



UNIONE EUROPEA



REPUBBLICA ITALIANA



REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

Castle of Monreale

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Location of the site

The castle of Monreale is positioned in the Municipality of Sardara about 50 kilometres north of Cagliari, in southern Sardinia. Located near the area of the ancient *thermae*, from the top of the hill that bears the same name, it controlled the border between the kingdoms of Arborea and Cagliari.

From Cagliari you can reach it through the SS 131 for 56 km up to Sardara; from here one turns into SP 69 and, after a short stretch, at the thermal baths, one takes the road leading to the castle.

■ History of the excavations and studies

Thanks to its grandeur and its location on top of a hill overlooking a large part of the Campidano plain, the castle of Monreale was one of the most important strongholds of Arborea.

At present the fortification consists of a quadrangular keep from which the walls which include the village lead off. Two gates are identified: a north one towards Sardara and one to the west, called gate of San Gavino.¹

The first certain mention of the castle dates back to 1309, when it was cited in a document as a donation by King James II of Aragon to the sovereigns of Arborea, Mariano and Andreotto de Bas, who entrusted its administration to the town of Pisa.² However, some of the findings found during the archaeological investigations carried out at the monument, lead us to set its construction during 1275.³

¹ F. R. STASOLLA, *Per un'archeologia dei castelli in Sardegna. Il castrum di Monreale a Sardara (VS)*, in *Temporis Signa*, V, 2010, pp. 39-54.

² V. SALAVERT Y ROCA, *Çerdena y la expansiòn mediterrànea de la Corona de Aragòn*, Madrid 1959, doc. n. 392, pp. 506-510.

³ P.G. SPANU, *Il Castello di Monreale in Sardegna*, in *Military Studies in Medieval Europe. Papers of "Medieval Europe - Brugge 1997" Conference*, G. De Boe, F. Verhaeghe (eds), vol. XI, Zellik 1997, pp. 97-106.

In modern times, many distinguished scholars have dealt with the history and structure of the castle of Monreale, in particular historians and travellers have left us a great deal of information which has helped reconstruct the look of the castle from the sixteenth century to the present day.

Giovanni Francesco Fara, in the mid-sixteenth century, in his book *In Sardiniae Chorographiam*, when listing the territories belonging to the Diocese of Terralba, speaks of the "incontrada of Monreale".⁴

His testimony is particularly important because it allows placing the monument in a natural environment which was completely different from the present one: it tells us, in fact, of a place rich in rivers and lush forests and of the nearby thermal baths of Sardara. Although the description of the castle does not focus on any particular features, it provides a series of very important information: the castle was well protected by the shape of the hill and by the presence of towers and defensive walls and includes a reference to the presence of a single access to the facility, facing westwards.

Over the centuries, the castle of Monreale has captured the attention of the world of cartography: its structure, in fact, has been observed and surveyed in numerous and illustrious historical maps of Sardinia (figs. 1-2).

⁴ I. F. FARA, *In Sardiniae Chorographiam*, ed. 2007, fig. 1992, p. 202. Giovanni Francesco Fara (1543-1591) dedicated himself to studying the history and geography of Sardinia, taking information from rare manuscripts and original documents that were kept in the Vatican library and archives.

