

Il Giuoco del Ponte of Pisa: The Sport of Battle and Pageantry from the Renaissance to the Napoleonic Era

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Il Giuoco del Ponte (The Game of the Bridge) was a sport particular to the Italian city of Pisa from the Renaissance to the early nineteenth century. The Game was played amidst much pomp and pageantry and was, itself, a colorful spectacle. The goal of this highly structured, competitive activity was to have one of the two participating teams occupy a part of their opponent's half of the bridge within a specified period of time. To accomplish this objective necessitated strategy, strength, and a wooden, oblong implement called a targone which was used for offensive and defensive purposes. Although played once a year on the central bridge usually prior to the season of Lent, the date of play could be changed due to some extraordinary event such as a visit by royalty. The city was represented by two teams: the Tramontana for the Northern side and the Mezzogiorno for the

Southern section. Each team was composed of three hundred and twenty men divided into six squads with distinctive names, colors and insignias. For protection, each player wore a metal helmet (morione) with moveable frontal pieces made of vertical rods to facilitate visibility and breathing. Metal breast and back plates worn either under or over the loose fitting tunic completed the uniform.

Events leading to the Game were the formal presentation of the written challenge by the losers of the previous Game and the written acceptance by the challenged team, the selection of players including the skilled convicts who were paroled from prison to participate, and the pre-Game parade which terminated at the bridge.

The Game was held in the late afternoon with the players assembled according to their roles at strategic places on the bridge and adjoining piazzas. On the signal by the Granduca, the two teams rushed against each other and the Game was begun. The contest was directed by the Commandati for each team who were stationed on the parapets of the bridge. For forty-five minutes, the targone was used to thrust and parry and, towards the end, it was swung as a bat. If no clear victor was declared at the end of the time, peace was pronounced and both sides of the city celebrated. Great joy and revelry reigned on the side of the city whose team was victorious while the loser's side had no celebration.

For over two hundred years the Game remained a tradition not only for the economic advantages it brought to the city but also because it fostered Pisan pride and esteem during the years under the rule of Florence. Giuoco del Ponte came to an end due to the conflict between the Pisan nobles and the Florentines over rules. This continuing controversy and the increasing financial burden of the Game caused the nobles to lose interest and relinquish their support. The last Game was played in 1807.



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