically linked to the former maritime power and independence of the Pisan Republic.

Yet, despite the official suppression of the rite, something endured. The **Feast of Saint Peter**, deeply rooted in popular devotion, continued for several years after the disappearance of the official marriage ceremony. The tradition of the river procession, in which the citizens of Pisa traveled by boat up the Arno to San Piero a Grado, continued for a long time, keeping alive the bond between the city and its apostolic protector of sailors.

It is likely that, in this now residual phase, the magisquolo of the archiepiscopal chapter house, a figure comparable to a lay master of ceremonies or ecclesiastical administrator, was sent solely to carry the relic of Saint Clement to the church of San Pietro and to perform the religious service. The second part of the ceremony, culminating symbolically in the act of marriage with the sea, was intentionally abandoned by the Florentine-appointed archbishops to avoid any evocation of Pisa's former naval and political glory.



Landing site of Pisa, probably in the area of San Paolo a Ripa d'Arno

OTHER EVIDENCE

Another reference to the Marriage of the Sea can be found in the verses of **Puccino d'Antonio** (15th century) in his **Lament of Pisa**, where he describes a naval festival dedicated to “Madonna Pisa” as a maritime power.

**Who might ever in boasting say aright
That greater joy, nor yet so fair delight,
Was had as I did bear
Within my heart, to see the tides so still,**

**With an hundred galleys fair of will,
And me in bark all wrought with golden grace,
And as in concourse place,
Maids and young squires in merry company?**

**Ne'er was such melody in land or sea
Of songs, of viols, and of minstrelsy,
Of pipes and flutes full free,
Of harps, small organs, and of psalterie.**

**What greater joy might mortal ever see,
Than mine own folk, not wandering idly on,
But through fair stream of Arne,
Beholding so great gentleness anon!**

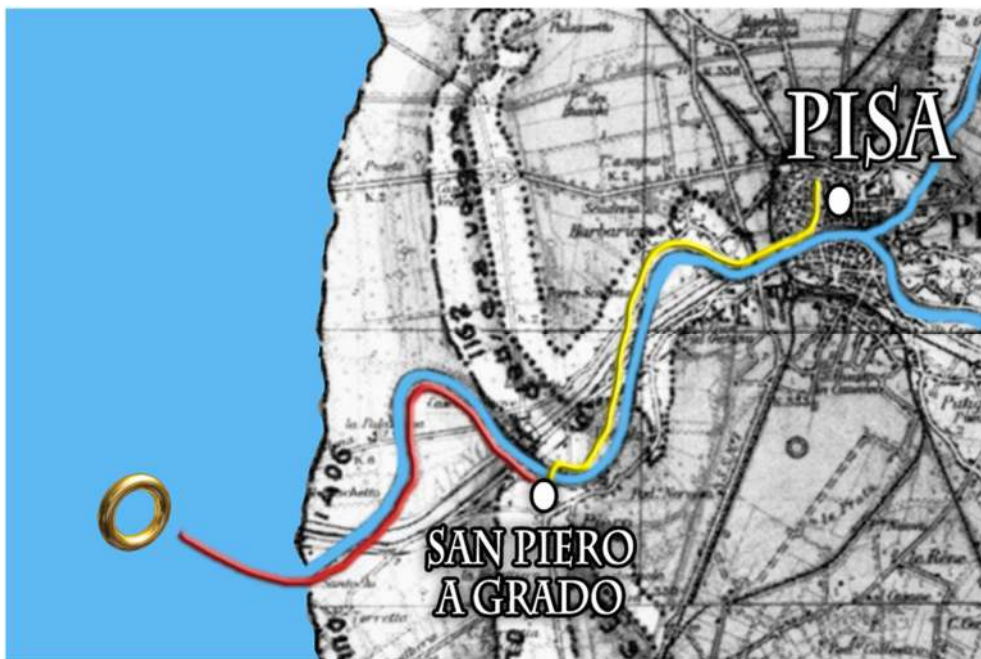
Raffaello Roncioni, a Pisan chronicler of the late 16th century, also provides valuable evidence supporting the existence of the ceremony. In his descriptions of the Republican Arsenals, Roncioni speaks of the “*great boat, adorned with gold and other decorations, fashioned to represent Pisa*”, noting that this vessel was jealously guarded and never shown publicly except “*with pomp and on the day of victories, accompanied by one hundred galleys, as is written in the Lament of Pisa*”.