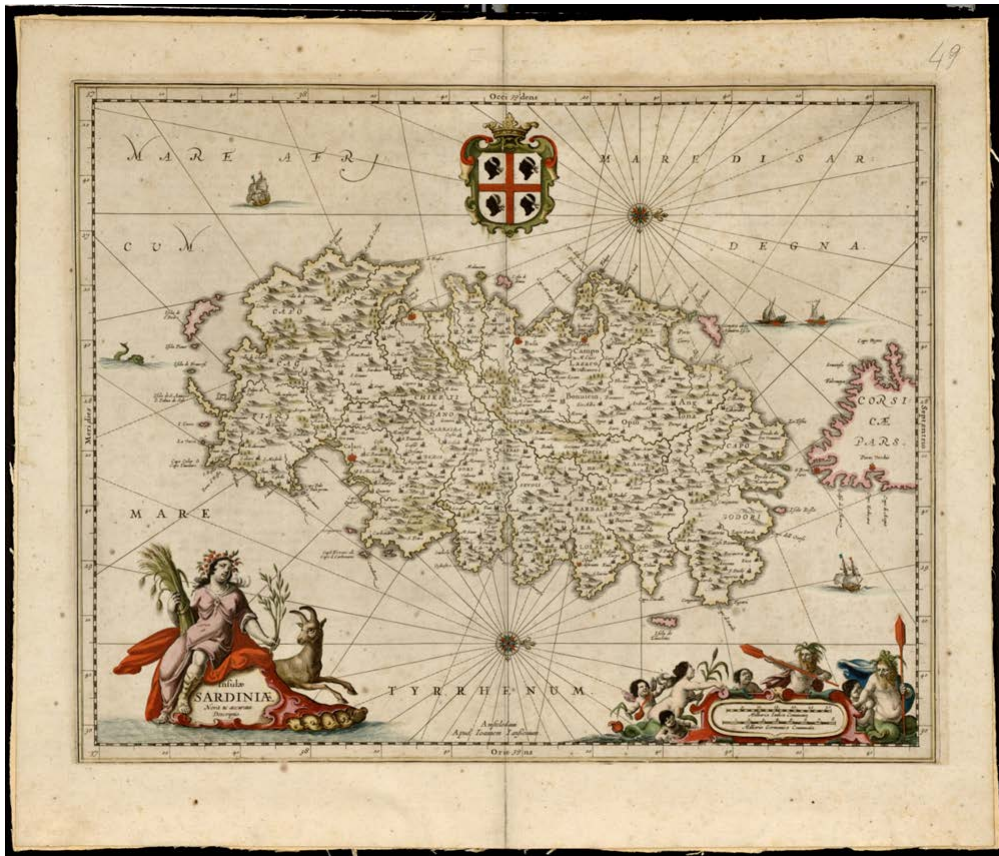


Fig. 2 - Map *Insulae Sardiniae Nova & accurata Descriptio*, 1642-44, by Johannes Janssonius (from <http://www.sardegna-cultura.it/j/v/258?s=24331&v=2&c=2811&t=1>).



Fig. 2a - Detail of the map *Insulae Sardiniae Nova & accurata Descriptio*, 1642-44, by Johannes Janssonius, in which there is a detail of the castle of Monreale (reconstruction by M. G. Arru from an image taken from <http://www.sardegnaicultura.it/j/v/258?s=24331&v=2&c=2811&t=1>).

Valery, the famous French traveller, in his description of Sardinia of 1837, said he had visited the castle, but he only talks about its grandeur and the emergent position over the surrounding landscape.⁵

In the middle of the 19th century, Vittorio Angius, in the *Dictionary "Dizionario geografico, storico, statistico, commerciale dagli Stati di S. M. il Re di Sardegna"*, describing

⁵ VALERY, *Voyages en Corse, a l'île d'Elbe, et en Sardaigne*, Bourgeois-Maze, II, Paris 1837. Antoine-Claude Pasquin, known as Valery (1789-1847) was a scholarly French traveller, the king's librarian at the Palace of Versailles who, in the first half of the 19th century, went on a historical-literary journey in Italy, which resulted in an artistic guide of the country that was printed in several editions and was expanded over the years.

the area of Sardara, recorded the almost total disappearance of the wood that once covered the Monreale hill⁶. After analysing the local economy, Angius moves on to a detailed description of the castle, to which he adds a brief account of the historical events which saw him as a protagonist. Angius indicates the perimeter of the castle to be 650 metres long, but it must be understood that by castle he does not mean the keep (which he calls "oblong fortification" instead), but the entire fortified complex.

When describing the village, Angius provides important data concerning the city walls, which he shows as divided into four sides, in which he counts eight towers and two gates (one in the "*side regarding Sardara*" and one facing San Gavino). A road called *Sa Ruga Manna* descends from east to west, runs through the village and links the two gates. He also records the presence, at the gate of San Gavino, of square pool called *Su Zubu*, which he considers a structure for collecting rainwater. Finally, he calculates that the total extent of the fortified area measures about 24,000 square metres, while the area of the keep would be of about 2,400 square metres. In this structure he identifies "the garrison barracks and warehouses," but he never indicates them by an appropriate name. Angius concludes his overview of the castle of Monreale by saying that although the place is mostly covered with rubble, it is easy to draw its plan and it is useful for studying military architecture from the Middle Ages.

