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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA  
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

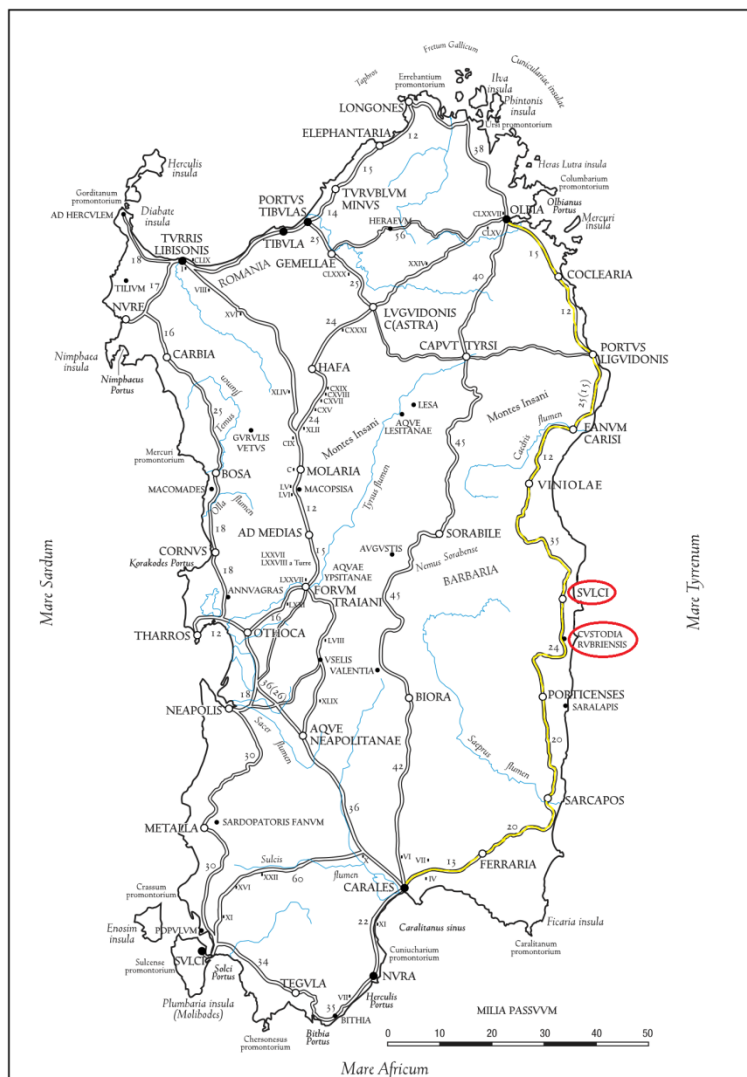
# Port and coastal towers of Arbatax

Patrimonio culturale  
**SARDEGNA** Virtual Archaeology



# The territory in the Roman Period

During the Roman Period, Ogliastra was not only a nodal point between north and south Sardinia, on the road connecting *Carales* and Olbia, but also connected the island's inland area with the eastern coast (fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** - The Roman road system in Sardinia. In red the sites of Custodia Rubriensis and *Sulci*; in yellow the road connecting Cagliari to Olbia (from Mastino 2005, p. 340, fig. 37).

In the Ogliastra region, in this period of its history, there was a strong military presence<sup>1</sup>, proven by the name of the centre of *Custodia Rubriensis*<sup>2</sup> (located at Bari Sardo) and finding, between Lanusei and Ilbono, of diplomas<sup>3</sup> (probably all of *classiar*<sup>4</sup>) and military decorations (*phalerae*)<sup>5</sup>. This proves that Roman veterans lived in the area<sup>6</sup> despite its low Romanisation level.

Information on the kind of settlements, probably mainly rural, is limited. But in some areas, like the coastal plan of the Tortoli pond, you have a concentration of evidence on the material culture dating to the Roman Age (fig.2). Settlements of a certain size were identified to the north, on the plains behind the lagoon, like in the locations *Tradala* and *Perdixedda*; while further south, a particularly interesting site is at *Is Murdegus*<sup>7</sup>.

