

Small and Very Small States in Italy that Lasted Beyond 1700 - A Vexillological Survey

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Noli, Senarica, Cospaia, Seborga, Piombino, Massa, Torriglia and Masserano, were small residual principalities from the old feudal system, or free republics under the protection of a larger state. They lasted until 18th or 19th century. Their history is briefly described and several symbols and flags are discussed and illustrated in 24 figures. Most of these flags have been little-known until now.

Introduction

During several centuries a wide belt in the middle of Europe, from Denmark to Sicily, was divided into a multitude of small self-governing states. Two high authorities - the Pope and the Emperor - ruled over them from a distance. Germany and Italy, today's major states in this region, achieved national unity in the second half of 19th century (Italy in 1861, Germany in 1870), much later than Spain, France, United Kingdom, or Russia. This fragmentation of Italy stimulated the appetite of greater powers and attracted foreign conquerors. As a result, through the 16th and 17th centuries the number of the separate states in Italy was dramatically reduced. The smaller (and weaker) ones were rubbed off the map so that around 1700 there were about 20 of them left in Italy while in Germany there were 300 or 400.

Nevertheless some very small states survived far beyond 1700, and a few still exist, such as the Republic of San Marino or, just across the Italian border, the principalities of Monaco and Liechtenstein. They owed their survival to the patronage of a larger power or even to their small size. In fact some of them passed undamaged through wars, agreements and treaties, much like small fish escaping through the mesh of a net.

From the vexillological viewpoint, it is necessary to distinguish between two different types of government, no matter the size of the state. Duchies, principalities, kingdoms, etc. belong to the first type. They were ruled, just like private estates, by families that had been granted special privileges by an emperor or pope. The flags they hoisted usually followed *jus feudalis*, that is, they were modeled on the coat-of-arms of the ruler house and did not pay any attention to the local symbols or traditions.

The second type of government was present in the so-called republics where the people had more or less a say in the matter of public affairs. Their flags were more popular and anticipated in every sense the modern national flag.

Examples of both types will be considered here. Some of these states are now forgotten, by history as well as by geography. Nevertheless, they did in fact exist and do not belong to the category of the suppositious or conjectural states. They are shown on the map of Fig. 1. Let us start with a small maritime republic.



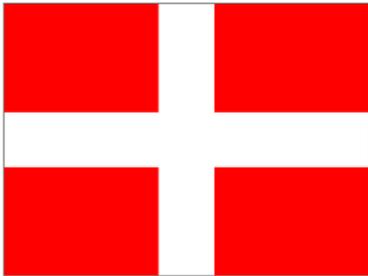
1. Map of Italian States

The Republic of Noli

The Republic of Noli, in Liguria, was established toward the late 12th century. Soon Noli made an alliance with Genoa and fulfilled it up to the very end, that is, until 1797, when Napoleon occupied Liguria. In spite of its small size, Noli had a safe harbour and an efficient shipyard and reached the status of a good naval and commercial power.

The flag of Noli (Fig. 2) dates to the 13th century. It was red with a white cross, in other words, it had the reverse colors of Genoa¹. An original exemplar of the flag is still preserved at the city hall. At sea the flag was rarely hoisted because the more authoritative and protective Genoese was usually preferred. Sometimes, as on the sundial of Fig. 4, the cross appeared shortened. This was probably done to avoid confusion with other similar flags of maritime states, such as Savoy, Malta or Denmark. Moreover, as you can discern in Fig. 4, there were some figures in the first quarter,

They represented three saints - the patron St. Paragorio, St. Eugene and St. Peter - sometimes placed on the flags to obtain protection. Today the city of Noli claims the historical right to be considered the fifth Maritime Republic in Italy, and it claims as well the privilege of placing its coat-of-arms, which is similar to the old flag (Fig. 3), on civil and naval ensigns, as well as on the jack of Italy, just like Venice, Genoa, Amalfi and Pisa. If this privilege were practiced, it could represent a severe test for flag designers!



2. Flag of Noli



3. Arms of Noli



4. Sundial showing the Flag

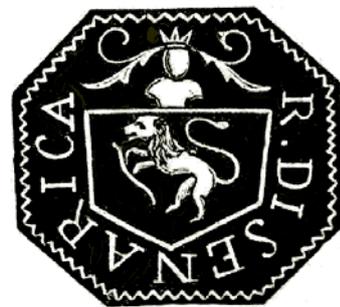
The Republic of Senarica

Let me now speak about another tiny state leaning on the broad shoulders of a powerful Maritime Republic. The story of the Republic of Senarica², hid in the hard mountains of the province of Teramo in Abruzzo in central Italy, is interesting and curious at the same time.

