



**T**HE Queen is ugly. Peeking out through the masses of her unbound hair, her face is marred by a scar that stretches from her right ear to her mouth. Eleonora, the last Queen of Arborea, stares at me from the cornice of the apse arch in the tiny church of San Gavino Martire, in San Gavino Monreale, Sardinia.

I am traipsing up and down the island in her footsteps, and this church is a milestone in my quest because it contains her only surviving effigies. Although Eleonora was portrayed innumerable times in later centuries, her real looks had remained a mystery until the San Gavino sculpture was identified in 1983. The discovery shattered the queen's legend, which wanted her to be as beautiful as she was wise and brave. Nevertheless, she remains a remarkable woman who withstood a foreign invasion, thwarted a conspiracy to overthrow her rule and granted her country one of Europe's earliest constitutions.

Born in about 1340, Eleonora was the eldest daughter of Mariano IV, king of Arborea, a small country running the length of western Sardinia.

'A mere daughter, Eleonora ascended to the throne when her brother was slain in 1383,' says the Marchese Marcello Lostia di Santa Sofia, a local historian. A 'mere daughter' she may have been, but Eleonora's presence haunts every street of Oristano, once the capital city of the Arborean kingdom and now a pretty, if sleepy, market town.

Every now and again, a medieval ruin crops up incongruously amid a procession of Baroque palazzi. In a quiet backstreet are the Gothic church and convent of Santa Chiara, built in 1343. Evidence suggests that Eleonora and her family often visited both church and convent.

By contrast, the palazzo in the busy Piazza Roma, known in Oristano as Eleonora's house, never saw even a glimpse of the queen. Eleonora is more likely to have walked past the tall, 13th-century tower that rises above the bustle of cars and people in the same piazza today. Oristano's tower is almost identical to two others—San Pancrazio and Torre dell'Elefante—in Cagliari, 56 miles south.

It is in the latter that the Aragonese, who held a few cities in Sardinia and hoped to conquer the whole island, imprisoned



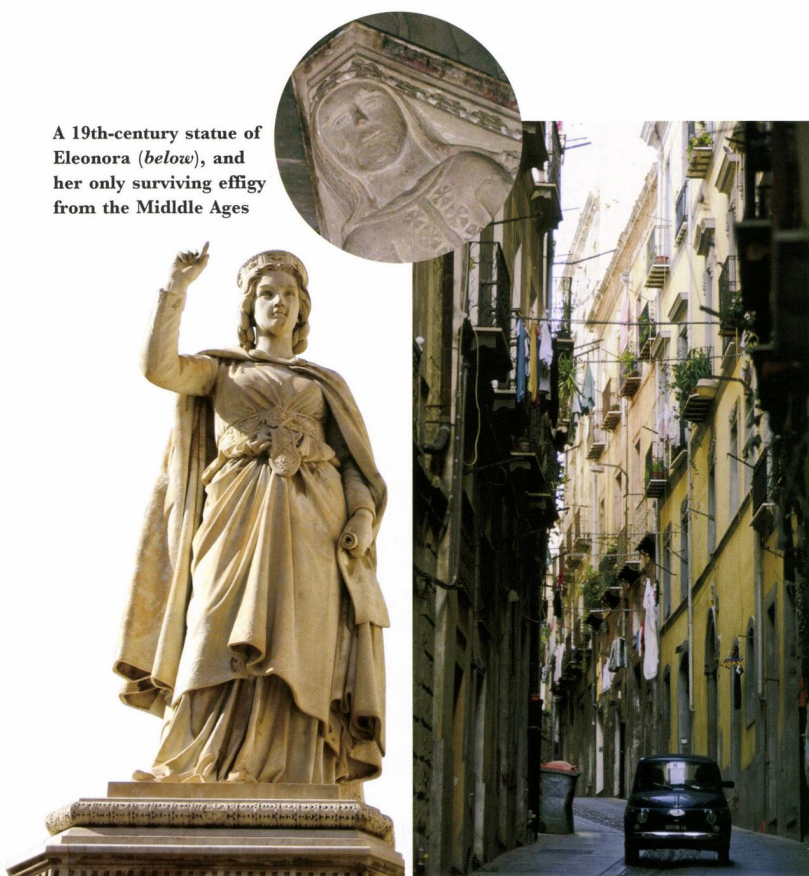
Gateway to Sardinia: Cagliari, the capital, as seen from the harbour

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ISLAND QUEEN

CARLA PASSINO takes a tour of Sardinia, tracing the footsteps of its remarkable Renaissance queen, Eleonora.



