

TRAVEL HISTORY CULTURE PEOPLE FOOD

ABRUZZISSIMO

MAGAZINE



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Anversa degli Abruzzi. Photo by Ingrid Paardekooper. Read the story on page 9.

LEFT:

A street in Castrovalva; a stone carving on the portal of the Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie in Anversa degli Abruzzi. Photos by Anna Lebedeva. Read the story on page 9.

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Editor's Note

There is a place I especially love visiting in March: the woods of the **La Camosciara Nature Reserve** in **Civitella Alfedena (AQ)**. It is where the spring feels most vivid. Beneath ancient beech trees, carpets of snowdrops pierce last year's dry leaves and reach towards the spring sun. Wherever you look, their gleaming white flowers sway gently in the breeze. I will be posting photos of this magic place on ABRUZZISSIMO's [Instagram page](#) next week, so please check them out.

In this issue, we take you to another striking location: **Anversa degli Abruzzi (AQ)**, a town gazing down into the deep ravines of the Sagittario Gorges. The narrow, serpentine roads are not for the faint-hearted but muster a little courage and you will be rewarded with magnificent mountain views, stories from the past, and honest cooking at local restaurant.

We have all heard the legend of the 99 castles that founded **L'Aquila** in the 13th century. As it turns out, the story is not entirely true. Read our fascinating article on the city's foundation, its fiercely independent spirit, and the many times **L'Aquila** has risen again from the rubble.

We continue our journey through Abruzzese dialects with the tongue twister "*Scine ca scine, ma ca scine 'n tutte no!*", exploring its meaning and cultural context.

This month we also revisit the ancient, almost forgotten dish *pecora alla callara*, which, like many traditional Abruzzese recipes, was born of necessity and has in recent years returned as a delicacy. Have you tried Abruzzese-style carbonara by the well-known chef Davide Nanni? He has generously shared his recipe with our readers. He cooks it in the mountains over an open fire, though you can try it in the comfort of your kitchen.

Enjoy the March issue!

Anna Lebedeva
Founder & Editor

DIGEST OF RECENT REGIONAL NEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS FROM ABRUZZO NEWSPAPERS



ECCE HOMO ARRIVES SOON IN L'AQUILA

A newly acquired 15th century painting by Antonello da Messina is soon arriving at the Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo in **L'Aquila**. The small oil on panel, depicting an Ecce Homo on one side and Saint Jerome in the Desert on the other, was purchased by the Italian State at a Sotheby's auction for \$14.9 million. This rare work, the last private *Ecce Homo* by Antonello da Messina, will be displayed at MUNDA, constituting a remarkable addition to **L'Aquila** in its year as Italian Capital of Culture. The painting's arrival is a major cultural event, marking the return to Italy of one of the last privately held masterpieces by Antonello da Messina, one of the country's most important Renaissance painters.

WIDESPREAD UNDECLARED EMPLOYMENT

In Abruzzo, around one in ten workers is employed irregularly, with more than 57,000 people working *in nero* and avoiding taxes. Out of a total workforce of 533,000, about 475,000 are formally employed, while more than 57,000 work off the books, placing the region ninth nationally for working off the books, at 10.8%. A recent report by the Cgia di Mestre shows that nearly 2.5 million Italians are employed 'in the black'. As a result of widespread tax evasion, Italians effectively spend almost six months of the year working to meet their fiscal obligations.

HOW MANY ABRUZZESI SPEAK DIALECT AT HOME?

A recent ISTAT report shows that 10.1% of Abruzzo's population speaks only or mainly dialect at home, while 85% use Italian with strangers. Italian use drops to 53% with friends and 47% at home, with dialect rising slightly in informal settings. Seven in ten residents know at least one foreign language, most commonly English, which 55.5% speak, though only 8% at an advanced level. Compared nationally, Abruzzo's dialect use is above average but lower than most southern regions.

In each issue of ABRUZZISSIMO, you'll find our column *Speaking Abruzzese*, where you can learn phrases from local dialects.



FROM PAPERS TO PROVISIONS: EDICOLE REVAMPED

Abruzzo is giving its struggling newsstands a lifeline. In the past 20 years, the region has lost nearly 43% of its *edicole*, and many owners now earn barely €1,000 a month, despite long hours. The new regional law allows newsstands to sell food, drinks, and other products, provide public services, and act as local delivery hubs. Funding and incentives will support innovation, modernization, and opening newsstands in small towns, aiming to preserve their place at the heart of local life.

