

LOG

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THE LIGHTHOUSES OF THE NORTH COAST OF TUSCANY

By Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti

The north coast of Tuscany runs from the border of the region of Liguria, whose sea washes its coasts, to the Vada Cape, which is washed by the Tyrrhenian Sea.

The upper coast is mostly sandy, with beautiful beaches and lovely tourist places, like Versilia, a location very well known for the elegance of its restaurants and bars and the smartness of the famous people that often spend their summers there.

Going a little south, reaching Leghorn, the coast changes a little, and you can see rocks and beaches one after the other.

The whole Gulf of Tuscany is sprinkled with seven bigger islands; a number of smaller islands; and simple rocks, called "ants" locally, because there are so many and they are spread all over. All of them are part of the National Park of the Tuscan Archipelago. Elba and Giglio are the largest. Then there are smaller islands, true paradises, like Capraia, whose natural environment has a rich and very rare native vegetation, among which the dwarf palm, dating back to ancient eras when the climate was warmer, lives together with the classic Mediterranean vegetation.

Then there is the island of Montecristo, maybe the same described by the French writer Alexander Dumas in his renowned novel, surrounded by its "ants," small rocks very dangerous for navigation, the biggest of which is called Affrica Rock (like the continent, but with two *f*s as is written in the

ancient maps). There are also smaller islands: Pianosa, Gorgona, Giannutri, Palmaiola, Cerboli, and all around are the "ants" of Grosseto and Burano and reefs called Meloria and Vada. It is really a very dangerous spot where lighthouses are very necessary.

During ancient times various populations settled in Tuscany: the Phoenicians, the Etruscans, and the Romans. Later the

roundings of the Gulf of Tuscany, now we will go discover the lighthouses that can be found along this coast, in the harbors, on the islands, and on the rocks, ancient and modern lighthouses, built in different historical times, and very different in their structure and in their location. They are a great aid to navigation in these perilous waters.

The first town we encounter, the farthest north in Tuscany, is Marina di Carrara, a modern, well-equipped seaside resort. It lies on flat land and has a large beach of white, soft sand, standing between the blue of the sea and the dark green of the pines washed by the Ligurian Sea. It is usually thought that this part of the sea is the Tyrrhenian, but from a geographic point of view, the Ligurian Sea reaches the south coasts of Leghorn.

This shoreline was formed by the progressive advancement of the sandy coast line during the centuries. Behind the town there are high mountains whose tops always look white with snow. They are the Alpi Apuane, and the white color is that of the renowned Carrara marble caves. The marble is mined here and gives its name to the town. In Renaissance times Michelangelo himself used to come here to choose personally the blocks of marble he needed for his wonderful sculptures.

The highest mountain of this chain is Monte Pisanino, 1,946 meters high.

In more ancient times, the Romans used to dig the marble and send it to Rome in heavy



The coast of Tuscany from an ancient map. Author's collection.

area was ruled by several lordships, the last of which was the Grand Duchy of Lorraine in the 1700s until Italy was unified in 1861.

After having described the particular sur-



Marina di Carrara, satellite view. Author's collection.

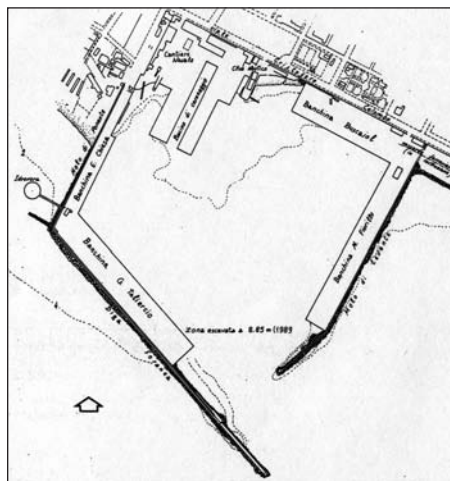
ships, for which they built a town called Luni, whose harbor turned out not to be suitable for these shipments. The town was deserted and the Romans moved to another destination.

The origins of Marina di Carrara date back to the 18th century when a new harbor and buildings were built for shipping marble to Italy and abroad. This was a very difficult spot for a harbor because the sand was always moving due to strong winds and currents. Only after WWI was the harbor completed. During WWII the harbor of Marina di Carrara was severely dam-



Lighthouse of Marina di Carrara today. Photo by Antonello Marchese.

keepers and their families, with a white square tower on one side, 22 meters high, topped by a small, round terrace surrounded by a banister on which is located the lantern. It has a fixed lens with a white light that flashes every three seconds with a range of 17 miles. Along the tower a long window provides light to the inside stairs. Its geographical position is latitude 44°02' N and longitude 10°02' E. This is one of the few Italian lighthouses that still has a keeper living inside.



The harbor of Marina di Carrara from an ancient drawing. Author's collection.

Of course, these modern lighthouses do not have the mystique and the history of the ancient lighthouses, but they are still a sign in the night, a guiding light for the ships that have to reach a landing, avoid shoals, and find the right way to enter a harbor with a particular configuration as that of Marina di Carrara.

aged by bombing, but at the end of the war it was quickly rebuilt. Now ships loaded with the precious marble can depart for ports throughout the world.

What seems strange in this history, with such long efforts to build a harbor, is that nobody thought to build a lighthouse on the wharf to show the entrance.

It was not until 1956 that a tower was built on one side of the west pier. The lighthouse is a two-story building for the

Next we reach Viareggio with its long, white, sandy beach, central city of the famous Versilia area, and renowned for its carnival that takes place every year along its crowded streets. Viareggio is also well known for its social life with the elegance of its hotels and nightclubs that gather the most elegant, rich, and well-known people, mostly during the summer. But this is Viareggio today; in the past things were different.

Viareggio takes its name from the *via regia* (regal way), a road built in the Middle Ages over a base of stones that, beginning by the sea and crossing a moorland, was used to take inland the necessary material for the construction of the Montramito Castle, at the mouth of the Burlamacca channel, with the purpose of protecting the town, then ruled by the dukes of Lucca, a nearby Tuscan town. This family ruled only this northern part of



Old lighthouse of Viareggio. Author's collection.

Tuscany; other parts were ruled from Florence by the powerful de' Medici family.

During the years 1169 to 1172, Viareggio went through bloody struggles between Lucca and Pisa. The latter wanted to acquire the property and the supervision of the Burlamacca channel as Viareggio was not directly on the sea then and the channel was the only way to reach it.

Around 1400 the lords of Lucca started to use the channel as a harbor with the construction of many buildings along its banks for merchandise. Trade goods to and from Lucca were carried through a river passing across the Massacciucoli Lake and the Burlamacca channel and then overland to Lucca. This boosted the population of the area, a difficult task due to the presence of unhealthy marshes in the inland.

By the early 1500s, the coast had advanced to a point that the castle built at the mouth of the Burlamacca channel was now too far away from the water and no longer suitable

for its purpose. In 1534 a new, heavy, square tower was built on the channel using part of the stones taken from the demolition of the ancient fortification. To finance the work, it was resolved to impose a six-year tax on every good arriving at Viareggio.

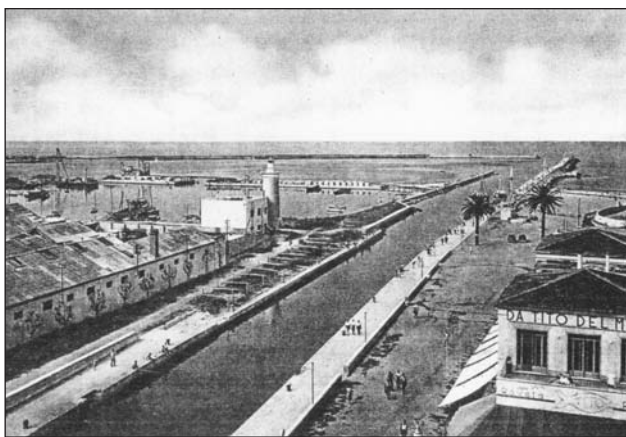
In 1541 from the top of the tower, not yet completed, a volley of guns welcomed the emperor of the sacred Roman Empire, Charles V, who landed in Viareggio to continue his trip by land to Lucca, where he was expected to meet a messenger of Pope Paul III.