The accounts handed down by Montaigne, Roncioni, and other sources, though sometimes inconsistent, for example, regarding the date of the ceremony, which in Roncioni’s case seems to refer to August 6th, the feast day of Saint Sixtus, traditionally associated with several victories of the Republic, nevertheless collectively suggest that two distinct rites were held in Pisa:

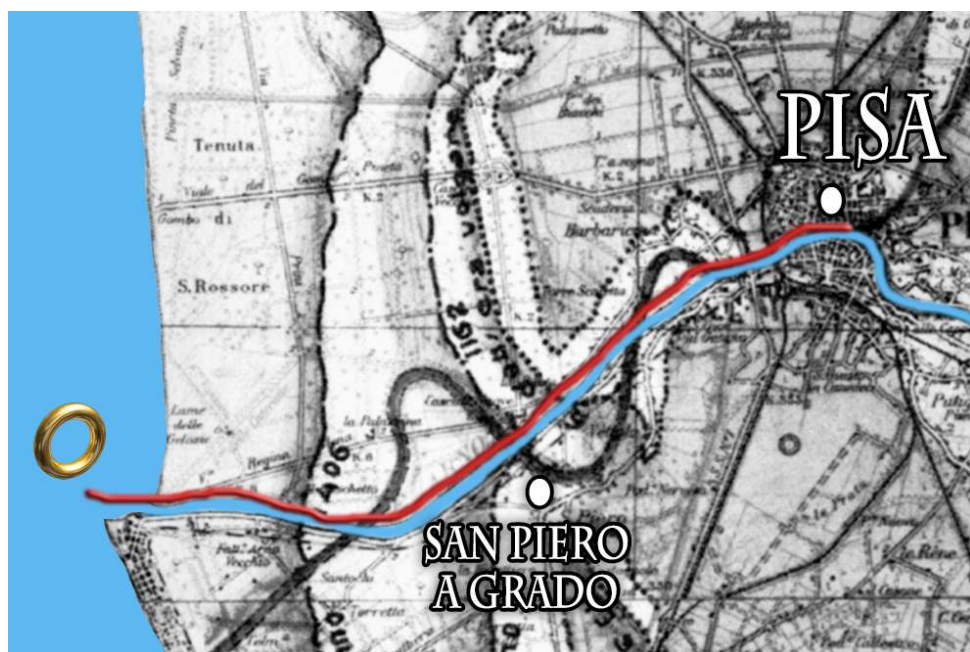
- the **Processione del Sangue** (Procession of the Blood), a popular festival featuring the transport of the relic of Saint Clement from Pisa Cathedral to the church of San Piero a Grado. This procession was characterized by enthusiastic participation from the populace, who accompanied the journey with singing, dancing, music, and very likely banquets and celebrations.
- the **Espousal of the Sea**, the solemn ceremony officiated by the archbishop, who would venture out to sea to symbolically cast the ring into the waters, sealing the union between Pisa and the sea, the source of its wealth and glory.