In 1350, Giovanna I d'Angiò, queen of Naples, grateful to the villagers of Senarica and Poggio Umbricchio for their brave resistance against the raids of the Visconti soldiery from Milan, granted them the right of self-rule. The highlanders declared their territory a republic, and though they had no coastal outlet, took as a model the *Serenissima* Maritime Republic of Venice. Imitating the Venetians, they elected a *Doge*, a Senate and a Noble Order. Moreover they drew up a solemn alliance treaty with the *Serenissima*. In case of war, Senarica had to send a good two soldiers!

Venice used to call tiny Senarica *La Serenissima Sorella*, "the Most Serene Sister". This little sister of Venice lasted over four centuries. No one invaded it. But eventually, this small independent state collapsed from the inside, worn out by divisions and legal quarrels. By the end of 18th century - following Venice in its decadence - it disappeared.

Obviously, the Republic of Senarica had some state symbols. Its coat-of-arms was a silver lion on a black field. It was a more modest beast than the Venetian one; it had no wings, no book, no sword, but was represented seizing a snake, a probable allusion to the *Biscione* of the Visconti, the common enemy to both leonian republics. We can deduce the exact design of this coat-of-arms from the state seal in Fig. 5 and from a fresco in the church in Senarica, the "capital". We also know that the arms were placed on golden fabric, but unfortunately the exact shape of these flags is unknown. Surely there was a gonfalon, more or less as represented in Fig. 6. It is likely that a standard echoing the Venetian one was hoisted at important ceremonies (Fig. 7), while a simple flag, as in Fig. 8, would have been commonly used. It is important to note that the last two flags, though logical, are only conjectural. In my opinion the question of the flags of Senarica deserves further investigation. I have approached the comune of Crognaleto, of which Senarica is only a fraction, but without any results so far. Unfortunately, the Republic ceased to exist without leaving any archives or annals. A possible way could be the State Archives of Venice.



5. State Seal of Senarica



6. Gonfalon of Senarica (supposed)



7. Standard of Senarica (supposed)



8. Flag of Senarica (supposed)

The Republic of Cospaia

The history of the Republic of Cospaia is even more unusual³. Cospaia is a tiny village on a green hill in northern Umbria close to the Tuscan border. For four centuries it was an independent republic. In 1440 the boundaries between Tuscany and Papal States were redrawn, and a measurement error excluded from the new map a strip of land about half a kilometer wide, and Cospaia village found itself in a no man's land. Finding themselves without written laws, or army or, above all, taxes, the inhabitants hastened to proclaim their independence. What did it happen? Just on the border there was a river. Neither geometers from Rome, nor those from Tuscany realized that the river splitted up in two branches; so each one measured up to the branch on his side. The miniature state owed its survival to the excellent duty-free business which the neighbouring states did there, especially when in the 16th century the villagers started to grow tobacco⁴. Unfortunately the republic started to attract all sorts of smugglers, and so, in 1826 Florence and Rome agreed to put an end to the independence of Cospaia. As a compensation for their lost freedom, the villagers were granted the franchise to grow half a million tobacco plants. Even today the best quality tobacco grows in this area.

The vexillology of this state is quite poor because of the almost absolute lack of public institutions. We know that quite simple flags were hoisted, black and white, usually diagonally divided, with ornamental tails (Fig. 9)⁵. They did not exhibit any meaning but the primordial simplicity of the colors as well as of the drawing. There was even a black and white gonfalon with a lion and the inscription "Repubblica di Cospaia" on. Obviously, there are no documents about these symbols. However they are based on a quite solid tradition (if you consider that the republic

lasted until 1826, so that the father of the grandfather of some older Cospaiese was theoretically able to see these flags). Even today, they are hoisted in the village during the *fiesta* of the ancient Republic, a popular costume evoking.

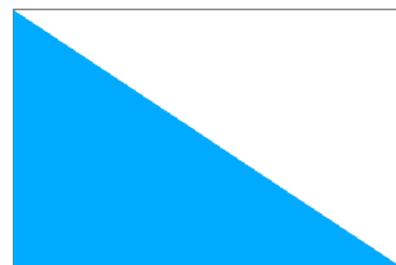


9. Flag of Cospaia

The Principality of Seborga

Let me now come back to Liguria and visit quite a peculiar principality. Seborga⁶, the ancient *Castrum Sepulcri*, later *Sepulcri Burgum*, is a tiny scenic village in the province of Imperia in western Liguria, near the French border. In 954 it was ceded by the Counts of Ventimiglia to the monks of Lerino and in 1079 it became a principality of the H.R. Empire. For over six centuries Seborga was a rare example of sovereign abbey state. In 1729 it was acquired by the Kingdom of Sardinia, despite strong opposition from the Republic of Genoa.