At last, in 1542, the building was completed and around it were established the first settlements of Viareggio that, after two years, were fortified by a wall for their security.

In the meantime there was a great increase in the maritime traffic, but it was not the same for the population. Behind the town, where the farming should have been located, there still was a large marsh area where malaria raged, being the greatest cause of mortality among the population. In spite of this, in 1701 the Council of the Republic of Lucca named Viareggio a "community." This gave the settlers the right to form a board of citizens and make their own decisions concerning the town. Their first act was to ask Lucca to settle the matter of the marsh so that they might cultivate the land.

With the help of a Venetian engineer, Bernardo Zandrini, the back country was finally drained and all of the marsh vegetation was destroyed. In 1741 the drainage work was completed but, as a consequence of cutting the vegetation, the inland cultivations were damaged by the sea wind and another decision had to be made. Immediately behind the beach a big line of pine trees was planted to provide protection from the winds. Today, those pine trees, grown during the centuries, have formed a great natural forest including Viareggio and other locations, becoming a wonder of nature.

The town of Viareggio expanded and new activities were born: shipbuilding and fishing. The local people were not used to fishing in the open sea, being far away; they used to fish in the nearby Massacciuccoli Lake and in the local channels. To solve this problem, the rulers of Lucca hired some fishermen from



Lighthouse of Viareggio in the 1950s (above) and today (below). Top photo from the author's collection; bottom photo by Antonello Marchese.



Liguria to instruct the men of Viareggio in sea fishing using nets and bigger and heavier boats to increase their business.

Also, sailing became very important at the beginning of the 19th century, and on October 2, 1819, the Duchess of Lucca, Maria Luisa of the Borbone family, ordered the construction of a dock on the left side of the Burlamacca channel. This marina was very important for the first ship builder and provided an easy landing for sailing ships.

In 1820 the Duchess raised Viareggio to the rank of "town." There are no records of a lighthouse having been built at that time, but it is quite possible that some light was lit up during the night to guide the ships to safe landing.

Notwithstanding all these efforts, the piers of the docks proved to be unsuitable and too short, even if they were extended in different times. But there was another important problem, that of the continuous build-up of the sand at the entrance of the port-channel.

In 1737 the Dukedom of Lucca was replaced by the Dukedom of Lorena, whose

capital was Florence, having replaced the de' Medici family which became extinct being without heirs. These rulers were not interested in the harbor of Viareggio, having at their disposal the bigger harbor of Leghorn, which was more suitable for them. So Viareggio declined.

In 1861 Italy was finally unified and Tuscany became part of the Kingdom of Italy, ruled by King Emanuele II of Savoia. In 1863 the situation of the harbor-channel of Viareggio became of primary relevance again. There was still the problem of the sand shoals always moving; a sea storm was enough to close the entrance of the channel and of the harbor.

During the years many engineers were called to solve this problem, without coming to a satisfactory solution. The piers were lengthened several times; an outer breakwater was built; and finally, in the first years of the 1900s, the work was completed. But still there was the problem of the sand shoals.

In 1863 red and green lights were located at the ends of the two outer wharfs to show the harbor entrance, while a lighthouse was built at the north side of the Burlamacca channel, consisting of a one-story building having at one side an octagonal tower painted in red. The beacon flashed a white beam of light with a range of 10 miles. After a number of years, as a result of various events, this lighthouse was first discontinued and then later destroyed during WWII.

Also, the shipbuilding industry developed, and toward the end of the 1800s, a new and bigger shipyard was built. From this yard, which became famous, came the finest sailing ships of the time, which sailed all around the world.

In 1937, as the Viareggio harbor was expanding, a new lighthouse was built on the left side of the Burlamacca channel, a round tower, with a two-story building for the keepers, to replace the old light that was no longer working.

In spite of all the work done, the port of Viareggio was suitable only for vessels having a limited draft and a restricted tonnage, this until WWII. Toward the end of the war, the harbor was badly bombed by the Allied forces and nearly destroyed. Also, the flee-

ing Germans mined the port to make it unsuitable for the American army which was coming north. The two lighthouses were both completely destroyed, the piers and buildings were all damaged, and the sand again flooded the port. The harbor-channel of Viareggio did not exist anymore.