With the Florentine occupation, both rites gradually disappeared, suppressed by a deliberate political and religious will to erase any legacy of Pisa’s former republican autonomy. At the same time, the cult of Saint Peter also steadily declined, replaced by new devotional figures more aligned with the religious sensibilities and politics of the time. Chief among these was the cult of **Saint Ranieri**, who in 1632 was officially proclaimed Patron of the city, becoming the identity symbol of Pisa, now fully integrated into the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

HYPOTHETICAL ROUTE OF
THE *ESPOUSAL OF THE SEA* UNTIL 1406



CURRENT ROUTE OF THE *ESPOUSAL OF THE SEA*



OTHER ESPOUSALS OF THE SEA IN ITALY

While in Pisa the tradition of the Espousals of the Sea sadly disappeared following the Florentine conquest and the consequent suppression of many civic customs, such as the Mazzascudo, similar rites have survived through the centuries in other Italian coastal cities and are still celebrated today. The most notable examples are those of Cervia and Venice.

In **Cervia**, the Espousal of the Sea ceremony is still held today on the occasion of the Feast of the **Ascension** and remains one of the city's most important and popular annual events. The tradition traces its origins to an event in 1445, when the Venetian cardinal **Pietro Barbo**, the future Pope Paul II, was caught in a violent storm off the Romagna coast. Having miraculously survived the shipwreck, he decided to throw his pastoral ring into the sea as a sign of gratitude and reconciliation with the sea itself.

The modern ceremony reenacts this symbolic gesture, turning it into an evocative event that blends liturgy, folklore, and popular participation. The rite begins with a solemn procession: the bishop and the mayor of the city, accompanied by civil, military, and religious authorities, gather in the heart of Cervia and, amidst trumpet blasts and participants in historical costume, proceed to the port. There, they are welcomed by a crowd of citizens and tourists along with numerous traditional boats, including the distinctive fishing vessels and historic **burchielle**.



The bishop and mayor then board a specially prepared ship, which carries them along the canal to the open sea. Once offshore, the bishop offers a blessing prayer for the waters and the seafaring people, after which he symbolically casts a ring into the waves, thus renewing the ancient "pact" between the city and the sea. At this point, according to tradition, some swimmers dive into the water to try to retrieve the ring, which remains the prized trophy of the lucky finder.

In Venice, the tradition of the Espousal of the Sea is considered the oldest and most prestigious among those that have survived to the present day. According to legend, the origin of the rite dates back to the year 1000, when **Doge Pietro II Orseolo** set sail with the Venetian fleet and liberated Dalmatia from Slavic pirates.

However, many scholars believe that the ceremony has even more ancient roots, likely connected to pagan rituals for blessing the waters and securing the sea's favor.

Over the centuries, the celebration took on a solemn and codified form, becoming one of the central events in the calendar of the Serenissima as the **Festa della Sensa**. On this occasion, the doge and his entourage would board the **Bucintoro**, the sumptuous and imposing ceremonial ship of the Republic of Venice, magnificently adorned with golden decorations, drapes, and banners.

Accompanied by a procession of boats, and amidst songs, music, and festivities, the Bucintoro would reach the meeting point with the boat of the Patriarch of Venice, who would bless the waters. At the end of the ceremony, the doge would throw a gold ring into the sea, thus sealing the symbolic marriage between Venice and the Adriatic, a gesture reaffirming the Serenissima's sovereignty over the sea.

Even today, despite the fall of the Republic in 1797, the ceremony takes place with strong public and touristic participation. In place of the Bucintoro, the **Bissona Serenissima** is used, an elegant eight-oared ceremonial boat decorated in traditional Venetian style.

The mayor of Venice, who symbolically assumes the role of the doge, boards the Bissona and repeats the gesture of throwing the ring, followed by a picturesque water parade of historic boats, gondolas, and traditional vessels that transform the lagoon into a colorful and festive floating stage.



INSIGHT: THE MARITIME REPUBLICS

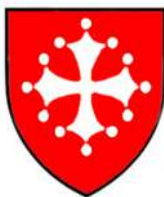
Everyone knows the Four Maritime Republics. In reality, it was only four that were chosen for the emblem of the Italian Navy in 1941.

The concept of a “Maritime Republic” is a 19th-century invention.