Seborga's flag (Fig. 10) was white and blue, diagonally divided. The colors were taken from the coat-of-arms which had a white cross on a blue field (Fig. 11). Seborga's current claims of independence, based on a conjectural lack of legality of the conveyance of 1729, are in my opinion insubstantial, and its modern symbols, badly copied from the ancient ones, are without interest to the vexillologist. To tell the truth, neither the old symbols are quite sure. Perhaps the flag is correct, but, regarding the shield, I suspect it was copied from the Savoy's one, changing red to blue, *after* the end of the principality. Any way the colors of Seborga - white and blue – are surely correct, being those original of the Lerino abbey.



10. Flag of Seborga



11. Arms of Seborga

The Principality of Piombino

The Principality of Piombino⁷, today part of the province of Leghorn in Tuscany, offers an example of flag strictly related to a sovereign house.

The imperial feud of Piombino, which also included the island of Elba, became a principality in 1594 and was first ruled by the Appiani family, followed in 1634 by the Ludovisi. In 1701 the latter house went to an end, and a branch of it, Boncompagni-Ludovisi, took over the state. Their coat-of-arms was placed on white flags. The last one (Fig. 12), adopted in 1701, had the Boncompagni-Ludovisi blazon, bearing the arms of the individual families. Note the dragon of the Boncompagni, which came from the original family name, *Dragona*. The umbrella with the keys of Saint Peter, in the middle of the escutcheon, was the symbol of a Gonfalonier of the Holy Roman Church, a family privilege.

The Principality of Piombino lasted until 1801, when it was occupied by France. The Congress of Vienna did not restore this state.

Sometimes the design of the coat-of-arms on white fabric reflected lucky and unlucky events of the ruling family's life, chiefly wedding and death, as in the case of the Duchy of Massa.



12. Flag of Piombino

The Duchy of Massa

The Duchy of Massa and Carrara, roughly corresponding to the modern province with the same name in northern Tuscany, was an independent state from 1473 to 1829. It was initially ruled by the Malaspina family (whose symbol was the thorn tree, in Italian *spino*). In 1519 they became related to the Cybo family (whose symbol was the chess, or cubes, in greek *kybos*) and later to the Este, which had the eagle as its symbol. A new maritime flag (Fig. 13)⁸ was introduced in 1741, when Maria Teresa Cybo Malaspina married the duke D'Este of Modena. The coat-of-arms had the twin escutcheons of the Este and Cybo-Malaspina families (the shape was rather variable). This flag was abolished in 1796 and restored in 1814 after the Napoleon era, to be hoisted only on land. It remained in use until the end of the Duchy, in 1829.

In 1790 Maria Teresa died and her daughter Maria Beatrice ascended to the throne. The new duchess modified the blazon and placed it on coins, letterhead, seals

and flags⁹. However the new flag (Fig. 14) was not very used. The duchy continued to fly the flag of Maria Teresa, probably to avoid the expense of changing to a new flag.



13. Maritime Flag of Massa 1741

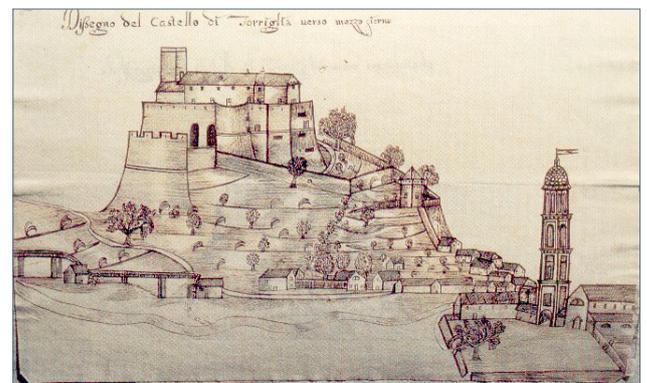


14. Flag of Massa 1790

Let us now move only a few miles to the northwest.

The Principality of Torrignia

The Principality of Torrignia¹⁰, located on the mountains of Genoa's hinterland, was a classic example of an imperial feudal state. There was a castle, the prince's residence, dominating the borough (Fig. 15)¹¹. Today it is in ruins, but several furnishings have been preserved. All around the castle 22 small villages were located in a wide valley, up to the border with checkpoints garrisoned by local militia. The feud had its own laws, mint, soldiers and so on, and the emperor's authority was nominal and remote.