It is impossible not to notice the discrepancy between the testimony of Fara and that of Angius regarding the number of entrances to the fortified stronghold. This contradiction is reported during the second half of the nineteenth century by Alberto Della Marmora in his *Itinerario dell'isola di Sardegna*, where he writes that Fara makes no reference to the village of the castle of Monreale, whereas previously for the other fortifications he has described, when the village is present, he does not neglect to mention this.⁷

⁶ V. ANGIUS, s.v. *Sardara*, in *Dizionario geografico, storico, statistico, commerciale dagli Stati di S. M. il Re di Sardegna*, vol. XVIII, p. 893-907. Towards the end of the 1820s, the abbot from Turin Goffredo Casalis appointed the priest Vittorio Angius (1797-1862) to draw up the entries in the *Dictionary* about Sardinia. In the nine years spent visiting the island, village by village, Angius gathered an enormous amount of material about customs, economic activities, history and antiquities of each place.

⁷ A. DELLA MARMORA, *Itinerario dell'isola di Sardegna (tradotto e compendiato dal canonico G. Spano)*, Cagliari 1868, pages 264-265. Alberto Ferrero Conte Della Marmora (1789-1863) carried out a long number of trips to Sardinia, starting in

Della Marmora also speaks of the forest which in previous centuries had covered the area of Monreale and regrets the fact that the mountain is now completely deforested.

As regards the tower, as he calls the keep, he writes that it is located at the highest point of the hill and is, compared with the rest of the complex, perfectly preserved, noting however the lack of a staircase to climb to the top (the reason why he was forced to measure the structure at its base). He also refers to the presence, outside the castle walls, of a fountain made of squared blocks and called *Ortu Cossu*. Della Marmora believes that the presence of this fountain is proof of the existence of a medieval village and hypothesises that this was no longer detectable in the sixteenth century, since Fara does not mention it. However, this assumption is implausible since the ruins and the remains of the related structures are still visible. The sketch of the hill of Monreale made by Della Marmora, where the keep still standing high can be viewed (Fig.3).

