

# THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AREA OF SATURO

*From Iapygians to Greeks and Romans: 3,000  
years of history overlooking the sea*

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UNIONE EUROPEA

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GREEKS AND IAPYGIANS

The site of Saturo bears witness to the complex relationship between the Iapygians and Greek civilization. Between the 9th and 8th centuries BC, during the peak expansion of the Iapygians in the region, evidence points to a new settlement on the acropolis. In this period, indigenous communities maintained intense commercial relations with the Greeks, as shown by ceramic and metal artifacts of imported origin.

From the 8th century BC, Saturo became a strategic point for the founding of Taranto. The resistance of the Iapygians to the arrival of the colonists led to a conflict that caused the end of the settlement on the acropolis, an event linked to the fulfillment of the oracle of Delphi, which demanded their subjugation.

The subsequent use of the Saturo promontory for sacred purposes seems to reflect the definition of the borders of the new Tarantine polis. Starting from the 7th century BC, the Iapygians fragmented into three subregional identities—Messapian, Peucetian, and Daunian — and it was only in the 4th century BC that Taranto managed to gain full control of the coastal strip.



1 e 2. Lorem Ipsum is simply dummy text of the printing and typesetting industry. Lorem Ipsum has been the industry's standard dummy text ever since the 1500s, when an unknown printer took a galley of type and scrambled it to make a type specimen book. It has survived not only five centuries, but also the leap into electronic typesetting, remaining essentially unchanged.

# MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE TARANTINE COAST

The Tarantine coast is rich in legends that weave together myth, history, and landscape.

According to tradition, Taras, son of Poseidon and the nymph Satyria, arrived in the region and founded the settlement of Saturo after seeing a dolphin—a favorable sign that appeared while he was performing sacrifices. The founding of Taranto, on the other hand, is associated with Phalanthos, leader of the Spartan colonists, to whom the oracle of Delphi foretold the birth of a great city.

During his journey, Phalanthos was shipwrecked but was saved by a dolphin. He landed on the promontory of Saturo, a sacred place linked to Athena and Aphrodite Basilis, marked by springs believed to be holy. Both narratives are depicted in the coinage of Taranto, where a naked male figure is shown riding a dolphin.

Archaeological evidence and mythical sources confirm the symbolic importance of the Tarantine coast, seen as a foundational space where the sacred and the human meet.

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# THE COASTAL TOWERS SYSTEM

The system of coastal towers, developed along the Tarantine coast starting from the 16th century, represented an effective defensive tool against raids by pirates and corsairs coming from the sea. The creation of an initial network of towers was due to the initiative of Don Pedro de Toledo, Viceroy of Naples, who ordered the main settlements to build, at their own expense, maritime watchtowers and fortresses to defend themselves from Saracen attacks.

Mostly built with local stone, these towers were visually connected to one another, allowing for swift communication in the event of suspicious sightings. These structures generally feature a truncated pyramidal or cylindrical shape, designed to withstand assaults and provide shelter for the soldiers on guard.

In addition to their defensive function, the towers also played a central role in territorial and productive organization, shaping the cultural and historical landscape of the Ionian coast. The coastal defensive system, which includes the Torre di Saturo — today a valuable testament to the region's historical and architectural heritage — reflects the strategy of control and protection implemented for centuries along the Mediterranean shores.

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# MARITIME TRADE: ROUTES AND SHIPWRECKS

Along the Ionian coast of Apulia, bays and inlets have always favored the development of landing places and maritime trade networks. Since ancient times, these ports have been central to commercial exchanges, as evidenced by numerous shipwrecks.

The shipwreck of Campomarino di Maruggio, dating to the Hellenistic period, yielded Magna Graecia amphorae of the MGS IV type, used for transporting wine and oil, some bearing identifying stamps. The wreck of Torre Sgarrata (1st–3rd century AD) carried around 170 tons of valuable marble, including roughly hewn sarcophagi, facing slabs, and blocks intended for statuary, originating from Asia Minor and the island of Thasos.

The wreck at San Pietro in Bevagna, dated to the 3rd century AD, carried 23 unfinished Thasian marble sarcophagi of varying sizes. Some were stacked to maximize hold space. The high-quality cargo was likely to be finished and sold in Rome.

The concentration of shipwrecks along this coastal stretch reflects the intensity of trade, the presence of strategic harbors, and the risks of navigating an area as active as it was exposed.

# THE SYSTEM OF ROMAN COASTAL VILLAS

The coastal villas of the Roman period along the Ionian coast of Apulia are tangible evidence of the strong presence of Roman elites in the area. They chose this stretch of coastline for its natural beauty, proximity to harbors and springs, and its strategic role in maritime trade.

Among these is the villa of Lido Silvana, situated on a promontory between two inlets, which preserves stone and mortar wall remains, fragments of vaults, and rooms with mosaic and marble floors, dating from the 2nd to 3rd century AD, possibly connected to a production facility.

