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Port and coastal towers of Arbatax

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■ Story of the Studies

The coastal landscape of the western and central Mediterranean changed considerably in the XVI century when the towns built walls and bastions to defend themselves against barbarian pirate raids; while a system of towers was built on high ground, with a lookout function.

Sardinia itself was fortified too; given that, being in the centre of the Mediterranean, it was sacked and people were kidnapped to be used as slaves or to be exchanged for expensive ransoms.

In the mid XVI century, the Kingdom of Sardinia defence systems were inadequate and were one of the main problems for the Spanish crown. So much so that in 1552 King Charles V appointed the engineer from Cremona, Rocco Capellino, to reorder and complete Sardinian fortifications.

It is Capellino who prepared a chorographic map (we have three different versions), drawn in 1577, showing lots of small cylindrical towers along the coast; their positions and numbers differ in each version. Scholar analyses have shown that the tower symbol was used by the author to indicate both guard posts and real towers. This map does not show the Arbatax towers.

The drawing by Cappellino is the base for another important XVII century map: *Sardinia*, from *Italy* by the geographer Giovanni Antonio Magini, printed in Bologna in 1620 (fig. 1).





Fig. 1 - Isola di Sardegna, Fabio di Gio Antonio Magini data di edizione 1600-1699
(da <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b53042851p/f1.item.r=sardegna>).

In 1572, the captain from Iglesias, Marco Antonio Camós, sailed around the island to identify the best sites to fortify and filled in a detailed report documenting the existence of several guard posts and fourteen towers, including the one in Arbatax (built in 1554).

At the end of the XVI century, the historian from Sassari Giovanni Francesco Fara, in his work *Chorographia Sardiniae*, provides a faithful picture of the situation in those years. Describing the circumnavigation of the island, he points out existing towers and suggests building new ones, probably basing himself on reports drafted in those years. On the eastern coast, he mentions the presence of a tower on the headland of Arbatax.

The most comprehensive document on the construction of coastal towers in the Spanish period is the so-called "Sardinian - Spanish" map kept in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris. It contains the arms of Philip IV and Francisco De Vico¹, author of *Historia General de la Isla y Reyno de Sardeña*, published in Barcelona in 1639, to which the map seems to be attached. So we can assume it was drawn in the third or fourth decade of the century (fig. 2). The "Sardinian-Spanish" map indicates the existing towers precisely, presenting them with a small perspective drawing and giving names, with few exceptions. The map

¹ Francisco De Vico (1580–1648) was a jurist, politician and historian. Regent of the Supreme Council of Aragon, he worked to get the King of Spain Philip IV to create a Sardinian fleet to defend the coast against the raids of Barbarian pirates.

also includes the tower of *Arbataix*, tower of *Becacerin* (tower of Largavista) and the tower *de Orri*. The latter could be *Zacurro*, toponymic name variant for the tower of S. Gemiliano di Tortolì, constructed in the first quarter of the XVII century (fig. 3).



Fig. 2 - The cover of the work by Francisco De Vico (from De Vico 2004).



Fig. 3 - Chorographic map of Sardinia outlined in 1746 by Craveri and copied in 1788 by the Measurer Gio. Antonio Maina (from Torino State Archives <http://archiviostatatorino.beniculturali.it/work/visua.php?uad=146101>).

At the end of the XVIII century, Giuseppe Cossu², in his work *Descrizione geografica della Sardegna* (1799), when speaking of Ogliastro, provided many details on the tower of "Arbatasso", explaining that it was: «...*guarded by an alcaide, gunner and soldiers. Receives signals from the tower of Larga vista, and from Zacuro, and passes them on to S. Maria Navarese, being unable to discover, or be seen by another, except from the point of Monte Santo, being covered by the high mount of Larga vista, in the middle of it on the sea side, gives practice and requires anchoring. Has a well of poor water from which ships replenish themselves, can must ships when firing a canon, and provides food...*»;

while of the tower of Largavista he says: «...*you enter a frightful bay called Porto Scuru towards the Greek covered in the ridges of the mount of Largavista with a small beach at its head. Whoever comes around the rocks of this mount sees the tower of Largavista on its summit, round and facing east, signalling to the nearby towers on what passes by in those seas, being the most eminent of these contours...*» (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - In the foreground the tower of San Miguel, in the background on top of the headland of the same name, the Bellavista lighthouse (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

² Giuseppe Cossu (1739-1811) after graduating in Canon law, studied agronomy and became famous. He was a member of various Italian academies and one of the founders of the Royal Agrarian and Economic Society of Cagliari.

