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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

Castle of Monreale

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Encastellation

The term encastellation refers to the phenomenon which occurred throughout most of Western Europe during the Middle Ages, particularly from the end of the ninth until the twelfth century, which led to the birth of castles, intended both as a feudal residence and as a settlement or fortified village¹.

The first castles erected during the ninth century were simple fortified wooden constructions, whose sole purpose was defensive, whilst at the end of the tenth century stronger materials such as stone and brick began to be employed, in order to make them more suitable for controlling the territory².

The castles built in Sardinia during the Middle Ages belong to different types and are the direct consequence of the time span during which they were built. These fortresses are located mostly on high hills, in order to be effective in the defence of economically important roads and regions. A few of these structures were built as early as the sixth-seventh century, during the Byzantine domination and then rebuilt or renovated during the period of the Giudicati³.

Finally, during the thirteenth and fourteenth century, with the arrival of the Pisan and Aragonese people, a new phase of construction began (fig. 1).

¹ FARRIS 2003, pages 17-26.

² FOIS 2012, pages 13-19.

³ Building castles in the early Giudicati period was not to create forms of population and did not alter the settlement structure where they were set up, see Coddu 2013 page 16.



Fig. 1 - Sardinian encastellation (from F.C. CASULA 1980, table 40).

During the period from the early Middle Ages until the Aragonese conquest in 1325, two broad categories of castles can be identified: the "native castle" (built during the Giudicato period, from the IX-X century until the second half of the twelfth century); ⁴; the "colonial castle" (built by the Pisan and Genoese people during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries). This classification, besides its chronological aspect, also reveals the different methods of construction of fortified sites and their relationship with settlements.

The first group of fortifications is characterised by the regularity of the masonry, but not of its plant, by being perched on inaccessible hills, by the distance from roads and by the lack of a directly associated inhabited settlement.⁵ These are, therefore, castles which may be dated to the beginning of the Medieval Age, built, sometimes on structures dating back to the Byzantine Age, by the Judges in order to assert their sovereignty over the territory.

The castle of Monreale, built between 1206 and 1275-1276⁶, although chronologically within the thirteenth century, is a "native" castle, since it was built by the Judges of Arborea to defend the southern border of the kingdom (fig. 2).

The second group of castles was built in the 13th century on the initiative of the Pisa dynasty, with the aim of consolidating their power. They are generally square-shaped with a square watch tower and high-quality walls, which make one believe they were part of a pre-established project. They are perfectly distinguishable both from the "ancient" castles (up to the twelfth century), and from the later ones of the Aragonese age.

This second group includes the castle "della Fava" of Posada⁷, probably built in the early thirteenth century according to orders by the Judges belonging to the Visconti family of

⁴ POISSON 1989, pages 192-193.

⁵ See the example of the Medusa castle in Asuni and the Erculento castle on Monte Arcuentu; see Poisson 1989, page 192.

⁶ The castle is not named in the document that bears witness to the agreement stipulated in 1206 between the Giudicati of Cagliari and Aborea to correct the respective territorial borders (see SOLMI 1908, pages 193-212), while an epigraph found in 1995 inside the watch tower carries the date of 1276 and witnesses the work carried out by the *magister* who was in charge of the construction (or renovation) of the building (see SPANU 2003, pages 915-929).

⁷ POISSON 1990, p. 354.

Pisa, which tied its fate during this historical phase to the interests of Sardinia and particularly of Gallura (fig. 3)⁸.



Fig. 2 - The Castle of Monreale (photo by R. Bordicchia).

In Sardinia, castles have certainly played an important role in the movements of its built-up areas, particularly during the High Middle Ages, when due to external threats such as from the Arabs, the coastal settlements migrated to better protected and strengthened sites. However, Sardinia does not appear to show the system of population concentration within fortified structures which is typical of medieval Europe.

⁸ FLORIS 2008, p. 258.



Fig. 3 - The so-called castle "della Fava" of Posada (from <http://www.sardegna.digitallibrary.it/index.php?xsl=615&s=17&v=9&c=4461&id=62931>)

During the Giudicato period, the Sardinian territory was organised in administrative districts called "curatorie", numbering about fifty. The village where the curator lived was the capital of each of these districts.⁹ During the twelfth century, when the Pisani arrived, there was not a true headquarters within these boundaries, except in the cases of the capitals of the Giudicati and of the Bishop's seats. At the end of the Middle Ages almost all districts housed a castle and these forts served as the capital, substituting their name to that of the villages where the *curator* used to live. This fact apparently demonstrates the role played by the forts erected by the Pisani: a new place of power represented by the castle was inserted in the curatorie, i.e. the traditional location of civil power, on which the villages often depended and which, among other things, were also required to provide men for the garrison. The geographical distribution of these villages shows that they are positioned around the castle, but not necessarily within the same curatoria (district).

⁹ See BOSCOLO 1978.

This implies the existence of a kind of castle-territory, within which the population is employed by the castle, but without physically being nearby.

This system organised in Sardinia by the Pisani could be interpreted as an attempt to change the organisation of residential spaces, but the Aragonese conquest of 1325 stopped the project which, in many ways, only appears to be outlined.¹⁰

¹⁰ See POISSON 1989, pages 202-203.

■ Credits

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