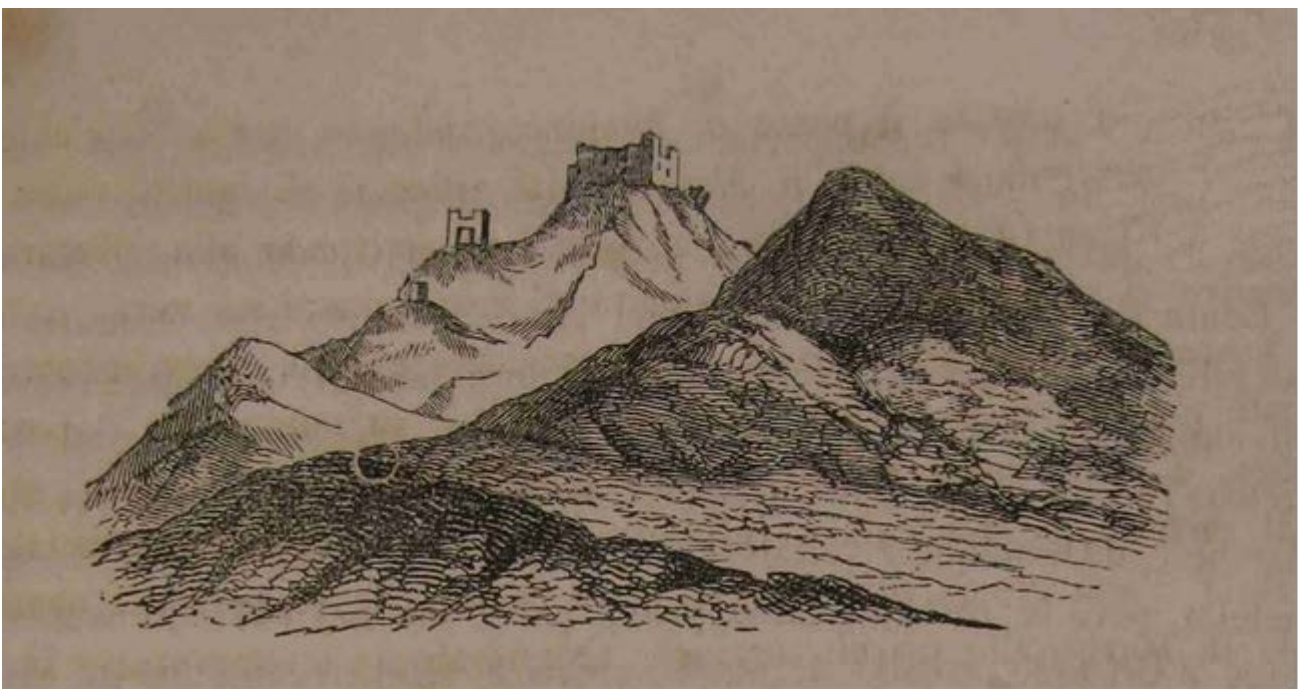


Fig. 3 - Drawing by A. Della Marmora (from A. DELLA MARMORA 1868, p. 265).

1819, dealing not only with the historical and natural wealth of the island but also drawing up a map of the island and drawing up a full geological description.

A contemporary work by Foiso Fois (in the volume *Castelli della Sardegna medioevale* published in 1992, after his death) traces a brief history of the castle and provides a description of what is still visible (figs. 4-5) In particular, he highlights the presence of signs on the plaster of the inside walls, hypothesising the presence, above the current ground floor, of three further floors.⁸



Fig. 4 - The keep in a photo of the 1980s (from F. FOIS 1992, p. 156).

⁸ F. FOIS, *Castelli della Sardegna medioevale*, Cinisello Balsamo 1992, p. 156. Foiso Fois (1916-1984) in addition to being one of the most important painters from the 1950s in Sardinia, was also a scholar of medieval Sardinian architecture.



Fig. 5 - The interior of the keep in a photo from the 1980s (from F. FOIS 1992, p. 157).

The first archaeological excavation at the site of Monreale was completed in 1991 as part of the activities of the Chair of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Cagliari, at the time headed by Letizia Pani Ermini.⁹

The works carried out in this first construction site, meant to secure and restore the perimeter walls of the keep, led to identifying the space of the central courtyard and a series of rooms built against the south wall.

Between 1992 and 1993, the surveys were extended to the North-West corner tower of the keep, to the barrel-vaulted rectangular tank located near the eastern wall and to the semi-circular tower in the walls of the village. The study of the soil layers and of the materials found in the alpha room has clarified how the space was reused as a garbage dump and filled in all its height during a century between the second half of the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth.

⁹ Over the years there have been numerous publications regarding materials coming from the various excavations in the castle by Letizia Pani Ermini's collaborators, who was joined several times by Pier Giorgio Spanu and Francesca Carrada for managing the excavations. After a few years' interruption, the works continue today under the direction of the University of Rome "La Sapienza", through the activities of Francesca Romana Stasolla, of Gabriella Ucheddu and with the collaboration of Rossana Martorelli and Fabio Pinna of the University of Cagliari.

The excavation dated 1995 investigated the area inside the keep, in order to identify all the partitions and the environments in which the complex was divided into.

In 2000 the site of Monreale was involved in a double archaeological excavation. In fact, in addition to continuing the investigations into the keep, the slopes of the hill were also investigated, in order to accurately identify the trend and the construction technique of the fortification walls of the village and to see to the timely restoration and consolidation of the tower next to the gate called San Gavino.

During the excavations conducted between 2008 and 2009, activities were once again concentrated within the keep, particularly in the room investigated during the 1992-1993 campaign, renamed alpha room; clean-up activities evidenced the presence of post holes regarding a wooden structure which had to support the wooden floors of the semi-circular tower.

The excavation of the area was once again begun in 2011 on the slopes of the hill, where the walled village of Monreale used to be. The investigation is still ongoing and is giving us evidence of numerous spaces used both as housing and for productive activities of various kinds (fig. 6).