In this historical period it is plausible that Roman ships sailing the Mediterranean towards North Africa had a stopping point along the coast of Tortoli-Arbatax. This assumption is confirmed by the numerous underwater finds made along the eastern coast of Sardinia, from Olbia to Cagliari. In particular, the wreck of a ship was found off Capo Bellavista-Arbatax. It carried ingots of tin, copper and iron from the mines in the Roman province of Betica (corresponding to the current Andalusia) and datable to the I century A.D.<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ogliastra was part of a segment of military presences which from the territory of Arzana (*Is Bangius*) through *Custodia Rubriensis* and the surrounding area, reached Dorgali (*Su Anzu-San Giovanni*), on to *Sorabile* (Fonni); see Pautasso 1990, p. 124 and Mastino, Ruggieri 2001, p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> The centre of *Custodia Rubriensis* is mentioned in the *Ravenna Cosmography*, a list of places and towns filled in by an unknown person in the VII century A.D. The text is probably based on one or more maps from a previous period.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> The *classiarii* (from the Latin *classis* = fleet) were soldiers of the Roman Navy.

<sup>5</sup> The *falera* was a decorative metal disc which could decorate both soldiers' armour and a horse's harness.

<sup>6</sup> All soldiers, after being discharged, were designated as "veterans". That qualification had financial and land allocation benefits, in Italy and the provinces.

<sup>7</sup> Pautasso 1990, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> See Lo Schiavo, Gianfrotta 1987, Mastino, Ruggieri 2001, pp. 153-154.



**Fig. 2** - Aerial view of the pond of Tortolì  
(da <http://www.alimages.it/report/2006a/06ago3/agosto3.html>).

Other proof of the wall structures referable to Baths in the church of Santa Barbara<sup>9</sup> and at San Lussorio<sup>10</sup> and the numerous sporadic finds of coins<sup>11</sup>, stamps on *dolia*<sup>12</sup> and table and kitchenware. Furthermore, recovery at sea of a considerable number of amphorae (fig. 3) is evidence of intense trading, especially of oil and fish paste, between the Ogliastra coast and other Mediterranean countries, especially North Africa. This is also borne out by the mention found in ancient sources of the *Sulpicius Portus* (fig. 4). Its position can probably be placed on the coast of Tortolì-Arbatax, near the current pond area<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The remains of the church of Santa Barbara are in the area of *Cugùmeru*, on the eastern slope of the hill of *Monte Bonghì*. Here they found short stretches of wall and pottery fragments which, though out of context, give proof that the site was used in both the republican and imperial Roman periods.

<sup>10</sup> At the church of San Lussorio they found a stone datable to the late imperial period with an epigraph which records the presence of (*servants*) *vulgares*, that is peasants of a servant status which made sure the *praedia*, that is the Roman farms, worked correctly; see Meloni 2000, pp. 1695-1702. Still at S. Lussorio they found a military diploma, now kept in the National Archaeological Museum of Torino.

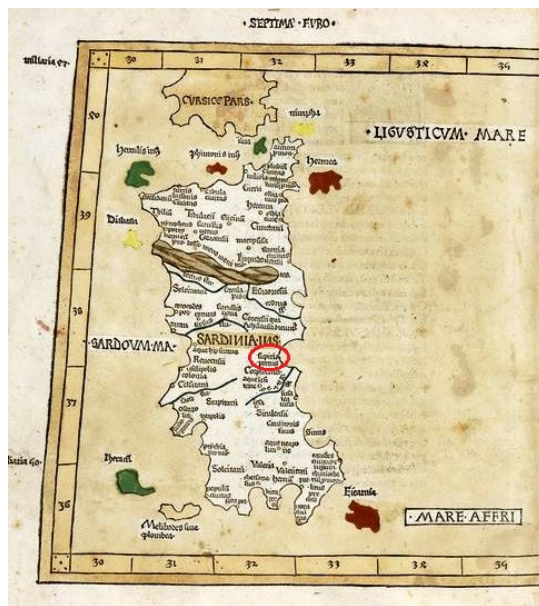
<sup>11</sup> Spano 1872, p. 10; Cannas 1963, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Dolia* are earthenware containers. Boninu 1976, p. 105; Rowland 1981, p. 142.

<sup>13</sup> The *Sulpicius Portus* is mentioned and placed geographically by the *Cosmography* by Claudius Ptolemy (II century A.D.) contained in the work *Geography*: this reports the coordinates of about 8000 different locations in the



**Fig. 3** - Amphora from the sea of Arbatax (from A.a.V.v. 2005, p. 73).



**Fig. 4** - *Septima Europe Tabula*, in Ptolomeus Claudius, *Cosmographia*, Ulma, 1482. The red circle indicates the Sulpicius Portus (from <http://www.sardegna-cultura.it/j/v/258?s=24292&v=2&c=2810&t=1#>)

world known of at the time. See Pais 1923, II, p. 112; Cannas 1963, p. 34; Meloni 1991, p. 242; Vella 2004, pp. 21-32.

## ■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Maria Grazia Arru

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