A 19th-century statue of Eleonora (below), and her only surviving effigy from the Middle Ages



Eleonora's husband, Brancaleone, in retribution for the queen's defiance of their rule. A tortuous network of shade-filled streets links the two towers, running diagonally across the medieval quarter past the palazzi of the nobility, the cathedral of Santa Maria and the Viceroy's palace.

The Torre dell'Elefante, named for an elephant sculpture by its gate, guards the western entrance to the medieval quarter. It takes a lifetime of steps to reach the crenellated terrace on the top floor but, once there, it opens onto the sea. In one corner is a minuscule room with an arrow-slit window, which overlooks the city walls. I fancy that Brancaleone might have been kept here, too high to attempt escape, with the fortifications blocking all views of home and potential rescue—and am then disappointed to learn that the storey wasn't added until 1852.

At whatever level he was incarcerated, he cannot have been hugely comfortable if Eleonora, after five years of resistance, was trading castles and cities for her husband's release. 'Brancaleone hated the Aragonese with a vengeance,' says Conte Alberto di

The 'tortuous network': a narrow street in Castello, Cagliari's medieval quarter

Villasanta, who owns the Castello di Sanluri, one of the key castle strongholds the Aragonese had taken from Eleonora. Today no one would guess that the tranquil village of Sanluri on the vast plain linking Oristano to Cagliari was once a strategic outpost over which many battles were fought. 'The Aragonese fortified the Sanluri castle in just 27 days in 1355. When Eleonora's father realised his enemies had started building a fortress here, he attacked them before they could complete their work,' says the Conte Villasanta. He shows me Arborea's weapon of choice, the double-edged *virga sardisca*, with its sharp spear point on one end and lethal curved knife on the other 'to cut the tendons of enemy horses'. He quickly demonstrates how the *virga* was used, wielding it with consummate skill amid a group of unsuspecting German visitors, who look horrified.

Eleonora herself spent much time here. Her room is at the end of a corridor on the first floor, although it is now

bizarrely furnished with 18th-century Venetian antiques. That same room also played host to the heir to the Aragonese throne, Martin el Joven, who proved the scourge of the Arboreans, defeating them in battle eight years after Eleonora's death. His triumph, however, was short-lived, for he died just a few weeks later. Legend has it that, after his victory, Martin—a notorious philanderer—entertained in Sanluri a beautiful prisoner whose amorous ardour brought him to his death. 'His father did not survive him for long, and the throne of Aragon passed into the hands of the Castilian prince, Fernando,' says the Conte Villasanta.

It was the end of the Aragonese and the start of the dynasty that would unite Castile, Aragon and Sardinia under Spanish rule.

#### CAGLIARI CONNECTIONS

Volareweb (0800 032 0992; [www.volareweb.com](http://www.volareweb.com)) runs a direct flight from London Luton to Cagliari four times a week. Alternatively, both Alitalia (0870 544 8259; [www.alitalia.co.uk](http://www.alitalia.co.uk)) and British Airways (0870 850 9850; [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) have several flights a day from London to Cagliari via Rome.

To visit Cagliari's medieval quarter and towers, follow signs to Castello, which is the name of the quarter.

Beyond Cagliari, the best way to explore Sardinia is to hire a car. Rental booths for all the major car-hire firms can be found at Cagliari airport. The castle and village of Sanluri are 28 miles north of Cagliari, and Oristano is 56 miles north-west, both easily reached on the Strada Statale 131 Carlo Felice.

Recommended are the Hotel Regina Margherita (00 39 070 670342; [www.hotelregina-margherita.com](http://www.hotelregina-margherita.com)) and the Hotel Mediterraneo (00 39 070 301271; [www.hotelmediterraneo.net](http://www.hotelmediterraneo.net)) in Cagliari; and the Hotel Mistral 2 (00 39 0783 210389; [www.shg.it/mistral2/](http://www.shg.it/mistral2/)) in Oristano.

To learn more about Queen Eleonora of Arborea visit [www.countrylife.co.uk/eleonora.htm](http://www.countrylife.co.uk/eleonora.htm).