

The battle of Meloria, the greatest naval clash of the Middle Ages



Until the middle of the thirteenth century, the way in which Pisa and Genoa coexisted in the waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Mediterranean was limited to skirmishes, clashes and occasional robberies on the open sea and in the various port cities. The grudges and hatred began to grow from the War of Acre (or War of San Saba), which involved Pisans, Genoese and Venetians and ended in 1258 with the defeat of the Ligurian town following the alliance of the other two municipalities. From that moment on, a series of clashes between the three communes followed, each time moved by an old or new desire for revenge, until the years immediately preceding the battle of Meloria, characterized by a strong tension on the sea between Genovesi and Pisani; the war between the two maritime powers began in 1282.

The intense economic and demographic growth which took place especially at the beginning of the thirteenth century was an accelerating factor and a further reason for rivalry between the Pisans and the Genoese which led to competition for resources. The Battle of Meloria on August 6, 1284 was therefore an inevitable major conflict.



Our historical perspective allows us to judge as risky - if not foolish - the initiative of the Pisans, given their relatively secondary role compared to the other two maritime powers that emerges from all the chronicles better informed and especially by the fact that Genoa had now experienced a growth in economic terms, demographic and military power to cause a disparity of forces not indifferent.

But considering the story of the chroniclers of the time, to the contemporaries the outcome of the clash between the two great powers of the Tyrrhenian Sea appeared uncertain: to make up for any inferiority of men and means, the Pisani had provided a strategic alliance with Venice and Charles of Anjou and a political and commercial agreement with Florence to remain neutral at the height of the clash.

To influence the fate of the battle and the war, a series of occasional circumstances what not to have been able to count on the game of alliances and the agreements taken previously, the characteristics of the galleys of every naval team, the armament of the forces in field, the conditions of the sea, the individual abilities of the belligerents and their psychological conditions.

Above the occasional circumstances, that had without doubt an important role in deciding the fate of the battle and the war, it remains however the evident disparity of forces between the two contenders in favor of the Ligurian city.

The battle caused a series of consequences including a very strong downsizing of the maritime power of Pisa, the end of its important role in the events of the East, the confinement of its long-distance trade routes within the western basin of the Mediterranean, a phase of lordly rule and the loss of the status of great naval power in the Mediterranean.

It has tended to be recognized that the subsequent decline of Pisa was a long-term consequence of the Battle. Historians such as Ignazio del Punta, however, invite us to reflect also on an inverted perspective with respect to the traditional one: the Meloria was not the cause of Pisa's decadence, but the consequence of a wider process which began in the first decades of the thirteenth century; the beginning of Pisa's weakening would have started well before the Battle of Meloria.



The Meloria Tower

Suggested (italian) reading:

