

Le fiabe sono vere... Storia popolare italiana

Fairy Tales Are True... Italian Folk History

In Depth (summaries)

4. SEASCAPE: STORIES OF MARITIME TRADITIONS

The Ambivalent Soul of the Sea: A Journey between Life and Death

For a moment, let us imagine not merely observing the sea, but taking part in an ancient ritual with it. Since the dawn of time, the waters have whispered stories of duality, an enigma that has fascinated the human soul. Like a primordial being, the sea has been revered as a source of life, pulsing through Homeric poems and the cults of Magna Graecia. Yet, like a capricious god, it has always held its secrets, standing as a threshold between worlds—the realm of the living and that of the dead. In the traditions of southern Italy, souls on their final journey sought comfort in the water, looking for one last sip before departing from the earth. But the sea, with its unfathomable power, could also imprison them, denying them the passage to the afterlife and condemning them to eternal wandering. In the heart of Mediterranean folklore, the sea became a realm of the dead, a space of initiation and a dwelling place for drowned souls, where life and death danced in an endless embrace.

The *Tonnara*: A Ritual of Fishing and Sacrifice

Along the coasts, maritime communities wove their existence into the rhythm of the waves. Fishing, an ancient craft, was the heartbeat of their economy and culture. Consider the *tonnara*, an ingenious system of nets extending like powerful arms from the shore into the open sea, barring the path of migrating tuna. The chamber of death, a space of sacrifice, marked the climax of this mortal dance, where the fish met their fate. On the beaches, stone-built *logge* received the day's catch, where the fish were processed and sold. The fishermen, artisans of the sea, knew every secret of the waters, every crevice where their prey hid, using traditional techniques passed down through generations. Their days were punctuated by songs and prayers—pleas for mercy upon the creatures of the sea, an attempt to justify the slaughter as a necessity for survival. At times, a gesture of compassion emerged, as a fisherman ran his hand along a tuna's back before its final journey—a whispered farewell. The lives of these men were a mosaic of practices, with the sea and the land completing one another.

Living Water: Creative Force and Mystery

Yet water was not merely inert matter; it was an active force, a creative energy shaping the cosmos. Popular traditions spoke of miracles and legends, of processions and prayers, of mythical events tied to the waters. Every spring, every river, every drop of rain carried a story, a mystery waiting to be revealed. Good and evil waters, miraculous and malevolent, alternated in a balance that mirrored the complexity of life itself.

Sails: Wings of the Sea, Symbols of Identity

Then, like a divine breath of wind, came the invention of the sail—an innovation that changed the course of navigation. The earliest sails were square, but it was the lateen sail, triangular and enigmatic, that gave vessels the freedom to challenge the wind. Born in the waters of the Mediterranean, it spread like an echo through every port and bay, opening new routes and horizons. The *vela al terzo*, which emerged in the northern Adriatic, became a mark of identity, its canvas adorned with family and community symbols. Sailboats, the wings of the sea, carried fishermen and goods, weaving a tapestry of stories and encounters. Today, associations and gatherings keep this ancient craft alive, an intangible heritage passed down through generations.

Salt Pans: The Alchemy of Sun and Sea

Along the sun-drenched coasts, salt pans were laboratories of alchemy, where seawater was transformed into salt crystals. Evaporation, guided by sun and wind, dictated the rhythm of labour, following a cycle that began with the spring equinox and ended in autumn. As valuable as gold, salt was the fruit of a perfect union between humankind and nature. Governed by the seasons, the salt pans became microcosms that mirrored the cycles of land and sea.

Mills: The Silent Power of Water and Wind

Far from the coast, deep inland, watermills turned in quiet rotation, harnessing the hidden strength of rivers and streams. Like ancient sentinels, they transformed the power of water into motion, driving millstones and wheels—silent witnesses of a pre-industrial world. Water, with its unyielding force, became both an ally and a resource to be carefully safeguarded.

The Scents of the Sea: A Symphony of Sensations

The sea revealed itself through an endless symphony of scents, shifting like the tides and winds. Every place, every moment, carried its own distinct aroma—the dried seaweed on the rocks, the resin of coastal pines, the boat hulls, the salt fields. Interwoven with the fragrances of the land, the scents of the sea became part of memory itself, a sensory experience that evoked deep emotions and distant recollections.