EUROPE'S LONGEST WALKING TRAIL IN ABRUZZO

Abruzzo is now part of the Margherita Trail, Europe's longest walking route, stretching over 7,400 kilometres across Italy, Switzerland, France, and Belgium. In the region, it links **Ortona, Fossa, L'Aquila, Paganica, San Demetrio ne' Vestini**, and other towns celebrating Margherita d'Austria, the 16th-century Habsburg princess who governed L'Aquila and surrounding territories, fostering culture, the arts, and local heritage. Each stage has been kept under 20 kilometres to encourage slow walking. You can find information on routes and other details on the trail's official [website](#).



CALASCIO OPENS SCHOOL FOR TRADITIONAL TEXTILES

The small town of **Calascio (AQ)** has inaugurated the Istòs School for advanced training in weaving, using local wool and plant fibres, led by Florence's *Fondazione Arte della Seta Lisio*. One- to two-week courses guide professionals and enthusiasts through traditional knitting, natural dyeing, and rural costume history and restoration. Weekend intensives welcome students, locals, and visitors to explore spinning, weaving, and advanced tailoring. The school is part of a wider regional project, backed by €20 million in funding, aimed at revitalising an area long affected by depopulation. See the programme on the foundation's [website](#).

DID YOU KNOW?



THE HOLY VEIL OF MANOPPELLO

One of the most famous and enigmatic relics in Christianity is enshrined in the Basilica of the Volto Santo in **Manoppello (PE)**. The Holy Face veil, measuring roughly 17.5 by 24 centimetres, is translucent and fragile, and is believed to bear the true face of Jesus Christ.

According to tradition, it is the sudarium mentioned in the Gospel of John, the cloth laid on Jesus's face in the tomb, separate from the burial shroud. Some traditions hold that Mary placed the cloth on her son's face herself before His body was wrapped in the burial shroud.

What sets the Volto Santo apart is the image itself. The face appears alive, with eyes open. Scholars have noted that its proportions correspond precisely to those of the Shroud of Turin. Within Christian belief, the veil absorbed the first breath of the Risen Christ, imprinting upon itself a vivid and inexplicable image of His resurrected face.

The veil is said to have arrived in Manoppello around 1506, though its origins remain unknown.

Today, the relic draws thousands of pilgrims from across the world to the basilica. Each year, on the third Sunday of May and again on 6 August, the veil leaves the basilica in solemn procession, carried through the streets of the town, accompanied by pilgrims and local residents. For further details, see the Basilica of the Volto Santo's [website](#). An episode of the recent Netflix docuseries *Mysteries of the Faith* explores the Volto Santo relic.



L'AQUILA AND THE LEGEND OF 99 CASTLES

By Anna Lebedeva

In the high basin beneath the Gran Sasso, at 731 metres above sea level, L'Aquila was born not once but twice. According to legend, 99 castles scattered across the territory around L'Aquila joined together in an act of collective will, each contributing a church and a square to the new city. It is a compelling tale but not strictly true.

At the beginning of it all was the *transumanza*, the seasonal migration of shepherds and their sheep flocks between mountain pastures in summer and lowland plains of Apulia in winter. "As some historians observed, notably the late Professor Alessandro Clementi, half playfully yet with conviction, the churches and palaces of L'Aquila smell faintly of sheep because they were financed by the wealth of transhumant flocks," says Giancaterino Gualtieri, an author and local history enthusiast based in L'Aquila.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, long-distance transhumance declined, only to revive under the Normans and later the Swabians, who re-established a unified territory stretching from Abruzzo to Apulia, restoring the seasonal movement of flocks that connected mountains

Photos: Fontana delle 99 Cannelle in L'Aquila

and plains. "From around 1100, with a single authority guaranteeing safe passage, flocks could once again move seasonally: grazing on the rich summer pastures of the Gran Sasso, then descending to winter in the plains of Puglia," explains Gualtieri. "Livestock meant wealth. The Latin word pecus, flock, gave rise to pecunia, money."

THE FIRST FOUNDATION

The profits of transhumance were largely controlled by barons and feudal lords. An emerging mercantile class found itself excluded. The foundation of L'Aquila was, in essence, an anti-feudal gesture. Its promoters petitioned both pope and emperor for permission to create a free city, a place where trade in wool, leather, and livestock could flourish beyond baronial constraints. At first, both powers hesitated. A strong commune near the border of the Papal States was politically delicate. Earlier attempts to found the city had sought papal approval, but it was Conrad IV of Germany, then ruler of the Kingdom of Sicily, who finally authorised the unification of the castles of Amiternum and Forcona, formally establishing the city in 1254 at a site called Aquili (also known as Acculi, Acculum, or Aquilio, named for its abundant springs). Giancaterino Gualtieri says that the city's name comes from this area of Acculi and its springs, rather than from the Swabian eagle (Aquila), as is often suggested.