Neither Pisa, nor Venice, nor any of the others ever referred to themselves in that way. However, it is a useful way to describe a particular type of republic that had the following characteristics:

- Independence
- Autonomy, with an economy, politics, and culture essentially based on seafaring and maritime trade
- Possession of a fleet of ships
- Origin as a city-state, which sometimes later expanded further
- The presence of their own **fondachi** (merchant quarters or warehouses) and consuls in Mediterranean ports
- The presence of **foreign fondachi and consuls** in their own ports
- Use of their own currency, accepted throughout the Mediterranean, and of their own maritime laws
- A republican form of government
- Participation in the Crusades and/or in the suppression of piracy

The Italian cities that met all these criteria were actually eight in number:



PISA



VENICE



GENOA



AMALFI



ANCONA



GAETA



NOLI



RAGUSA
(DUBROVNIK)

OUR ESPOUSAL WITH THE SEA

Since 2008, we of the **Compagnia dello Stile Pisano**, together with **Compagnia di Calci** and **Associazione degli Amici di Pisa**, have chosen to revive, albeit in a symbolic form, stripped of its ancient religious and political meanings, this fascinating and almost forgotten Pisan tradition.



Our reinterpretation of the Espousal of the Sea takes place every year and unfolds as a captivating commemorative journey: a boat departs from the heart of the city, navigating the waters of the Arno and passing through the symbolic landmarks of historic Pisa, before reaching the open sea.

Once offshore, the most awaited moment takes place: the verses of Puccino d'Antonio's Lament of Pisa, an ancient song of sorrow and pride for the defeated yet never forgotten Republic, are read aloud. Immediately afterward, a young girl, symbolically representing the city of Pisa, throws a ring into the sea, thus renewing the symbolic act of espousal between Pisa and the sea, an emblem of the unbreakable bond that has always united the city to its maritime identity.

The ceremony ends in a convivial atmosphere, with refreshments and a collective toast in celebration of the event, in a spirit of friendship, remembrance, and appreciation for the cultural roots of our city.



The rediscovery and appreciation of the Espousal of the Sea represent a tangible and meaningful example of how historical memory and local traditions can be preserved and revived, even centuries later, with a spirit of respect and civic passion.



Although the original ceremony was lost due to political upheavals and the passing of time, its spirit lives on today thanks to the commitment and determination of those who, like the **Compagnia dello Stile Pisano**, have chosen to return to

the city of Pisa a precious fragment of its glorious maritime and republican identity.

Since the very first edition in 2007, this journey of rediscovery has not been undertaken alone. Essential to its success has been the invaluable contribution of the **Compagnia di Calci** and the **Associazione degli Amici di Pisa**, associations that share the same love for the history, traditions, and cultural heritage of Pisa. Their collaboration has helped strengthen and spread awareness of this ancient ceremony, forging a strong connection between past and present, between historical reconstruction and popular participation.

Today, although stripped of its original religious and political components, the ceremony aims not only to serve as a historical reenactment but also as a moment of gathering, unity, and rediscovery of a shared identity. It is an opportunity to introduce new generations to the role Pisa played over the centuries as a maritime and republican power, an undisputed protagonist of the Mediterranean.

With this symbolic act, renewing the bond between the city and its sea, Pisa reclaims a tradition that belongs to her, and that, thanks to the united efforts of associations and citizens, continues to live on and inspire civic and cultural pride in the Pisan community.



Suggested readings:

- E. Tolaini, *Lo Sposalizio del Mare e altri saggi su San Piero a Grado*, ETS, 2004

*Text, graphics, and
layout by
Giovanni Valdiserra*

*Drawing on first page
by Martine Friselli*

COMPAGNIA DELLO STILEPISANO

Via Pietro Gori, 17—56125 Pisa

Web: www.compagniadellostilepisano.it

Facebook: www.facebook.com/stilepisano

Instagram: www.instagram.com/stilepisano

E-mail: info@compagniadellostilepisano.it

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