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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
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Port and coastal towers of Arbatax

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Description of asset

The modern town of Arbatax is located in the centre of the east coast of Sardinia, at a point where the shoreline is full of headlands and inlets, near Capo Bellavista and the Stagno of Tortolì, in an area that has always been highly conducive to human settlement (fig. 1).

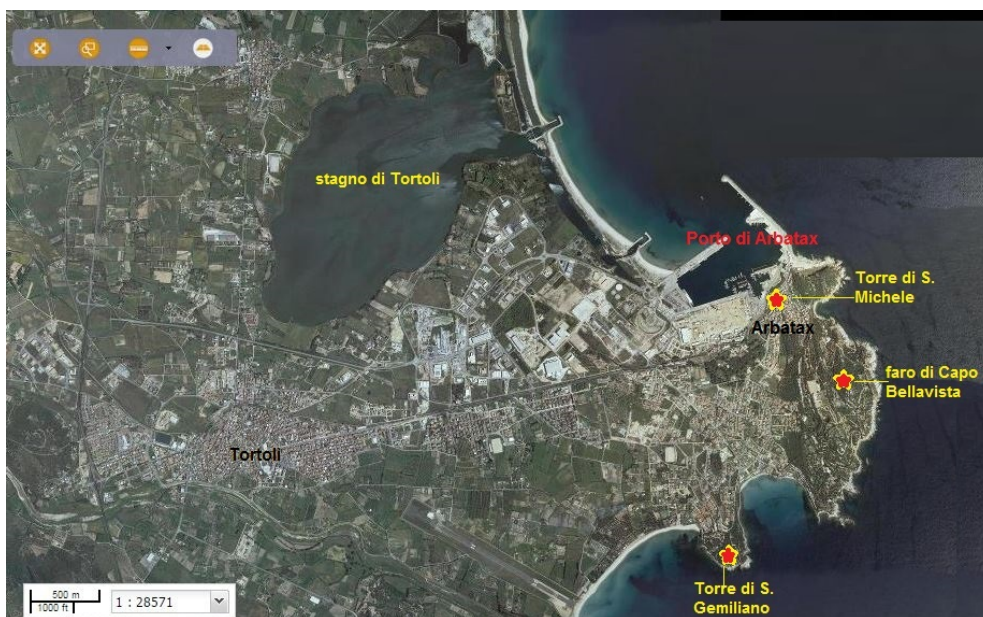


Fig. 1 - (from Sardegnageoportale; re-worked by M.G. Arru).

The oldest cultural stages date back to the Neolithic Age, proved by the presence in the area of several underground tombs, like the *domus de janas* and *menhirs* in the San Salvatore-*S'Ortali 'e su Monte* (figs. 2-3) archaeological complex.



Fig. 2 - The *domus de janas* dug under the hill of *S'Ortali 'e su Monte* (photo by C. Nieddu).



Fig. 3 - The *menhirs* in front of the tomb of giants of *S'Ortale 'e su Monte* (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The Nuragic Age was full of nuraghi, both simple and polylobate and some burial sites, like those of *S'Ortali 'e su Monte* (figs. 4-5).



Fig. 4 - The nuraghi of *S'Ortali 'e su Monte* (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



Fig. 5 - The tomb of giants of *S'Ortale 'e su Monte* (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Proof of the presence of the Phoenician-Punic people in the Tortolì area can be found in items found, in some ancient literary sources of a later date¹, telling of the presence of a port in the central part of the eastern Sardinian coast. This port, placed by scholars in the area of the current coastal pond of Tortolì, was an important stopping point for trading routes, in the Phoenician-Punic and Roman period, leading towards the central-western coast of Italy and North Africa (fig. 6).

