

# LA LANTERNA LIGHTHOUSE OF GENOA, LIGURIA, ITALY

By Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti



Genoa is an important city—whose nickname is “La Superba” (“The Proud”)—located on the hills overlooking the Ligurian Sea.

With a population of more than 700,000 inhabitants, it has a busy harbor full of container ships, ferries, and cruise ships. On its east side is the eastern Riviera and on its west side the western Riviera, both very modern and loved by the tourists for their mild climate and their beaches. But this is today's history.

In the Middle Ages, navigation had improved both during the day and night, and Genoa was already an important commercial center. Since 950 A.D., the city was an independent municipality, and with Amalfi, Venice, and Pisa, one of the four strongest maritime republics, all fighting among themselves for domination of the Mediterranean Sea. In the end, Genoa was the winner. Until 1816, when it was annexed to Sardinia, it remained an independent republic.

In Genoa there were two important factions: the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, the latter being the strongest. From 1096 the town was ruled alternatively by a podestà, or mayor, chosen from the two strongest Ghibelline families, the Dorias and the Spinolas, making it a communal republic. Actually, it was an oligarchy ruled by a small group of merchant families, from whom were selected, in later times, the Doges (or Dukes) who held their office for life.

The Genoese were merchants and bankers by nature, and the traffic in the harbor became increasingly busy, bringing riches for those involved. Vessels from all over the known world arrived with their loads of silk, precious stones, spices, and every other kind of merchandise, but also provisions and passengers.

But there was a problem: the entrance of the harbor was dark.

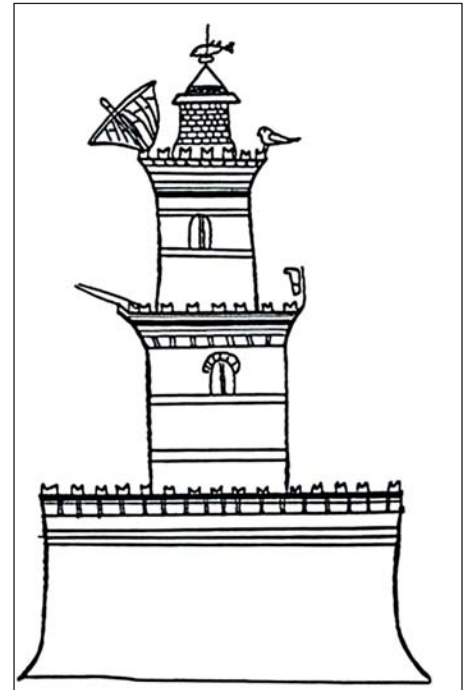
Bonfires were already lighted on the hills surrounding Genoa to guide the ships, but that was not enough. A light became necessary in the harbor to safely guide the incoming ships.

The origins of the lighthouse of Genoa are uncertain and half legendary, but some sources say the first tower was built around 1129 on a rock called Capo di Faro (Lighthouse Cape) on the west side of the town, at the base of the San Benigno hill, a name derived from a monastery then existing on the top. By a decree called *delle prestazioni* (about services), responsibility for the light was entrusted to the surrounding inhabitants *Habent facere guardiam ad turrem capiti fari* which, in Latin, simply means “to keep the light on.”

Nobody knows the shape of this first tower, since it disappeared a long time ago, but it is known that the light was provided by a fire on the top of the beacon, which was constantly fueled with wood, to which was added dry stems of *brugo* (heather) and *brisca* (broom) to make the fire last longer. This kind of fuel was easy to find on the hills surrounding Genoa, but it must have been a very hard job to carry it down to city. It is supposed that this task could have been accomplished by slaves or war prisoners. Another mystery is how men in this period reached the top of the tower, possibly through an internal wood ladder as indicated in later chronicles.

From the logs of the local maritime authorities of the 12th century, nothing was spared for the care and the maintenance of the tower. Ancient documents of 1161 report that every ship entering the harbor of Genoa had to pay a duty as a contribution to the expenses of keeping the fire lit.

This tower has a very long story, often interlaced with the story of Genoa. In



This sketch of the lighthouse of Genoa dates to the year 1371. Author's collection.

