

# Sardinia's Giant Secrets

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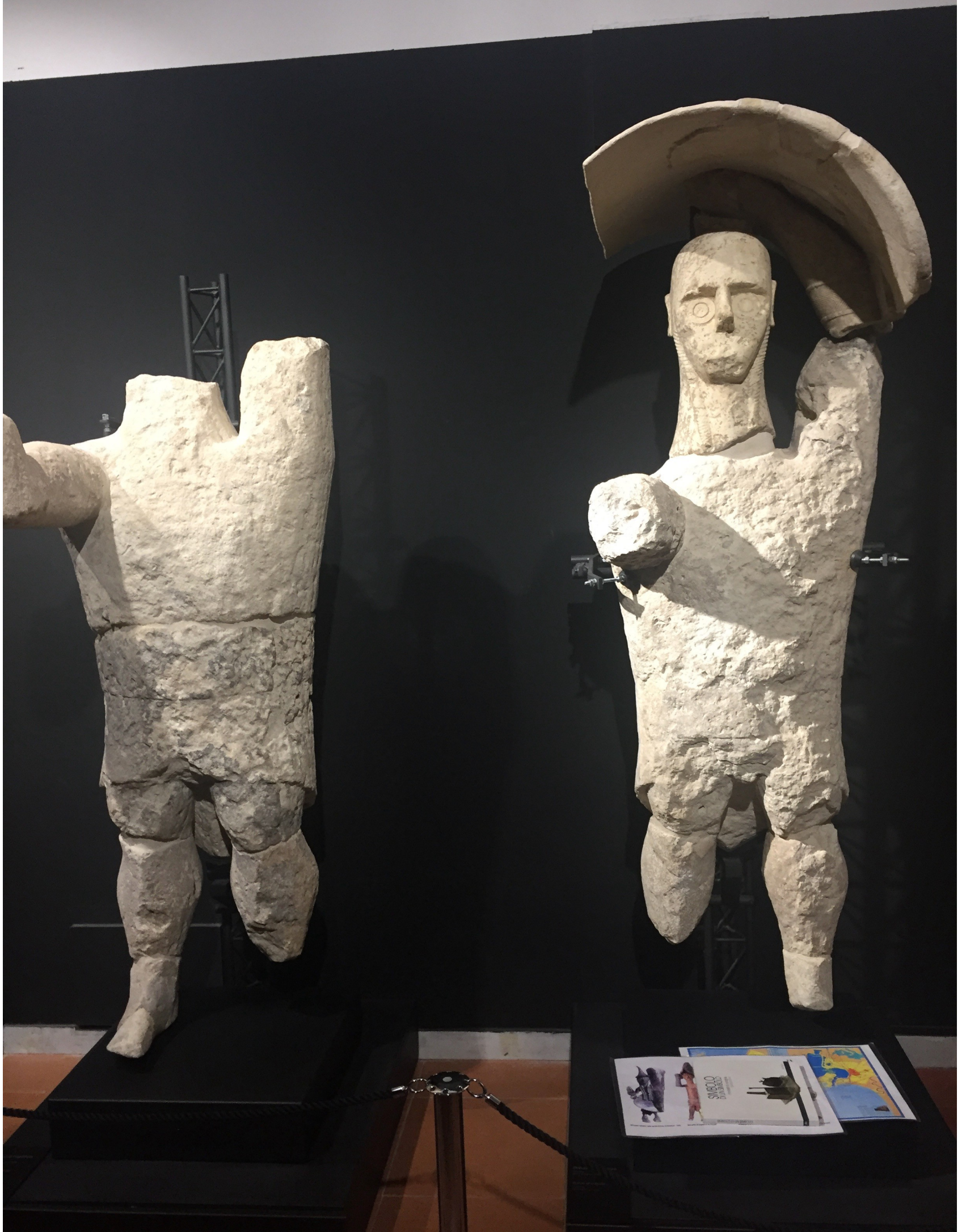


Western Sardinia has been attracting visitors for thousands of years — from contemporary vacationers to medieval pilgrims to . . . mysterious giants dating back to 750 BC.

You can meet the archeological proof of those giants on the Sinis Peninsula, about seven miles southwest of the town of Cabras, along the western coast of Sardinia around the island's midpoint. The proof starts in Cabras itself, at the Museo Civico Giovanni Marongiu, a compact, handsome museum built in 1997 to house six of the 28 giants found to date. Purpose-built and modern as it is, with signage in Italian and English, the museum was being renovated when I visited. It is being enlarged to accommodate 13 of the other 16 statues, currently housed at the National Archeological Museum of Cagliari.