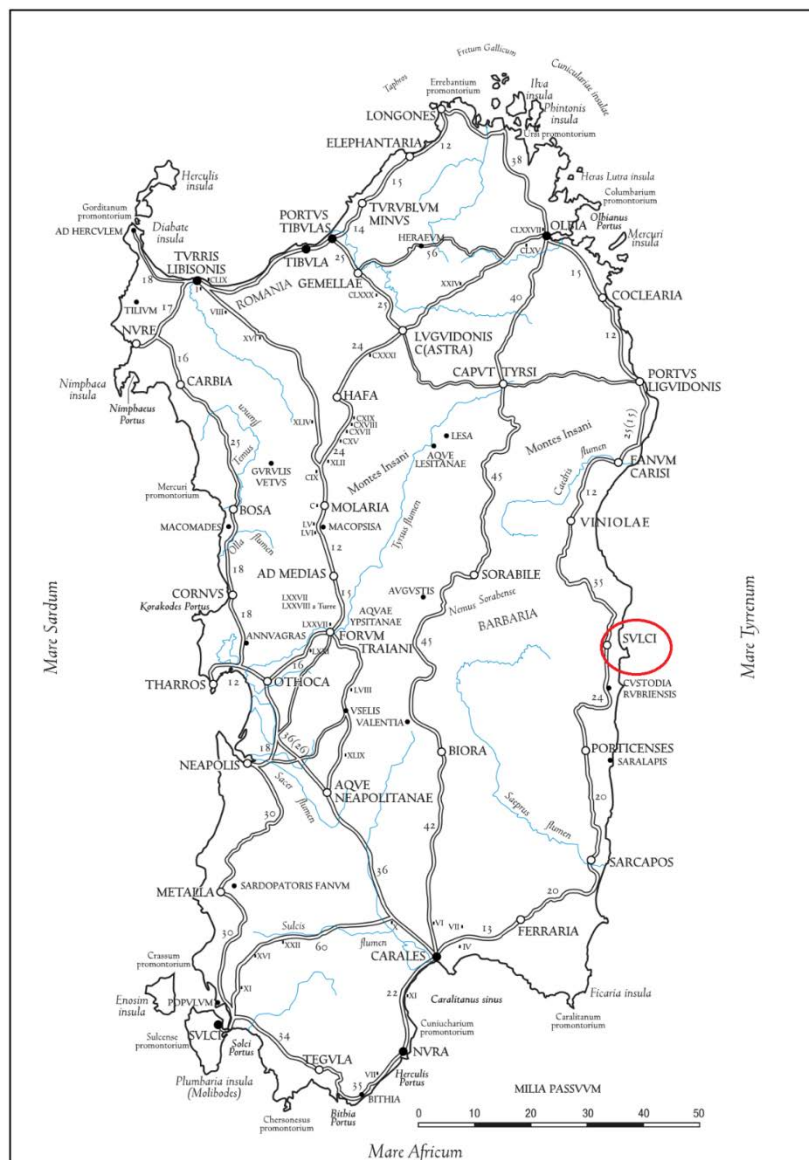


Fig. 6 - The Roman road system in Sardinia. *Sulci* is highlighted in red (from Mastino 2005, p. 340, fig. 37).

¹ Claudius Claudianus (end IV - start of V century A.D.) mentions *Sulci*, ancient Carthaginian colony; Claudius Ptolemy (II century A.D.) refers, however, to the *Sulpius Portus*.

During Roman times, the Olgiastra region, crossed by the road connecting *Carales* and Olbia, had a strong military connotation as the finds of diplomas² and military decorations³ prove, indicating the presence of Roman veterans⁴. Information on the kind of settlements, probably mainly rural, is limited. But in some area, like the coastal plan of the Tortolì pond, you have a concentration of evidence of the material culture dating to the Roman Age. The presence of a safe harbour for Roman ships sailing the Mediterranean, in Arbatax, is also confirmed by the numerous underwater finds in adjacent waters. That type of coastline, with all the headlands and inlets, meant it was still exploited at later dates as a safe harbour and a lookout point to identify possible dangers coming from the sea.