But the new city lasted barely a few years. Manfredi, who by then became regent over the Kingdom of Sicily viewed the new settlement as a papal outpost planted too close to the frontier of his kingdom. The fledgling town, aligned with Rome, was besieged and razed in 1259. What stands today is the result of a second foundation.

REBIRTH

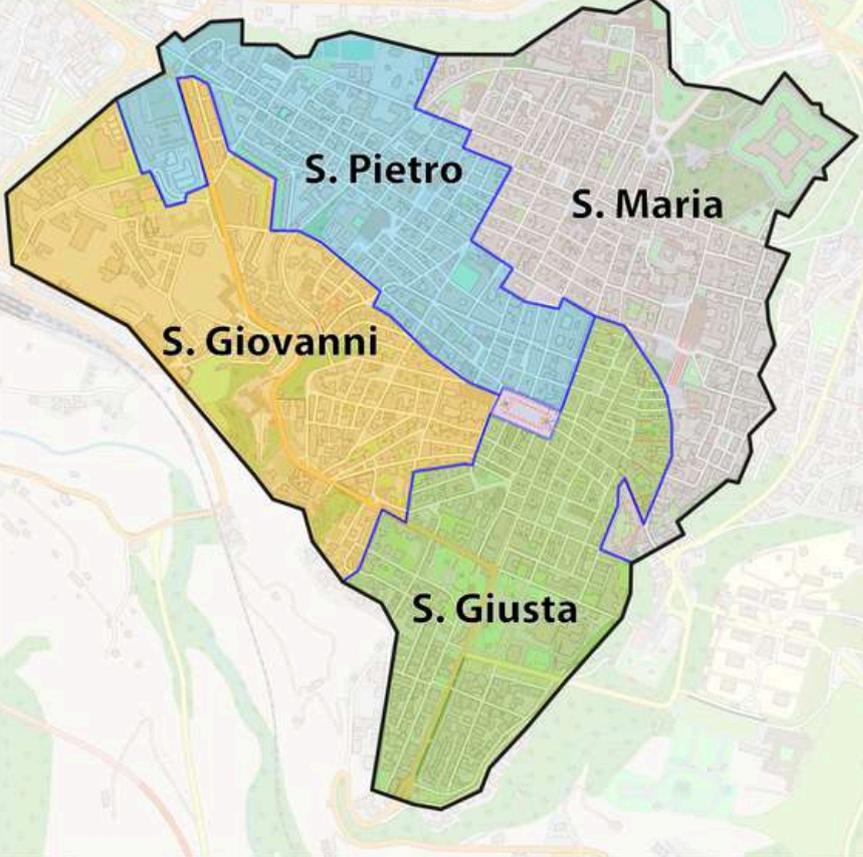
The city's rebirth, a few years later, was more carefully organised. Royal diplomas confirmed privileges and, crucially, divided the urban land into



A map of L'Aquila by Girolamo Pico Fonticulano from 1575, which shows the city walls and 14 gates

plots, each assigned a house and an adjoining garden. This was not an incidental detail. The earliest Aquilans were largely farmers and shepherds. Their new city did not erase their rural identity; it reorganised it. The original plan included green spaces within the walls, unlike older towns where cultivated land lay beyond the perimeter.

Within decades, the transformation was visible. Workshops in the new city multiplied, and trades proliferated. Contemporary chronicles list bakers, tavern-keepers, tailors, shoemakers, entertainers. The market square was paved in 1309, a costly investment that signalled commercial confidence; main streets were widened to accommodate growing traffic; and water infrastructure expanded, including the construction of an aqueduct in the early 14th century.



Photos: (above) a map of the historic *quarti* of L'Aquila; the city's banner with the *quarti*'s coats of arms

THE LEGEND OF THE 99 CASTLES

The legend claims that 99 castles federated to create the city, each establishing within it a locale bearing the name and patron saint of the parent village. The number is alluring, one of those figures that carry symbolic weight across cultures. But the documents tell a different story. "The early territory of L'Aquila included around 60 - 70 castles, rather than the often-cited 99," says Gualtieri. Some monasteries, notably those controlling Bominaco and San Benedetto in Perillis, resisted sending inhabitants to the new city. Certain villages contributed labour or materials without settling within the walls. The city did organise itself into semi-autonomous quarters reflecting the geography of the surrounding basin. Each quarter gravitated around a church and square, oriented towards its place of origin.