The writer also gives us evidence of a third tower: «...having left the head of Larga vista, you pass the point of Rombalassa, and that of Elesi, which on bending between land, the slopes of the bare mount of Larga vista stop and you enter the bay of Fraclisi with a good bottom enclosed by a stony beach covered by a high cliff, on top which you can see a small chapel dedicated to the SS. Giovanni, and Emilio, then coasting a long tongue of high land, extending towards midday, sirocco you can find, on the neighbouring rocks, the round tower of **Zacuro** guarded by an alcalde, gunner and soldiers; it receives signals from the towers of Arbatasso, Larga vista, and S. Maria Navarese, and replies to them. Having left the point of Zacuro, once again onto land on the other side of that line, entering the port of Zacuro with a low, sandy beach at the top and a small pond of the same name behind it, receiving water from the river of Tortoli...»³ (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 - The tower of San Gemiliano seen from the sea (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

³ Cossu 1799, pp. 156-158.

During the first half of the XIX century, two important scholars worked in Sardinia, Vittorio Angius and Alberto della Marmora. Their works are an important source of information for the scholars of Sardinian history and culture.

At the end of the 20s in the XIX century, the abbot from Turin, Goffredo Casalis, appointed the priest Vittorio Angius⁴ to draw up the items of the *Geographic, historical, statistical, commercial dictionary of the States of H.M the King of Sardinia*, on Sardinia. In the nine years spent visiting the entire island, village by village, Angius collected a huge quantity of data on the customs, traditions, language, law, archaeology and history, geography and economy of Sardinia.

He provides considerable information on the territory, population, farming and commerce of Tortolì. He also talks about the port and mentions the towers of *Albatass* and *S. Gemiliano*, while for the *Capo Bellavista* one he says: « ... *the tower called Largavista, used to explore whether there were any suspicious ships, barbarian pirate ships appearing on the horizon and, if so, warn the population to prepare their weapons, if at night or the morning the barbarians should try to invade* »⁵.

For the pond of Tortolì, he felt that: «... *this pond was the ancient Porto Sipicio, indicated in the "Geography" of Ptolemy as in this coast area*»⁶. He also narrates that: «...*in 1851 bishop Todde, wanting to obtain for Tortolì and the province the commodity of a safe harbour, started correspondence on this point with the deputy Angius, whohad proposed to obtain the reopening the ancient Sipicio port from the government Minister Cavour.....appointed a naval officer to study what was to be done on the site, and the officer appointed (Lieutenant Augusto Bruno)after acknowledging that the woods could not remain at anchor in the natural harbour of Arbatax under the NNE winds nor could they even stay in the S. Gemiliano one in the SE winds, wrote the following on the pond: "the nearby pond offers safer harbour for ships, if turned into a port, being also*

⁴ Vittorio Angius (1797-1862) priest of the order of the Piarists, historian, epigraphist and numismatist. In 1848 he was elected Deputy.

⁵ Angius 2006, p. 1715.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

less expensive than the other works that would be needed in the port of Arbatax or S. Gemiliano, if wanting to create a port in them"»⁷.

Alberto Ferrero Della Marmora⁸ performed, as of 1819, a long series of journeys in Sardinia, handling not only the historical and natural riches, but also drawing a map of the island and drafting a full geological description.

