



SAN PIETRO IN VINCULIS (SAN PIERINO)



SAN PIETRO IN VINCULIS

The church that locals affectionately call “**San Pierino**” has a very ancient history. The first mention dates back to 763, when it was known as **San Pietro ai Sette Pini** (*to the seven pine trees*) – a name that suggests it was located well outside the city walls at the time. In 1072, Bishop Guido of Pavia envisioned establishing a community of regular canons following the Augustinian rule here, a project that was only realized nine years later. The new church was then consecrated in 1118.

In 1463, after the original community had ceased to exist and following a period of administration “in commendam” (i.e., entrusted to external individuals), the church was handed over to the **Olivetans monks** from the monastery of Agnano. When they moved to San Michele degli Scalzi in 1774, San Pierino was entrusted to a secular priest and became a priory.

The church’s original structure was smaller than it is today. It was expanded in the 12th century during the renewal linked to the Augustinian community. The building is divided into two levels: the lower part is a crypt, belonging to the earlier phase, while the upper level houses the actual church. In the past, the side doors led to the two main aisles, while the central one led down to the crypt. The current central staircase, however, most likely dates to the 15th century.

A particularly interesting feature is the **Cosmatesque**-style mosaic floor, which dates back to the 12th century. This type of decoration, more commonly found in the Lazio region, is quite rare in Tuscany: in Pisa, significant examples exist only in the Cathedral and, indeed, in San Pierino.





Unfortunately, over the centuries many of the frescoes that once decorated the walls have been lost, and during more recent restorations, the Baroque furnishings were also removed in an effort to restore the interior's original Romanesque appearance.

Beneath the altar lies an ancient Roman sarcophagus from the 2nd century, decorated with the figure of a man in a toga flanked by two Genii. A second sarcophagus, featuring representations of the Four Seasons, can be seen along the right aisle. On the wall of the choir, there is a painted Crucifix from the 13th century, attributed to Michele di Baldovino, while among the few surviving paintings, a fragment depicting Saint Peter and the angel—dating back to the late 11th century—stands out.

THE CRYPT

Although it is often referred to as a “crypt,” the ground floor of San Pietro in Vinculis was not originally conceived as an underground space for worship. In fact, the church belonged to the category of the many **loggia churches** that once dotted medieval Pisa.

These buildings, structured on two levels, featured an open loggia on the ground floor—usually on at least one side—that served a public function. Here, **notarial acts were drawn up**, contracts signed, documents stored, and legal and administrative activities carried out. In an era when there were no separate buildings for public offices, archives, or courts, loggia churches served as multifunctional points of reference for the community.

In the case of San Pierino, a historical document from Pisa attests that, prior to 1186, a private deed was drawn up "in the hall of the church of San Pietro in Vinculis," in the presence of a jurist named Salem.

This demonstrates that the lower level of the church was recognized not only as a sacred space but also as an official venue for civil and legal matters.

The upper floor of the church—originally accessible most likely via an external wooden staircase, as was typical in *loggia churches*—housed the liturgical hall, intended for religious functions. The clear separation between the two levels reflected the social and architectural organization of medieval Pisa: within a single structure, sacred and civic spaces coexisted, designed for different yet complementary purposes.

Over the centuries, the loggia on the ground floor was enclosed on the southern side, the one facing the Arno River. Shops were built against that side, altering the relationship between the building and the street. The once open and public space gradually became lower than the new street level, eventually turning into a subterranean area used for burials.

In Pisa, where the sandy soil and high water table made underground constructions difficult, very few churches possess such spaces. San Pierino is an exceptional case: it is the only one that has preserved its lower level intact, now fully restored and open to the public. It is therefore a rare architectural example in which the building's historical evolution can still be read in tangible form. This part of the structure still bears traces of frescoes, including depictions of saints attributed to the painter **Francesco Neri of Volterra**, dating to around 1367.

At the far end of the underground area, on the left-hand side, one can also observe the foundations of the earlier Paleo-Christian church, which predate the major 12th-century transformations. A precious detail, revealing the deep historical layers of a place that has evolved over the centuries—transforming, yet never losing its identity.



INSIGHT: LOGGIA CHURCHES

The term *loggia church* refers to a specific architectural typology that was very common in medieval Pisa. These were religious buildings constructed on two levels:

- **The lower level**, open to the outside through a loggia (that is, a portico with columns or arches) on at least one side, was not intended for worship. It was used for civic and commercial activities: notarial deeds were drafted here, council assemblies were held, and market stalls were set up.
- **The upper level**, originally accessible by a staircase (often made of wood), housed the worship hall, with the altar and space for the faithful.

This architectural type responded to the needs of a lively and dynamic city such as Pisa, where public spaces often served multiple functions, balancing the sacred and the everyday. Its inspiration derived from Carolingian architecture, particularly the *Torhalle* and the *Westwerk*, concepts that may have reached Pisa through the influence of Benedictine monks.