1316 the tower was officially classified as a lighthouse. In 1318 a major fight arose between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The Guelphs sheltered themselves in the lighthouse. Anchored in the harbor was a galley that sent them supplies by a cableway from the main mast of the ship. They could have resisted their enemies for a long time. The Ghibellines besieged the lighthouse and bombed it with heavy stones. In the end, the Ghibellines, seeing that the siege was useless, started to dig out the foundations of the tower, trying to make it collapse. The Guelphs surrendered and were all killed. The tower was not repaired until 1321.

A Genoese historian, Giustiniani, wrote in his history of Genoa that in 1326 the first



The harbor of Genoa in 1493 from an ancient print. Author's collection.

lantern, surrounded by glass to protect the fire, was installed on the top of the lighthouse, which at that time was fueled with olive oil. The glass, first used in the Middle Ages, was manufactured by a firm in the inland and was not yet as clear and thin as the glass we know today. The glass was thick and full of pores and became easily blackened from soot. It was hard to keep clean, so the keepers (called *turrexani* in the Genoese dialect) were supplied with rags and sponges. They also used egg whites for cleaning. The keepers were also compelled to live inside the structure with their families.

From 1340 its management was entrusted to a harbor corporation, the *Salvatori Del Porto* (Harbor Saviors), which had started to handle the harbor business in 1290.

In 1371 an unknown artist depicted an image of the lighthouse on the cover of a log used to register all the expenses connected with the lighthouse: the keeping of the fire and the appointment and the wages of the keepers. From this simple handmade sketch, we can see what the tower was like at the end of the 1300s. The lighthouse had three parts superimposed one above the other, crenellated in the Ghibelline shape, stones cut like a swallow tail. The base was much larger than the other two parts, which were narrower with only one window on each of the higher parts.

This corporation also decided to have the Genoa coat of arms painted on the north,

lower side of the lighthouse. The work, a red cross on a white field, was done by Evangelista, an artist from Milan. The original coat of arms is gone, perhaps due to weather conditions or poor care. The one that can be seen today was painted in the same place by the architect Pettondi in 1785 and refreshed in 1991 during major restoration work on the tower.

In the 1400s, the lighthouse was also used as a prison for very important people. For many years (some sources say five,

some ten), there were imprisoned the hostages of the king of Cyprus: James of Lusignan and his wife, Heloise, who in a small, wet room, gave birth to their son Janus. How could this boy have grown up in such a dark and damp place, between sea and sky, cradled by the sound of waves and terrified by the rage of the storms against the tower? Even today, climbing the stairs of the lighthouse there can be seen here and there a few steps that go nowhere, against a wall or beside a closed gate, stairs going in different directions. What happened in the past in these places? I don't think anybody can answer.

Anyway, between story and legend, the lighthouse goes on through the centuries. It is known that in 1405, for a short period, the keepers of the light were priests, who put on top of the lantern a fish and a cross, symbols of their faith.

In 1413 the *Consoli del Mare* (Sea Consuls), another harbor corporation, approved the sum of 36 Genoese liras, a currency of the time, for the management of the lighthouse, establishing also a penalty for the men who did not carry their task with care.

As many corporations managed the harbor and the lighthouse over time, its history is very well recorded in their logs. But sometimes, as these logs were kept by men, it could happen that a man confused history with legend, and this is why some facts are still sometimes legendary, sometimes historic.

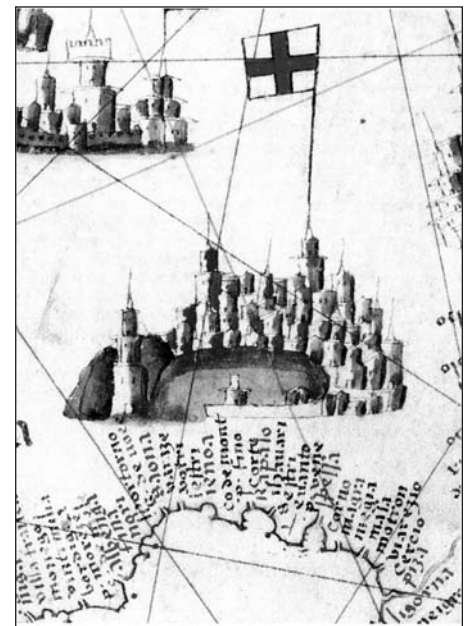
In 1449 one of the keepers of the lighthouse was Antonio Colombo, uncle of the much more famous voyager Christopher Columbus. He worked there for two months only, earning for his work 21 Genoese liras.