At the end of the war, the people of Viareggio worked hard to have their harbor fully working and make the lighthouse shine again. Between 1946 and 1950, the port was fully operating and fishing became one of the main activities not only for Viareggio but also for the whole of Tuscany.

The lighthouse of 1937 was rebuilt in 1947 and its beacon was again flashing over the piers and the sea.

Also, the shipyards expanded, starting to build renowned yachts, for which Viareggio now is well known all over. It was now necessary to build a new lighthouse, in a different location, more suitable for the new harbor. On the south side of the port in 1993 a new tower was erected, 30 meters high, placed on a one-story building that was the entrance to the tower itself. The first company hired to construct the lighthouse did not comply with the rules, and a second company had to complete the work. Inside, there is not a spiral staircase, as there should be in a round tower, but a ramped staircase.

This cannot be called an attractive lighthouse, being a straight white column having on top a little gallery on which stands the lantern. No decoration of any kind makes this lighthouse a decorative monument, something to be remembered. Anyway, it performs its job very well.

Its lantern has a rotating optic with a range of 24 miles. It is located at latitude 43°51' N and longitude 10°14' E.

Before arriving at the Meloria rocks, located in the middle of the sea, it is interesting to say a few words about Porto Pisano. This is now a ghost harbor; everybody knows that it existed, but nobody knows where it was located. It was a natural access to the sea for Pisa, at the mouth of the Arno river. In the Middle Ages, Pisa was one of the four Maritime Republics, together with Amalfi, in the south of Italy, and Genoa and Venice in the north. Porto Pisano was a well-protected harbor, with many towers—one of which was a lighthouse—for its defense and blocked by a big chain to prevent enemy vessels from entering.

All of these republics enjoyed great commercial and political prosperity, having not fought among themselves for predominance

in the Mediterranean Sea. In their harbors there arrived from distant lands not only precious cargoes like silk, woods, and jewelry, not easy to find in Italy, but also news from faraway countries that brought new knowledge about art and literature.

The rivalry between Pisa and Genoa grew and in 1284 led to the Meloria naval battle, one of the worst and bloodiest battles ever fought in those waters between two fleets. This was the end of Pisa as a naval power in the Mediterranean Sea and was also the end of Porto Pisano. The war was not the only cause of the disappearance of Porto Pisano, which was located on marshy ground. Soon the sand and the sea erosion at the mouth of the Arno river slowly destroyed both the towers and the harbor. The disappearance of



L. Cecchi's interpretation of the ancient Lighthouse at Meloria. Author's collection.

the lighthouse of Porto Pisano led later, in 1303, to the construction of the lighthouse of Leghorn, the most ancient in Italy (see *The Keeper's Log*, Vol. 26, No. 3).

The Meloria rocks are located four miles off the coast of Tuscany, in front of Leghorn in very shallow waters that extend along the coast for about 7.5 miles. Since ancient times there was a lighthouse on the rocks to avoid wrecking in those dangerous waters, but it was destroyed during the Meloria battle. Nobody knows what the shape of this lighthouse

was. An artist, L. Cecchi, made a fictional reconstruction of this beacon, which was also supposed to be a small fortress, having a round base, on which was placed a square tower, on top of which was a smaller round tower on which was lighted a fire, of wood or olive oil, covered by a glass lantern.

Medieval glass was not yet perfected; it was thick and porous, and it was always necessary to clean it due to the soot and the salty water. The first keepers were monks of different religious orders, the only ones able to live in such a solitary place. They received provisions and fuel by sea. The last keeper was Friar Galgano. He received 120 liters of olive oil every three months, but he was forbidden to fish, so he could not use the oil for cooking. He also received 45 coins to pay for the wicks, the candles, and the sponges necessary to clean the glass, together with a salary of 15 coins.

A new lighthouse was built on the Meloria rocks in 1598 when the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici gave orders to erect a tower with a fire on the top, in the spot where so many shipwrecks had taken place. This lighthouse was not very solid, and in a few years the sea erosion made the beacon collapse. In 1709 another Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici, gave orders to erect a tall, white, marble tower that could be seen very far away. It consisted of four pillars connected by pointed arches to reduce resistance to the waves. This tower is still standing, but it has never been a lighthouse; on its top a fire was never lighted.