Over time, many of these loggias were walled in or transformed: some were closed off to make space for commercial activities, while others ended up beneath the new street level and became crypts or burial areas.

At least 14 such churches were once documented in Pisa. In addition to San Pietro in Vinculis, they included: **San Felice e Regolo**, **San Luca**, **San Michele in Borgo**, **Santa Maria Maddalena**, **San Iacopino**, **San Pietro in Padule** (Sant'Omobono), **San Biagio alle Catene**, **San Martino alla Pietra del Pesce**.



THE TOWER



At a closer look, the church's bell tower reveals its true origins: it was not originally built as an ecclesiastical element, but rather as a civic tower, constructed at the end of the 11th century. It was later adapted for use as a bell tower, but without undergoing significant alterations—allowing the structure to retain much of its original appearance, typical of the vertical architecture of medieval *tower houses*.

Inside, the staircase connecting the levels is modern, but in the past, tower houses were equipped with external wooden staircases attached to the masonry. In the event of danger—such as an enemy attack—these staircases could be removed or burned, cutting off access to the upper floors and turning the tower into a defensive refuge.

Interestingly, the tower's ground floor is not directly connected to the church. Originally, the two were separated by a narrow alleyway running between the sacred building and what was then a civic tower. Only later was an elevated passage built to link the tower to the church, providing direct access from the first floor. Over time—and perhaps also for security reasons, since dark alleyways were often the scene of unpleasant incidents in medieval urban life—this small passage between the two structures was incorporated into the masonry, becoming an integral part of the architectural complex.

Despite the structural unification, the ground floor of the tower was never absorbed into the sacred building: even today, it houses public spaces and commercial activities that open onto Via Palestro.



THE PISAN PANDECTS

In Pisa, a copy of the Pandects was already documented in the 12th century. It was kept in the church of San Pietro in Vinculis, which is precisely where the name **Pandette Pisane** (Pisan Pandects), also known as **Littera Pisana** or **Codex Pisanus**, originates.

This manuscript is now considered one of the most valuable witnesses of classical Roman law, as it is an almost complete copy of the main section of the *Digest*. It dates back to the 6th century, making it contemporary with—or shortly after—the original compilation commissioned by Emperor Justinian. It has preserved the text with extraordinary fidelity, becoming a key reference for legal studies throughout Europe.

The Pisan Pandects were not merely an object of legal reverence, but also a practical and educational tool: they were used by jurists and students of the ancient Pisan School of Law, which was one of the most active in the Middle Ages—long before the more famous Bolognese school came into being.

In 1406, Pisa was occupied by Florence. As was often the case in medieval warfare, the victors seized the cultural treasures of the defeated city.

Among them were the priceless Pandects, which were taken to Florence as spoils of war. Since then, they have been preserved in the **Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana**, where they are known as the *Littera Florentina*.



Emperor Justinian Dictating the Pandects
Giovanni Domenico Ferretti, 1730, Palazzo Quaratesi, Pisa

Today, this manuscript is considered a monument of Western legal culture. It is studied by legal historians, philologists, and jurists for its extraordinary historical and textual value: the Pisan Pandects represent one of the oldest and most complete copies of Justinian's *Digest*, written in the 6th century and preserved almost intact.

A fundamental role in the dissemination and understanding of Justinian's text was played by **Burgundio of Pisa**, one of the most distinguished Pisan intellectuals of the 12th century. Between 1135 and 1140, he stayed in Constantinople, where he gained access to key Greek texts and translated parts of the Pandects from Greek into Latin, making them accessible to the Latin-Western world. His translations were crucial in transmitting the core concepts of Roman law, which would form the foundation of the *ius commune* for centuries. Burgundio was also a judge, ambassador, and man of culture: his figure well represents the spirit of medieval Pisa, a crossroads of trade, scholarship, and diplomacy. His tomb, made from a reused Roman sarcophagus, can still be seen today in the church of San Paolo a Ripa d'Arno.

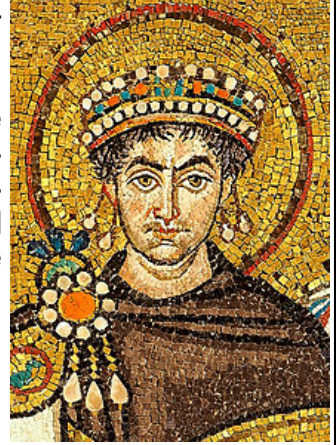
The Pisan Pandects are not merely a precious ancient manuscript: they mark a true turning point in the history of European law. Their presence in Pisa fostered the birth of a legal school active as early as the 12th century, anticipating the great revival of Roman law studies that would later flourish in Bologna. Thanks to these developments, Roman law entered a new era of study and application, one that would deeply influence medieval, modern, and even contemporary legal systems.