In his report *Quistioni marittime spettanti all'isola di Sardegna* (1830), when discussing the difficulties related to the isolation of Sardinia in the first decades of 1800, he mentions some problems related to the coastal towers and the island ports, in order to make valid proposals to improve trade. His analysis considered decommissioning some towers to strengthen others. On arriving to analyse the two bastions of Arbatax-San Miguel (fig. 6) and Santa Maria Navarrese, he declared a preference for the former over the latter; above all for its strategic position, as it was close to the "village" of Tortolì and served two ports. A first landing-place, protected against the northerly winds, not far from the tower of San Gemiliano and the church of the same name, was located south of the headland of Bel-lavista; a second was found north of the promontory, near the Isolotto of Ogliastro, which stood at equal distance between the towers of Arbatax and the Santa Maria⁹ one. He concluded his report by proposing guarding the tower of Arbatax more closely and recommended finding a better place for establishing a small boarding dock. Lastly, he suggested widening the mouth of the pond "to use it as a small harbour"¹⁰.

⁷ Angius 2006, pp. 1715-1716.

⁸ Alberto Ferrero Della Marmora (1789-1863) was a general, naturalist, cartographer and Italian politician. He was a member of the Academy of Science of Turin and of the geological Societies of France, Berlin and London. His most important works are *Voyage en Sardaigne* (1840) and the *Itinéraire de l'île de Sardaigne* 1860.

⁹ Della Marmora 1830, p. 40.

¹⁰ Della Marmora 1830, p. 50.



Fig. 6 - La torre di San Miguel (foto di Unicity S.p.A.).

Father Gelasio Floris in his *Componimento topografico dell'isola di Sardegna* datato 1829, provided the first news about the *menhirs* of Perda Longa, describing “two large rustic and trivial granite columns” and including a drawing with the size in palms.

In the last century, Angelino Usai, Flavio Cocco and Vincenzo Maria Cannas, scholars and enthusiasts of Ogliastro antiquities, contributed through their works to reconstructing the history of the territory.

Angelino Usai¹¹, in the work entitled (*L'Ogliastro*, Bologna 1956) also highlights the region by exploring the numerous archaeological sites.

¹¹ Angelino Usai, born in Lanusei in 1906, career officer, was a careful, studious author of works which contributed to reconstructing ancient Ogliastro events.

The priest from Gairo, Flavio Cocco¹², published in three volumes the study “Data on the history of villages in the Diocese of Ogliastra”, telling the history, traditions and news of single places.

Father Vincenzo Maria Cannas¹³ of the Friars Minor, was an avid scholar of the area of Tertenia and its surroundings. He carried out several archival searches, in both Sardinia and Spain.

In 1981, Foiso Fois included the towers of Arbatax and S. Gemiliano in his study on the “Spanish towers and forts of Piedmont in Sardinia” (Cagliari 1981); as did Gianni Montaldo in his “The coastal towers of Sardinia” (Sassari 1992).

In 1976 M.L. Ferrarese Ceruti describes three *menhirs* in Perda Longa, one of which still *in situ* and two knocked down¹⁴. In that same location, he reports on two graves of giants and two cup-shaped boulders.

In recent years the results of digs carried out by Maria Ausilia Fadda in the archaeological area of *S’Ortali ‘e su Monte* have been published; this is where F. Guido had investigated the tomb of giants in 1981.

Finally, between 2005 and 2010 a series of volumes dedicated to Ogliastra were published by Ogliastra Multimedia Library: *Ogliastra: ancient culture - new Province: The Villages, Nature and Environment, History, Society and Economy*.

¹² Flavio Cocco, priest and scholar, was the author of several historical texts and a connoisseur of the Ogliastra.

¹³ Vincenzo Maria Cannas (1914-2001), enthusiast of archival research, spent a long time in the Vatican's secret archives, the ecclesiastical and civil archives of Sardinia, of other regions and of Spain. He published several works. This plus scientific research, the result of archaeological and speleological exploration.

¹⁴ The *menhirs* that Ferrarese Ceruti had reported as being knocked down have now been lifted up again. Following reconnaissance they found a further twelve, for a total of fifteen.

■ Credits

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