At Gandoli, excavations in 1983 uncovered two large adjoining rectangular rooms, coated with plaster, probably part of the *pars rustica* of a villa. Further south, at the site of Frascione (Nardò), a late Republican residential complex was identified, featuring walls built in *opus quadratum*, and dating from the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD.

These complexes document the mixed vocation — both agricultural and maritime — of Roman villas overlooking the sea.

# WORLD WAR II FORTIFICATIONS ALONG THE COAST

During World War II, the Ionian coast of Taranto was heavily militarized to protect the naval base of Taranto. The promontory of Saturo was adapted for military purposes: the 16th-century tower was restored and marked with a black stripe indicating its function as an observation post.

Two reinforced concrete casemates were built on the acropolis, and in the area of the Roman villa, a bunker-lighthouse was constructed to illuminate the sea and signal the presence of enemy units. The lighthouse, equipped with a manual counter weight elevator, ensured nighttime visibility for the coastal batteries. At its base, a casemate connected to the defensive system is still visible.

The entire complex integrated observation, communication, and active defense. Not far away, the Batteria Cattaneo at Gandoli, armed with heavy-caliber cannons, completed the protection of the Taranto coastline.

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# RECENT GEOMAGNETIC INVESTIGATIONS

In 2021, a geomagnetic survey was conducted on approximately 5,500 m<sup>2</sup> of the unexcavated area of Saturo Park. The results revealed numerous anomalies corresponding to buried wall structures, notably parallel walls continuing from those already exposed by excavations.

Rooms and architectural arrangements previously unknown have been identified, suggesting the presence of complex buildings from various chronological phases. Some areas show concentrations of materials linked to structural collapses, including *cocciopesto* flooring, as well as features related to heat-generating activities, such as hearths and similar structures. In the northeastern area, irregular shapes have emerged, possibly indicating burials or naturally filled cavities.

The survey also demonstrated that these structures extend far beyond the currently visible boundaries, suggesting the site was considerably larger and more complex than previously thought, perhaps serving public, residential, or sacred purposes yet to be clarified.

# ENVIRONMENT AND COASTLINE: THE HISTORICAL-NATURAL LANDSCAPE

The promontory of Saturo, on the Ionian coast, represents an exceptional meeting point between natural landscape and history. Characterized by sandstone rock rising up to 30 meters above the sea, this site is crossed by ravines formed by the runoff of spring waters. A perennial spring, still active today, has favored the development of human settlements since ancient times, from the Bronze Age to the late Roman period.

Its strategic coastal position encouraged intense commercial and cultural exchanges, making Saturo a key hub in the Mediterranean. The continuous interaction between humans and nature is reflected in the landscape, where archaeological structures such as sanctuaries, Roman villas, and fortifications blend harmoniously into the natural context. This balance between natural and historical elements makes Saturo a unique place, capable of narrating millennia of cultural and environmental evolution.

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# THE AQUA NYMPHALIS AQUEDUCT

The aqueduct known as Aqua Nymphalis supplied the city of Taranto by capturing springwaters between Leporano and Saturo. Recent cartographic, aerial photographic, and topographical research has made it possible to reconstruct its route with greater precision, verifying previously known data and identifying sections that were unknown until now.

The infrastructure featured a complex system of secondary channels: some intended for capturing underground water, others for conveying it toward the city. In its final stretch, the aqueduct crossed low-lying areas on arches and supporting walls, eventually reaching the castellum aquae of Taranto, identified in Piazza Ebalia.

Particularly fascinating is the discovery, in the locality of Le Cutrane, of inscriptions in red on the plaster of the tunnel — actual construction registers recording workdays and the names of laborers. Water management along this stretch of coast was crucial from antiquity, as evidenced by the cistern built above the Roman villa at Saturo, which collected water essential for the settlement's activities.

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# THE DEITIES OF THE PROMONTORY OF SATURO

Since ancient times, the promontory of Saturo has hosted significant cults dedicated to Greek deities deeply connected to nature and local life. In particular, prominent figures include Athena; Aphrodite Basilis, a warrior goddess and protector of sailors; and Gaia, a chthonic goddess associated with the fertility of the land and with divinatory practices — the latter two both worshipped in the Sanctuary of the Spring.

The nymph Satyria, eponymous of the local spring, is mentioned in ancient sources as the mother of the mythical founder Taras and the consort of Poseidon, underscoring the sacred importance of water and nature in the area. Athena, on the other hand, was venerated in the Sanctuary of the Acropolis, where an epigraphic dedication and a marble head dated to the 4th century BC bear witness to her cult.

These deities, each with specific characteristics and roles, reflect the spiritual richness and religious complexity of the promontory of Saturo — a crossroads of cultures and beliefs in the heart of Magna Graecia.

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