If you arrange for a guide, as I did, these limestone stalwarts — three wrestlers, two archers, and a warrior — will come to life. Or death, since their purpose was to mark a series of tombs discovered near Cabras starting in 1974. The sculptures are known as the Mont' e Prama giants because the first fragments were found near Mount Prama in 1974, when a local farmer, plowing his field, unearthed a giant stone head.

Archeologists and experts on Nuragic culture (a Sardinian civilization of the Iron Age and beyond) were amazed by the find, first because of the size of the statues (up to three meters tall, almost 10 feet); second, because of sheer numbers (28 total to date), and third, because of their date of creation, believed to be between the 11th and 8th century BC. This makes them the most ancient anthropomorphic sculptures of Mediterranean Europe, predating those of Greece. The Nuragic society that sculpted them had to have been more sophisticated than previously believed. Details of the giants' apparel — leatherwear and draped cloth — suggest an Eastern influence, from trade routes perhaps? The statues' eyes are hypnotically large and compelling; some whisper that Martians were the original role models.



Once you have toured the museum and seen both the statues and other examples of Nuragic culture, you will be ready to visit Tharros. This complex on the Sinis peninsula is a crossroads of Sardinian conquest on a narrow finger of land jutting out to the sea. It began as a Nuragic village.

Then it was the site of a Phoenician city from the 8th or 7th century BC. It became a Punic city when the Carthaginians conquered it in the 6th century BC. The Romans came next, in 238 BC, and may have given it its name — a variation of “lands” in Latin. Decline began after Rome fell, but early Christians built a church on the site and it remained important in Christianity until 1071.

A guide can help you understand the layers of civilization amid the columns, thermal baths, viaducts, tombs, and urban grids, a jumble of stones and pillars to the uninitiated. A site expert can help you read these relics to understand which is Punic/Phoenician and which is Roman. You can see for yourself ridges in the surviving slabs of road that show where carts and chariots rolled.

If you write in advance, the organization managing Tharros will try to place you with a group in English so you can have a guided tour at no cost. Otherwise you can enter the park — the most visited archeological site in Sardinia — and wander around independently with no tour guide. Or you can pay for a private guide. A ticket to the archeological park and the museum costs eight euro. A train running between the two locations during the summer costs about 3.5 euro.

Just before the entrance to Tharros is the Church of San Giovanni, a 10th century sandstone structure built on a Punic necropolis. It is one of the oldest churches in Sardinia and its Byzantine-like domes and cylindrical towers reflect the cultures and centuries that influenced its design.



North of the church and the archeological site is the tiny town of San Salvatore. It looks like a deserted Mexican village, with low-slung homes in sun-hardened yellow, and in fact was used as a film set for spaghetti westerns in the 1960s and 1970s. Today the town is empty 350 days of the year, but, during a concentrated period bracketing the first week of September, San Salvatore comes alive for the *Corsa degli Scalzi* (the race of the barefoot).

Origins of the event may be traced back to 1619, when pirate pillaging was a constant threat. When the alarm sounded, local women carried valuables and provisions away from town, while the men carried a statue from the church and ran barefoot toward the sea, hoping that the dust swirling up from their feet would appear to be an advancing army, dissuading marauders. And it worked, supposedly.

The village roads are still dusty, the route to Cabras less so, but up to 800 men, rigorously local (from Cabras and environs), run barefoot the seven

miles from Cabras to San Salvatore, carrying the statue. A week later a group of women, similarly shoeless, walk the course in reverse, bringing the statue back to Cabras. The women are dressed in traditional costumes, the men in white garments. In between the two races are *sagre*(festivals) of local food, performances by musicians and actors, religious programs, parades, and the vision of a sleepy little 17thcentury ghost town come to life.



The church in San Salvatore is worth a visit any time of year. The town was built around it as a Christian church, but if you take the stairs below ground level, you will see traces of the pre-Nuragic, Nuragic, Phoenician, Roman, and Arabic cultures that have passed by. A Greek alphabet

suggests that this space was used as a school at one point. There is a Greek swastika. The drawing of a lion suggests explorers. A sailor wrote an inscription of thanks after a dangerous ocean crossing. Arabic sailors left messages in their language. A good guidebook or guide can help you identify all these signs of accumulated history.

Emerging into the sunlight from this underground hypogeum, you may be ready for Sardinia's best-known attraction — its beaches. The west coast of this southern tip of Sardinia is a protected marine area, with waters that are clear and crystalline. Not to be outdone in beauty, the beaches here are equally dazzling — eight of them, one after the other, composed of sparkling white quartz.

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