It was only beginning on May 15, 1867, that the Meloria rocks were finally lighted by three lighthouses. The first one was a lantern located on a metallic pylon 20 meters high about 200 meters from the 1709 tower on the south side of the shoals. After WWII, it was rebuilt in concrete. It is a round tower



Lighthouse on the Meloria rocks. Photo by Antonello Marchese.



Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici by Giusto Sustermans about 1600. Author's collection.

17.5 meters high painted in black and yellow, placed on a round red base, surrounded by a breakwater barrier, flashing a white beam for 15 seconds with a range of 12 miles. Its location is latitude 43°33' N and longitude 10°13' E.

On the west side was a lightship, called incorrectly, *Shiplight*. Also, this one was later replaced by a concrete tower that kept the same name as the ship, *Shiplight*. This is a white tower placed on a truncated cone and is 20 meters high flashing two white beams every 10 seconds.

On the east side is a light buoy two miles from the harbor of Leghorn. It flashes three white beams every 10 seconds and can be seen for seven miles.

All three lights are powered by solar devices. We now reach Vada, another pleasant tour-

ist location along the coast of Tuscany. A special spot is the "white beaches," also called "the Etruscan Coasts" or "The Saracens Bays," names that recall both the Etruscans who lived on these coasts in ancient times and the raids of the Saracen pirates who infested the Italian seas in previous centuries.

Vada is a small town; it only has 5,000 residents, but its rich history dates back from the Middle Ages until the early years of the 1900s. Its harbor has often provided safe shelter for ships during heavy storms, it has witnessed many wrecks, and it has been visited by noble people traveling.

Its oldest and most famous monument is the Tower of Vada, built by Pisa in the 13th century. It was a stronghold with a semi-pyramidal base supporting a square tower on top of which was lighted a fire. This was the first lighthouse to aid coastal navigation. The sea by Vada is very dangerous; shoals, rocks, and shallows lie about four miles off the coast and spread for about 16 square miles.

Today, the still-standing Tower of Vada is only a memory of the past, but other lighthouses have been built to avoid wrecks. In 1278 a small tower was built on a rock, but it did not have a light; it was only used as a day marker. In 1865, on an artificial reef 4.5 miles off the coast, was erected an intricate metal pylon, immediately nicknamed "the cage," which also had small rooms for the two keepers, who would alternate with shifts of 15 days each.

The rocks were also dangerous for the keepers. On June 13, 1913, a newspaper reported an accident to one the keepers of "the cage," Roberto Vittori, a 50-year-old man who slipped on the rocks, beating his head severely. He was immediately rescued by a Navy ship, but the poor man was already dead when he reached the hospital.

In 1922 the watch of the keepers was discontinued and the lighthouse



Today's lighthouse on the Vada rocks. Photo by Antonello Marchese.

was automatically operated until, in 1959, a concrete tower was built to replace "the cage," which was destroyed.

The 1959 tower is the one we can see today. This lighthouse is a tower 18 meters high painted in black with a red stripe in the middle, with an automated fixed optic that flashes a white beam every five seconds and is solar powered. Its location is latitude 43°19.2' N and longitude 10°21.9' E.

The last keeper of "the cage" was Giovanni Quintavalle, a Vada-born man. He was nicknamed "Nanni," and all the local fishermen knew him very well and used to go near the light to see him. He had a very difficult life caught between land and sea, facing many dangers and inconveniences.

When his first son was born, he was at the lighthouse, and it was his fishermen friends who went to give him the news by boat. After leaving "the cage," Giovanni served at many Italian lighthouses until he retired in 1967 and was able to return to his town, Vada, where he spent most of his time fishing. He died in 1978, but, in the meantime, his son, Bruno, had followed his father's path and became a lighthouse keeper, a job that he held for many years.

This article has told the stories of a few lighthouses that stand along the north coast of Tuscany, some of them in the middle of the sea. These are not big lighthouses, but their stories are ancient and fascinating, as all lighthouses are. Their light is in danger of disappearing forever, but for a seaman the lighthouse will always be a signal which shows the safe way to find his harbor.



Ancient Tower of Vada. Author's collection.