Although the manuscript was taken from the city, it remains one of the highest expressions of the bond between Pisa and Roman legal culture, and continues to evoke a time when the city was both guardian and protagonist of European legal knowledge.



INSIGHT: THE CORPUS IURIS CIVILIS

The *Corpus Iuris Civilis* is one of the greatest legislative undertakings in history. It was commissioned by Emperor **Justinian I** between 529 and 534 to bring order and coherence to the vast body of Roman legal texts, which had become disorganized and difficult to consult over time. The goal was ambitious: to create a unified and consistent legal code valid throughout the Byzantine Empire.



The work is composed of four fundamental sections:

- **Codex:** the official collection of imperial laws, including those issued by Justinian himself
- **Institutiones:** a legal manual intended for the training of students and future jurists
- **Novellae:** new laws promulgated after the publication of the *Codex*
- **Digesta** (or *Pandects*): the largest and most prestigious section, considered the heart of the entire compilation

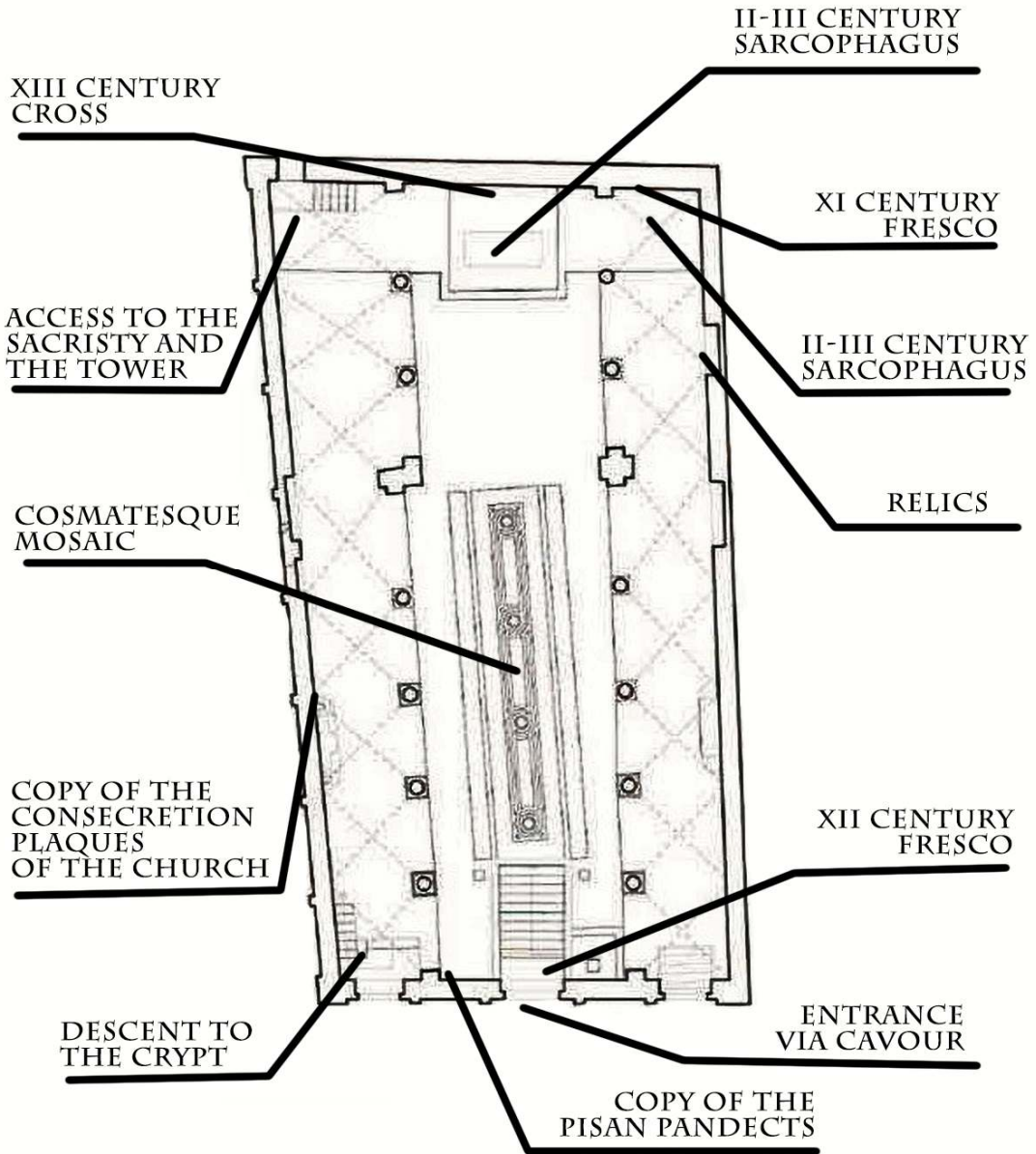
The *Digesta* consist of 50 books arranged by subject, compiling thousands of excerpts from over 2,000 works by great jurists of the classical era, such as **Ulpian**, **Paul**, **Gaius**, and **Papinian**. This monumental synthesis of Roman legal thought was intended to be authoritative, clear, and definitive: for this reason, any alteration of the text was strictly forbidden.