15. Castle of the Prince of Torrignia

The Fieschi family ruled Torrignia from 1252. In 1547, after the failed *Congiura dei Fieschi* (Fieschi Conspiracy) in Genoa, the house of Doria took over the power. In 1760 the marquisate became a principality and in 1797 it was

occupied by Napoleon and united to the Ligurian Republic. That was the end of the Principality of Torrignia; however by that time the entire feudal system was at death's door.

Sometimes one is induced to imagine the ancient castles decked with flags and banners on every side. Actually, flags were raised quite rarely on land, and just one flag waved on the top of the castle of Torrignia. As one might expect, it was the standard of the Doria family, the coat-of-arms on a white background (Fig. 16). It is reported¹² that a special fabric was locally made for that flag, "white, soft, sumptuous and brilliant silk". The arms of the Doria family (Fig. 17 shows a seal of Torrignia) were a black eagle with red beak and claws on a field of gold and silver. They were the same for all branches of the family, according to a resolution dating to the 14th century. A conjectural armorial flag (Fig. 18) is also mentioned, but I have not found any evidence of its existence. From rare residual documents, it would result that the local colors were red and white, but they did not appear on any flag. They were the colors of milita uniforms and perhaps of the sentry boxes.



16. Standard of the Doria Family



17. Seal of Torrignia



18. Armorial Flag (supposed)

The Principality of Masserano

Masserano, today part of the province of Biella in Piedmont, northern Italy, was a principality ruled by the Ferrero-Fieschi house¹³. It was established in 1598 on the old feudal marquisate and lasted until 1767, when it was ceded to Kingdom of Sardinia.

Its first flag was the armorial banner of the Fieschi family, white and blue diagonally striped (Fig. 19). In 1614, the emperor Rudolf II granted the princely family a new coat-of-arms, quartered by the arms of the Ferrero house (a blue lion in a silver shield) and the imperial eagle. This coat-of-arms was placed on the striped flag (Fig. 20). At the beginning of the 18th century, the flag was changed (Fig. 21): it was white with a centered coat-of-arms similar to the previous one, except for the superimposed Fieschi escutcheon. The design was more or less complicated, depending on the use of the flag. As already noted, this type of flag was very common at that time, primarily celebrating the ruling house and usually having little relevance to local traditions and symbols. In fact, in the case of this principality, the coat-of-arms of the comune of Masserano had little in common with the state flag (Fig. 22). On the contrary Crevacuore, the second city of the old state, put its symbol (a heart, in Italian *cuore*) on a Fieschi-type escutcheon (Fig. 23). Both coats-of-arms date back to the 16th century and are still in use.



19. Arms of the Fieschi Family before 1614



20. Flag of Masserano 1614



21. Flag of Masserano 18th Century



22. Arms of the Commune of Masserano



23. Arms of the Commune of Crevacuore

Finally, let me show the great blazon of the Fieschi¹⁴, a family I have mentioned several times. All around the escutcheon we can observe a panoply of white flags bearing the arms of various branches of the house (Fig. 24).



24. Great Blazon of the Fieschi

Notes

* CISV, Centro Italiano Studi Vessillologici.

- 1 A. Ziggio, "Le bandiere degli Stati Italiani", *Vexilla Italica*, III, 1, 1976, 1-3.
- 2 P. Marozzi, "La Repubblica di Senarica", *Le Vie d'Italia*, XLIII, 12, 1937, 863-866.
- 3 Comune of San Giustino (Perugia). Tourist promotion.
- 4 G. Diana, "La storia del tabacco in Italia", *Il Tabacco*, 7(2), 1999, 55-62.
- 5 M. Dalceri, personal records. I am indebted to Mario for his kindness.
- 6 A. Ziggio, "Le bandiere degli Stati Italiani", *Vexilla Italica*, III, 1, 1976, 6-7.
- 7 A. Ziggio, "Le bandiere degli Stati Italiani", *Armi Antiche*, 1971, 109-110.
- 8 P. Di Piero, *La Marina di Avenza tra Vele e Bandiere*, Carrara, 1997.
- 9 A. Ziggio, "Le bandiere degli Stati Italiani", *Armi Antiche*, 1971, 45-51.
- 10 M. Casale, *La Magnifica Comunità di Torriglia*, Genova, 1985.
- 11 M. Casale, *Castrum Turrilie*, Genova, 1995.
- 12 *Ibidem*, pag. 69.
- 13 M. Dalceri, "Il Principato di Masserano", *Vexilla Italica*, 2, XVI, 1990, 43-47.
- 14 Courtesy of Mr. Mauro Casale. My gratitude to Mr. Casale, a deep expert in history of Torriglia.