In fact, from the first years of the VIII century A.D., the Arabs began to raid the Sardinian coasts, making construction of the first coastal defence towers necessary.

From the IX to the XV century, during the Sardinian Giudicati period, several forts were built to control the Sardinian coastline. During the island's Spanish dominion, in particular at the beginning and all through the first half of the XVI century, incursions increased considerably. So from 1570 they started planning a fort network to defend the coast. In 1587, King Philip II of Spain set up the "Royal Administration of Towers", entrusting it with the construction of new towers and their management, enrolling soldiers and supplying them with weapons. The pirate phenomenon stopped at the start of the XIX century so the coastal towers were no longer needed.

In general, the towers were positioned at strategic points from where you could cover wide stretches of sea and each tower could communicate, by luminous signals, with the ones next to it.

Between the XVI and XVII century, three lookout towers to defend and protect the territory against pirate raids were built in Arbatax. The towers of San Michele and San Geminiano are still visible, whilst the third one, called "di Largavista" was demolished in the second half of the XIX century to make room for the Bellavista Lighthouse.

² The "military diploma" is a document written on a bronze tablet that Roman army soldiers received when they were discharged, usually after 20-25 years of service. It stated that they had been discharged honourably.

³ These are *phalerae*, decorative metal discs which could decorate both soldiers' armour and a horse's harness.

⁴ All soldiers, after being discharged, were designated as "veterans". That qualification had financial and land allocation benefits, in Italy and the provinces.

The tower of San Michele, originally indicated in Arabic as "*Arba a Tasciar*", the "fourteenth tower", is said to have given its name to Arbatax which grew, over the years, right around it. The imposing structure, built in the mid XVI century with granite and porphyry blocks, is 15 metres tall, cone-shaped and is split into two interior levels, linked by stairs inside the walls.

The tower guarding the harbour had canons and mortars. It was subjected to several attacks and attempts to land over the centuries. In 1846, they stopped using the building for lookout and defence purposes and it became a Tax Police barracks.



Fig. 7 - The tower of S. Miguel and, in the background, the Bellavista lighthouse (photo Unicity S.p.A.).



Fig. 8 - The tower of S. Miguel (photo Unicity S.p.A.).

The tower of San Gemiliano, built in 1587, was originally called “Taratasciar” in Arabic, the “thirteenth tower”. In the XVII century, it was named the tower of *Zacurru* and only acquired its current name in 1767. It stands 43 metres above sea level, on a small headland guarding the bay of Porto Frailis, at about 4 Km from Tortolì. You have a view of over 25 km from the building.



Fig. 9 - The tower of S. Gemiliano (photo Unicity S.p.A.).

Built with local granite blocks, cone-shaped and slender in structure giving it a diameter of 7 m and a remaining height of 12 m. The raised entrance, at about 4 metres up to guarantee the building better defence, could be reached by a rope or wooden ladder. The space the guards lived in was a small room covered by a dome measuring about 13 m², with two gun slits. Going up wooden stairs, through a trap door, you reached the terrace holding canons and where soldiers were protected behind a wall (that is a brick parapet present only on one side of the tower towards land). The tower was assigned an *alcaide*, that is a captain, two soldiers and an arsenal with six rifles, a cannon and two mortars. It was abandoned a few later after the Royal Administration of Towers was suppressed in 1842.

The third tower, called "di Largavista" was built before 1639 on the top of the headland and was demolished in 1866 to make room for the Lighthouse of Bellavista. The tower's name came from the fact that from its position you had an ample view of over 45 km from the coast.



Fig. 10 - The lighthouse of Capo Bellavista (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Maria Grazia Arru

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Progetto cofinanziato dall'Unione Europea
Programma Operativo FESR 2007-2013

FESR - Fondo Europeo di Sviluppo Regionale - Asse I, Linea di Attività 1.2.3.a