The history of this lighthouse is tied to that of Genoa and its wars. We have to go as far as the 1500s before the lighthouse reaches its definitive shape, and this happened following tragic events.

On August 26, 1502, the king of France, Louis the XII, arrived at Genoa with his troops at the invitation of the most aristocratic families, who wanted to join their forces with this powerful king. At the beginning he was received with great celebrations, but the populace did not approve of this union and soon rose against the king, whom they considered a tyrant. King Louis at this point changed his position and held the town, forcing the inhabitants to build at the foot of the lighthouse a fortress, which was named *Briglia* (Bridle) by the Genoese that had been forced to work on it.

In 1512 both the aristocrats and the populace had had enough of the French. They tried to drive them out of Genoa but did not succeed. Another decision was made: a fleet was armed and its command entrusted to Admiral Andrea Doria, a man who in his life performed many glorious enterprises.

The ships started to bombard the French who had taken shelter in the stronghold at



A nautical map showing Genoa in the Middle Ages. Author's collection.



The lighthouse of Genoa as it was in 1543 from an ancient print. Author's collection.

the base of the lighthouse. Unfortunately, one of the cannonballs fired by a Genoese galley hit the tower in the middle, and the upper part collapsed. The French were defeated and left Genoa, but the town had lost its lighthouse.

It was only after 30 years that the Doge Andrea Centurione ordered the building of a new lighthouse over the remains of the old one. He committed this important job to an architect, loaning the necessary money from the Bank of St. George, a bank that still exists today. It is not known if other fires were lighted at the entrance of the harbor during this time.

From the historians of the time, we know how much material was used in the construction of the new lighthouse: 120,000 bricks, 2,600 hand-chiseled stones, and another 160 square meters of stones from the cave of Carignano, a small hill surrounding Genoa. The previous Ghibelline battlement was replaced with a plain stone wall and inside was built a stone stair to replace the wood ladder used before that could have been removed in case of an assault on the tower.

There is another historical mystery about the name of the architect who built the tower. Some sources name Francesco da Gundria, others, more reliable, say that he was Gian Maria Oligati. Anyway, in 1543 the lighthouse was completed and was magnificent. It was built in two sections, with the lower section larger than the upper one. Both sections had an open terrace all around them. On the top was placed a large copper lantern with clear Venetian glass, the

best then and now in Italy. A slab of marble was placed at the entrance of the lighthouse to celebrate the event of the building of the tower. This marble slab is still visible today.

Concerning the architect, there is a threatening legend which tells that the Doge Centurione, seeing such a beautiful structure, ordered that the architect be thrown down the higher terrace of the tower so that he could not built anything similar. The problem is: which one of the two architects had this sad destiny? Anyway, someone wrong-minded, knowing the peculiar character of the Genoese, thought that this order was given with the sole purpose of avoiding payment of the bill!

The tower is 77 meters high and 117 meters above sea level. At the time it was built, it was the highest lighthouse in the world and the second most ancient in Italy after that of Leghorn. Even if arts and literature had already entered the Renaissance era, the tower was built in a medieval shape, quite similar to the old one, and it is the same that, crossing the centuries, still stands today.

New keepers entered the lighthouse, holding the ancient name of *turrexani* and with the same duty to keep the lantern clean and properly operating as did their predecessors.

At this point of the story, we have to say that the people of Genoa started to affectionately call their lighthouse *La Lanterna* (The Lantern), which became the symbol of the city itself. Nobody calls it "The lighthouse of Genoa." Today restaurants, bars, cafes, shops, and even companies show the image of the Lantern in their signs or logos.