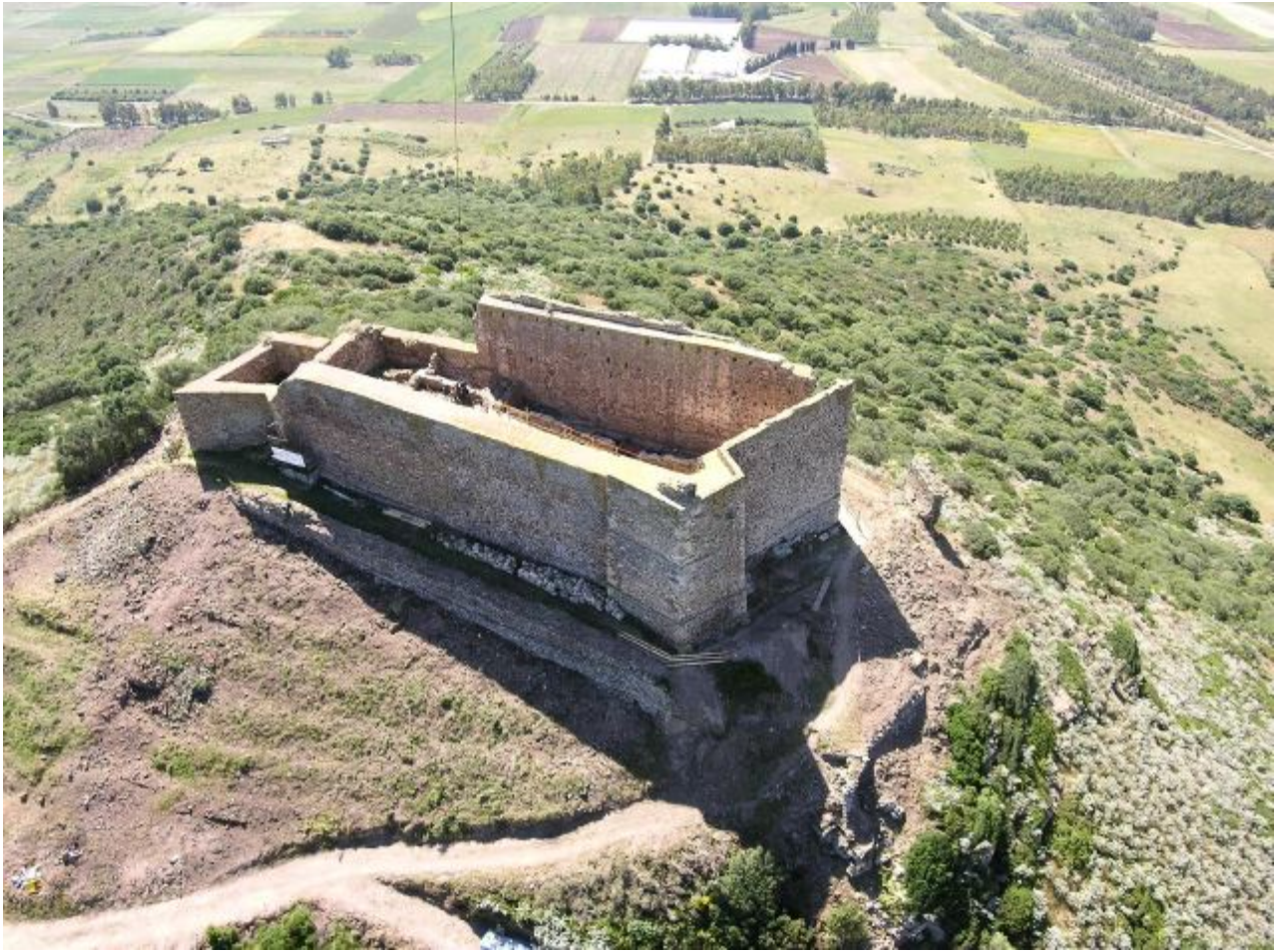


Fig. 6 - View from above of the castle of Monreale (photo by Studio SPAI).



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