The term **Pandects** comes from the Greek *pandektai* (πανδέκται), meaning “all-encompassing,” while **Digesta** derives from the Latin *digestus*, meaning “organized and classified.”

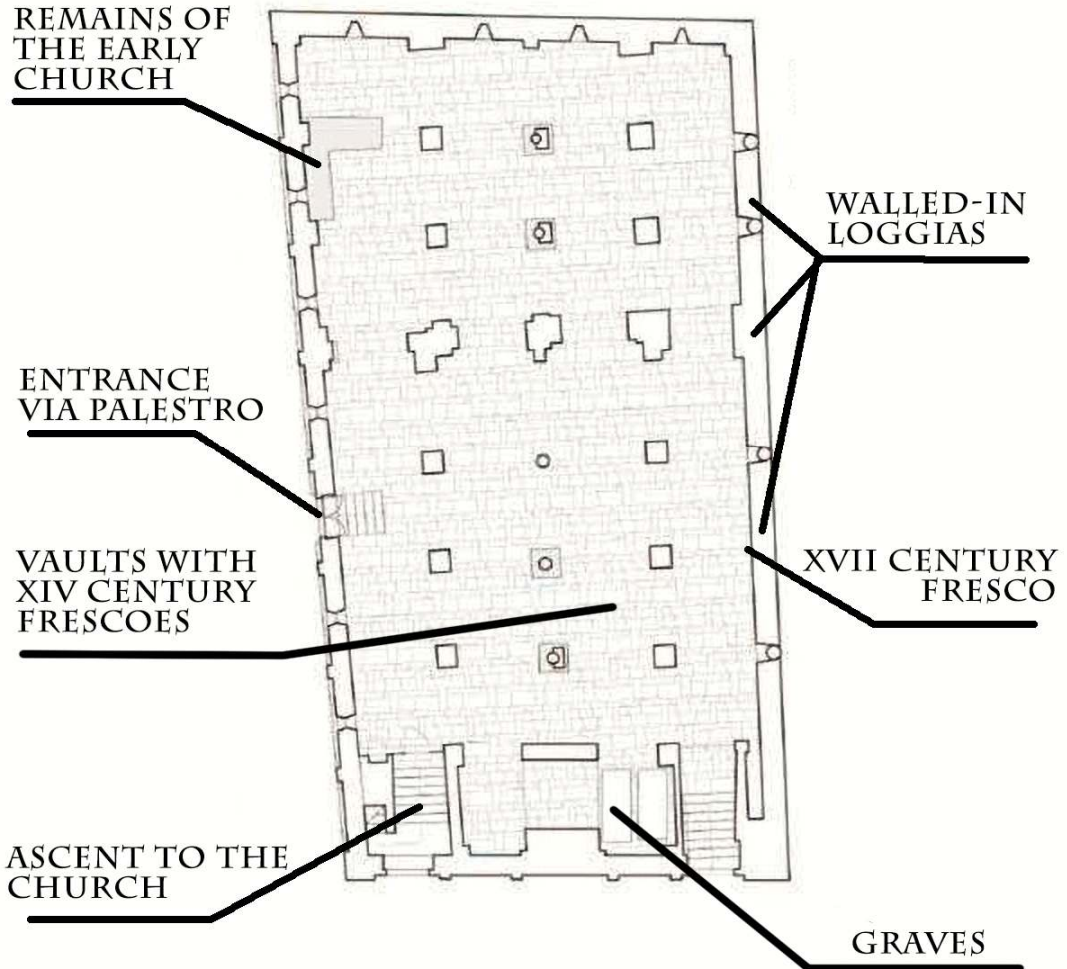
Rediscovered in the West during the Middle Ages, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* became the foundation of the **ius commune**, profoundly influencing the development of modern European law.



FLOOR PLAN (CHURCH)



UNDERGROUND PLAN (CRYPT)





COMPAGNIA DELLO STILE PISANO

Via Pietro Gori, 17—56121 Pisa

Web: www.compagniadellostilepisano.it

Facebook: www.facebook.com/stilepisano

Instagram: www.instagram.com/stilepisano

E-mail: info@compagniadellostilepisano.it

CF e Partita IVA: 01945000501

*Text by
Giovanni Valdiserra*

Rev. 10/06/2026