## Genoa's Other Lighthouse

A painting dating back to the 16th century shows the harbor of Genoa with its semicircular shape. On the west side can be seen the Lantern, and on the east side there is another lighthouse that does not exist anymore and whose story was lost a long time ago. It is only known that its name was the "The Greek's Tower" because all ships coming from Greece used to cast anchor under this light. No more can be said.



The Lighthouse of Genoa—a painting by G. Grossi in the 16th century. Maritime Museum of Pegli.

But let's go back to the past. The tower was located on a high rock. Arriving from the sea it was a safe and beautiful view, but it was badly exposed to the storms. There are records stating how many times the tower was struck by lightning, which caused severe damage to the lighthouse and even severely injured some keepers. This happened in 1596 and in 1602. Not having any other defense, the keepers asked that some marble slabs, on which prayers were carved,



The harbor of Genoa in 1700 from an ancient print. Author's collection.



The harbor of Genoa and the Lantern today. Author's collection.

be placed around the higher terrace. This was done but with no great results. More lighting struck the tower in 1675 and in 1778, but in the meantime, thanks to the invention of Benjamin Franklin and to the interest of a priest, Glicerio Sanxais, who taught physics at the University of Genoa and acted as go-between with the harbor authorities, a lightning rod was installed on top of the lighthouse.

Between 1711 and 1791 some restoration work was done inside and outside the tower: tie-rods and bolts were placed on the inside and outside walls. Climbing the steps to reach the top of the lighthouse, these rods and bolts are still visible today. Also during the centuries a larger lantern was installed and new fuels were employed.

In 1841 a Fresnel lens was installed in the lantern, still fueled with olive oil, to-

gether with a clockwork device for rotating the lens. A heavy lead weight attached to an iron line was let down the inside of the tower to operate the clockworks. When the weight reached the bottom, the keepers had to wind it up again by hand to keep the lens rotating. This job was performed every four of five hours. In this way the light could be seen as far as 15 miles.

In 1898 the olive oil was replaced by acetylene gas and in 1904 by compressed oil. In 1936 the lantern was electrified. The ancient clockwork device was replaced by a new electric ball-bearing rotating system, but the old one is still kept in the lighthouse.



The ancient clockwork of the Lantern. Photo by Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti.

The story of the Lantern is not yet finished. This stately old lady from the height of its 77 meters has been overlooking Genoa and the harbor for seven centuries, its geographic coordinates being 44° 22' 15" N, 8° 54' 20" E. Even though the lighthouse today stands in the middle of a new and bigger harbor than in the past and its base is no longer washed by the waves, it still stands and every night it flashes its beam out to sea for 26 miles. If you climb the 365 steps to reach the top of the lantern, you have a magnificent view of Genoa, the Riviera, and the mountains surrounding the city.

For more than 20 years, Angelo de Caro has served at the Lantern, working alone

until a few years ago when he was joined by Roberto Racialbuto, now his assistant and former keeper of the lighthouse of Portofino, no more in need of a human presence.



Angelo De Caro (back) and Roberto Racialbuto (front) the keepers of the Lantern. Author's collection.

Every day the two men, working in shifts, reach the top with the aid of a small lift installed in the 1950s. Like the ancient *turrexani*, they keep everything nice and clean and take care of all the equipment, even if it is now all automated.

Fortunately, for now there are still keepers in the Lantern, and everybody hopes that they can stay there for a long time.

De Caro is a very well-known person; he is in his 50s and was a keeper of other lighthouses around Italy before being assigned to the Lantern. He is also a hero, rescuing people from a wrecked ship while he was in Sicily. He has been for all his life, as he defines himself, "a romantic hermit," and this can be heard in his way of speaking, slow and rhythmic like the rotation of the Lantern.

Now he leaves to his friend Racialbuto the task of talking to people, when from time to time, they are asked for a TV or magazine interview. De Caro prefers to take care of "his" lighthouse, to do his best to keep it shining, so that people when in the night see its beam flashing every 20 seconds over the sea and the city, can say: "Look, the Lantern!"

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The lighthouse of Genoa today. Photo by Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti.