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Roman baths of Forum Traiani

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Location of the site

Fordongianus, ancient Forum Traiani, is in Sardinia, along the Tirso river. It is easy to reach along the SS 131. Taking the exit for Simaxis-Oristano and then the SS 388 towards Simaxis; after about 20 km you reach Fordongianus and, in the village, follow signs for the Roman Baths.

■ History of the digs and studies

Localisation in the current centre of Fordongianus of the ancient town of *Forum Traiani*, linked to the thermal waters spring which had given the place the name of *Aquae Hypsitanae*, a name probably referred to a native population, dates to the first decades of the 19th century.



Fig. 1 - Portico and *natatio* of the Baths (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

In the first decades of the 19th century the visible remains of the Baths and the church of San Lussorio were mentioned quickly in the Angius-Casalis¹, citing the lower parts as "*de' pubblici bagni*" (Fig. 1), and recalling the eight tombs in San Lussorio. It is also interesting to note the lamented habit of the inhabitants of Fordongianus to dig up and sell the country's antiques.

The Canon Giovanni Spano, even without archaeological digs, during his tireless work of disclosure, gave a description of the remains on the surface, including the Baths, in the New Sardinian Archaeological Bulletin of 1860².

The digs which brought to light the entire baths complex and its surroundings date back to the years 1899-1902, and ample news of them was given (Figs. 2-4) by the new Superintendent Antonio Taramelli in a long, detailed article in *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità* del 1903³. Mr Taramelli, who was Superintendent of Antiquities in Sardinia between 1903 and 1933, based on the diggers' reports, was the first to read the thermal baths complex, dating it historically to the island's "romanisation" context and archaeologically as part of the thermal bath buildings of the Roman empire.

¹ ANGIUS - CASALIS, *Fordongianus*, in Geographical, historical, static, commercial dictionary of the S.M states, the King of Sardinia, Cagliari, Editrice Sardegna, 1837, pp. 744-752

² G. SPANO, *Descrizione di Forum Trajani*, BAS, VI, 1860, pp. 161-70. The Canon Giovanni Spano (Ploaghe 1803- Cagliari 1878) studied theology, philosophy and ancient languages to become, in 1834, lecturer of Sacred Writings and oriental languages at the University of Cagliari, and Director of the Archaeological Museum. He dedicated a lot of his diverse activities to the study of archaeology in Sardinia: he was responsible for the first map of the nuraghes and the tombs of the giants, limited to the territory of Paulilatino. He was the first to adopt the terminology common in international studies for Sardinian archaeology: Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, still in use. He created the *Bullettino Archeologico Sardo*, one the first periodical Italian archaeological publications, which gave an account of new discoveries and archaeological search activities in Sardinia. In 1871 he was appointed Royal Government Commissioner for the Antiquities and Museums of the entire island, and Senator of the Realm. Famous and respected internationally, Canon Giovanni Spano is undoubtedly the founder of Sardinian archaeology.

³ A. TARAMELLI, *Fordongianus. Antiche terme di Forum Trajani*, NS, 1903, pp. 469-492. Antonio Taramelli (Udine 1868 – Roma 1939), after being Inspector in the Office of Monuments of Piedmont and Liguria, in 1903 was called to Management of the Museum and Antiquity Digs of Sardinia; a position he held until 1933, when he retired for reasons of age, and was elected Senator of the Realm the following year. In the thirty years he dedicated to archaeology in Sardinia, Taramelli worked very important digs (Santa Vittoria di Serri, Sardara, Anghelu Ruju) then published the results of his activities in prestigious Magazines and Series, going from prehistory to the Middle Ages. Under his direction, in 1904 the Archaeological Museum of Cagliari found a worthy seat in the building built specifically in Piazza Indipendenza, maintained as an exhibition site until 1993, when it was transferred to the current site of the Citadel of Museums. Furthermore, at his initiative the Museum G.A.Sanna of Sassari was set up, currently National Archaeological Museum. The really vast, fertile activities of Antonio Taramelli, accompanied by publication of research results, make him one of the fathers of the island's archaeology.



Fig. 2 - View of the portico after the digs of 1899 (from Taramelli 1903).

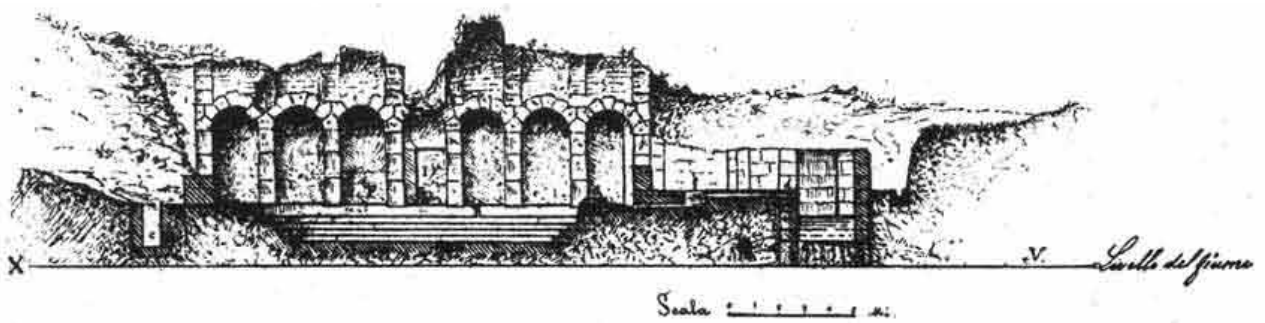


Fig. 3 - Section of the digs of 1899 through the pool (from Taramelli 1903).



Fig. 4 - Internal view of the portico brought to light in the digs of 1899 (from Taramelli 1903).

The edition of the important inscriptions highlighted by the digs at the end of the 19th century was curated by Giovanna Sotgiu in her volume on the Roman epigraph of Sardinia⁴, with the addition of a later find⁵, further confirmation of the existence and importance of the presence of the cult of Asclepius (Fig. 5).

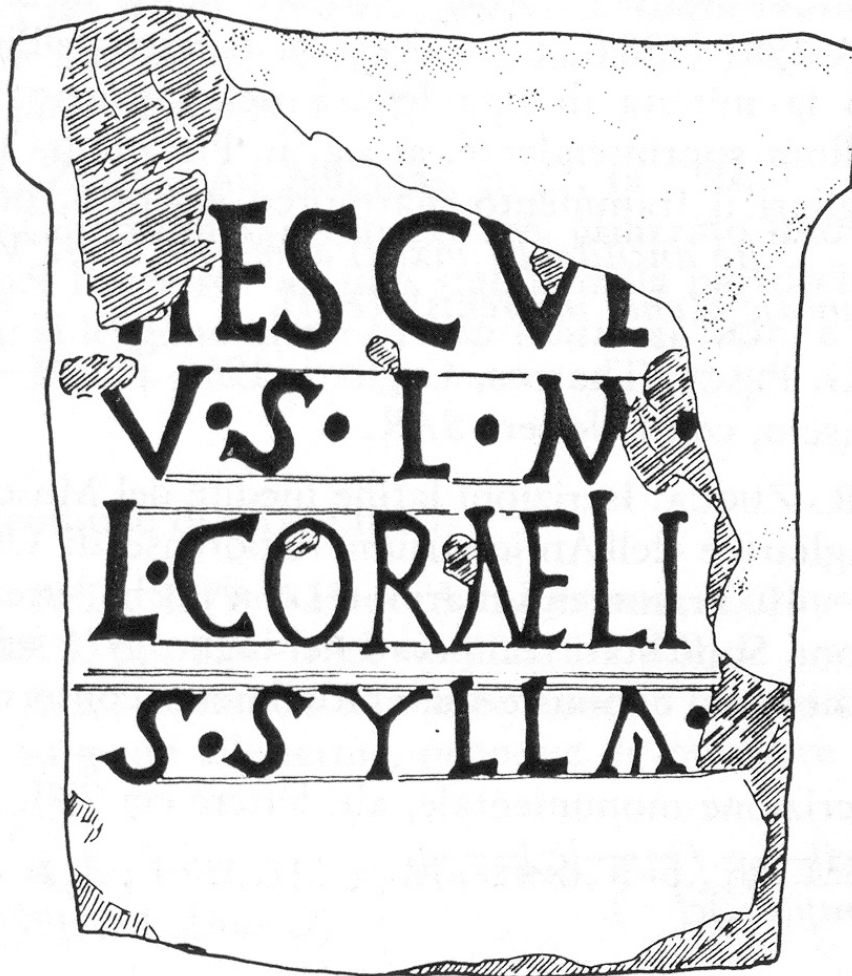


Fig. 5 - Dedication to Asclepius by *L. Cornelius Sylla* (from Sotgiu 1985).

From 1969, for a few years, the direct surveys of the Superintendent Ferruccio Barreca started again; mainly to remove earth that was upstream of the Baths and which was in danger of slipping towards the ancient building. The digs brought to light a complex of

⁴ G.SOTGIU, *Iscrizioni latine della Sardegna. I.*, Padova 1961, nos. 186-206.

⁵ G.SOTGIU, *Arula dedicata ad Esculapio da un L.Cornelius Sylla (Fordongianus, Forum Traiani)*, in AA.VV., *Studies in honour of Giovanni Lilliu for his seventieth birthday*, Cagliari 1985, pp. 117-124.

environments situated South-East of the Baths. but the dig stopped when it identified the planimetry of the structure without going any further.

Yards set up in the following years were limited to maintaining remains, until 1980 when Carlo Tronchetti partly surveyed a room brought to light in 1969 to discover painted walls (fig. 6) datable to the III century A.D.



Fig. 6 - Decorated wall of a room dug out in 1980 (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

In 1995/96 the Archaeological Superintendence, in agreement with the Municipality, started to consolidate and restore remains visible, further surveying the dig in sectors that had remained intact till then, bringing to light a Nymphaeum adjacent to the Baths pool, in which there was still *in situ* an important dedicatory inscription to the Nymphs by a Roman magistrate. These finds, and a full re-reading of the Baths complex, in the light of the new facts, were reported amply by the authors, Paolo Benito Serra and Ginetto Bacco, in the Reports of the XII Convention Roman Africa of 1996⁶. In that work, the two scholars

⁶ P. B.SERRA, G. BACCO, *Forum Traiani: il complesso termale e l'indagine archeologica di scavo*, in *L'Africa Romana XII*, pp. 1213-1255.

place a fundamental position in the story of the studies on Fordongianus, from where any further surveys can start.

The results of these activities were then published in two archaeological guidebooks, both by Raimondo Zucca: the first, very exhaustive, is dated 1986⁷, the second⁸ contextualises the Baths in the island's Roman aspects.

⁷ R.ZUCCA, *Fordongianus*, Sassari 1986

⁸ R.ZUCCA, *Forum Trajani e la Sardinia romana*, s.l. 2008.

■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Carlo Tronchetti



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