Other legends have gathered around the city. Some have claimed that its urban plan mirrors that of Jerusalem, that churches and gates correspond to sacred topography in the Holy Land.

Such interpretations are imaginative rather than demonstrable. Medieval foundations often attracted symbolic readings, especially in retrospect. What is certain is that L'Aquila was conceived with coherence, its grid shaped by longitudinal and latitudinal axes, its quarters distributed with intent, but it took time for L'Aquila to become an important economic hub. "When Pope Celestine V was crowned at Collemaggio in 1294, chroniclers described L'Aquila, more than 30 years after its second foundation, as large yet sparsely inhabited, with empty plots awaiting construction," says Gualtieri.

The legend of 99 castles endures because it offers an image of unity: many villages, one city. From its earliest days, the city has balanced order and independence. Over the centuries, it has been repeatedly tested by earthquakes and destruction, yet each time it has risen again, rebuilding streets, walls, and public spaces while preserving the traces of its foundation.

SEE WHERE THE CITY BEGAN

To understand how L'Aquila took shape in the 1200s, it helps to walk the places where its founding vision is still visible in stone. These sites offer a clear starting point for reading the city's earliest chapter.

HISTORIC QUARTI

Since 1272, L'Aquila has been divided into four historic districts, or *quarti*, a structure that still shapes how residents describe their city. Each quarter was anchored by a *chiesa capoquarto*, head churches, linked to a founding castle: San Pietro a Coppito for Coppito, Santa Maria Paganica for Paganica, San Marciano for Lucoli and Santa Giusta for Bazzano. The four *quarti* are still represented by their individual coats of arms, which appear alongside the civic emblem on the city's official crest. Rebuilt over the centuries and after numerous earthquakes, these churches still stand within the historic centre today as reminders of the city's original division into four *quarti*.

THE MEDIEVAL WALLS

The medieval walls of L'Aquila mark the boundary of the historic centre and remain one of the clearest traces of the city's 13th-century foundation. Built from the mid-1200s and largely completed by 1316, the circuit extends for more than 5.5 kilometres, enclosing about 157 hectares. It follows the natural line of the hill and originally counted 18 gates. One of the most significant is Porta Bazzano, constructed during the Angevin refoundation launched in 1266. Today, some of the best-preserved sections can be seen along the eastern edge between Via Castello and Viale Collemaggio, while restored gates such as Porta Napoli highlight the scale and ambition of the original urban project. (You can find all the gates visible today by entering their name in Google Maps).

CIVIC TOWER

The *Torre Civica*, or Civic Tower, is the only surviving element of the 14th-century Palazzo del Capitano and today forms part of Palazzo Margherita on Piazza del Palazzo, home of the city hall. Although



Castello di Bominaco, one of the founding castles

lower than its original height, the tower is one of L'Aquila's oldest structures, already present at the time of the city's foundation in the 1260s. It once anchored the civic centre, housing the Captain of Justice, the municipal offices, and the Palazzo della Camera, while its bells regulated daily life, signalling council meetings and public announcements. Originally about 52 metres tall, the tower could oversee a 33-kilometre radius; today it rises to approximately 27 metres. Before the 2009 earthquake, the bell tolled 99 times at dusk, echoing the legend of the city's founding castles.

FONTANA DELLE 99 CANNELLE

At the lower edge of the historic centre, near the River Aterno, stands the Fontana delle 99 Cannelle, the city's best-known monument and one of its earliest monumental works, built by architect Tancredi da Pentima (a plaque at the centre of the fountain marks the start of construction in 1272). Originally a public washhouse, it was built in the area of Acculi, which gave the city its name. Famous for its "99 spouts," the fountain keeps alive the legend of the city's founding castles, though the number has changed over time through expansions and restorations.

FOUNDING CASTLES

Some of the founding castles still exist, though many are now in ruins. Remains can be seen in towns such as Ocre, Bominaco, Beffi, San Pio delle Camere, and Prata d'Ansidonia.



ANVERSA DEGLI ABRUZZI: BETWEEN DEEP GORGES AND HIGH MOUNTAINS

Sitting on the cliffs above the Sagittario Gorges, Anversa degli Abruzzi (AQ) has long drawn travellers with its dramatic landscapes. Today, the town weathers depopulation with returnees, newcomers, and grassroots initiatives keeping its streets and traditions alive.

I first came to Anversa degli Abruzzi in 2012 to spend a few weeks working at an organic farm, La Porta dei Parchi. The dramatic landscape took my breath away

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Anna Lebedeva

Editor of Abruzzissimo Magazine

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