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CASTELLO SCALIGERO DI SIRMIONE

SCALIGER CASTLE IN SIRMIONE

The **Sirmione Castle** is an extraordinary example of a **lakeside fortification** and one of the most **spectacular and best-preserved fortresses in the Lake Garda area**. (Fig.1)

The castle stands at the entrance of the medieval village and consists of a **central quadrilateral of walls** enclosed by **three corner towers** and over them stands a **keep**, the tallest tower. There is another, lower circle of defensive walls surrounding a second courtyard, the dock courtyard and the dock itself. (Fig. 2)

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY...

The castle in Sirmione was built just after the **middle of the fourteenth century** at the behest of the **Della Scala family** that, after conquering a vast territory, created a network of fortifications to defend its dominions.

In 1387, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan, occupied Verona and the Scaliger territory, including Sirmione, until 1404; in 1405, Sirmione passed into the hands of the Republic of Venice until 1797, at which time the territory was controlled first by the French and then by the Austrians, until its annexation to the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.



1. View from the lake

THE VISIT - *The entrance and the drawbridge*

After going into the village of Sirmione through the monumental gate, you can enter the castle via a small **ravelin**, which protects the entrance to the fortress, overlooking the square. The bridge we walk across, today a masonry structure protected by modern railings with the symbol of the Della Scala family on it, was once a **drawbridge**: you can still see the holes where the beams were once used to raise the bridge.

On the facade of the ravelin, there are **two marble Scaliger coats of arms** and the **sculpture of the lion of Saint Mark**, the symbol of Venetian domination, but created in 1890. (Fig. 3) From the portal, once also protected by a portcullis, you enter the portico where the ticket office is located, along with educational panels and three wooden early medieval pirogues recovered in the waters of the Oglio river by a team of archaeologists from the Underwater Archaeology Centre (STAS - Centro di Archeologia Subacquea), the headquarters of which were located inside the castle for years.



2. Entrance to the dock from lakeside



3. Entrance from Piazza Castello

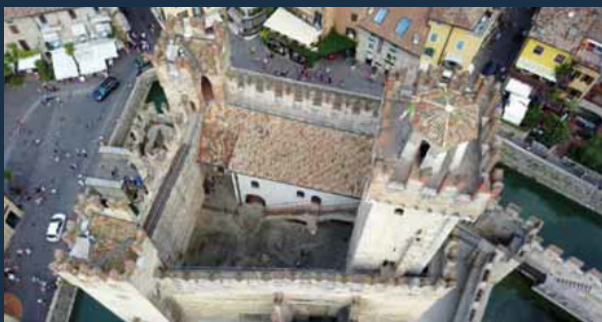


4. The keep

The **central courtyard**, already used as a parade ground for military exercises in the past, is well-protected by the three towers and by the **keep**. (Fig. 4) Alongside the keep, which was originally the castellan's home, there is the soldiers' dormitory, the donjon. The two buildings are closely connected, allowing troops to move quickly to the walkways. (Fig. 5)

From the courtyard, you can access the **southwestern tower** that, being shielded, meaning that opens towards the inside area, ensured the defenders better control and gave no shelter to the enemies, in the event of the fortification being seized. From here, you go up to the wallwalks.

The **wallwalks**, which are now protected by railings, are made of Verona stone and run around the four sides of the main courtyard, crossing the three corner towers. Here, the soldiers found protection from the enemy, thanks to the merlons from which they hurled projectiles.



5. The central courtyard



6. The second courtyard

The keep - From the southern side of the walkways, you can get to the keep, which is 37 metres high, crowned with stone corbels and decorated with a Scaliger coat of arms, originally depicting a ladder but which now appears to have been carved away. In fact, every ruler had the habit of erasing the memory of the previous one, eliminating their coats of arms. The merlons of the keep were all rebuilt during the **renovation work in 1920**, while at one time there must have been openings at the base of the parapet that were used as machicolations, from which various materials and projectiles were dropped onto possible attackers. From the top of the keep, there is an enchanting view of the Garda landscape.

The **second entrance** - From the segmental portal that opens up in the southern wall of the main courtyard, you will move towards the castle's second entrance, from the dry land area, with a sequence of two ravelins connected by a fortified corridor, meaning enclosed by crenelated walls and protected by drawbridges. The second ravelin, closed by a gate, allows access from the countryside through another bridge that is no longer mobile. Between one ravelin and the other, two doors open up in the fortified corridor: to the west there is access to the second courtyard and to the east the entrance to the dock courtyard.

The **second courtyard** was created with military functions, but in the nineteenth century it was transformed into a covered space, connected to the main courtyard by three doors, which were later blocked up.

You can see several findings dating back to a period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries: fragments of columns, capitals and epigraphs, on which there are dedications and sepulchral inscriptions. (Fig. 6)

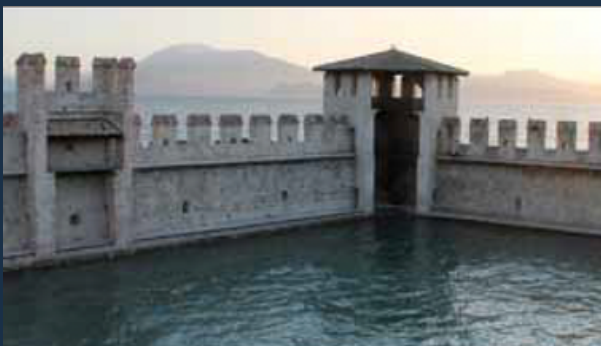


7. The dock courtyard

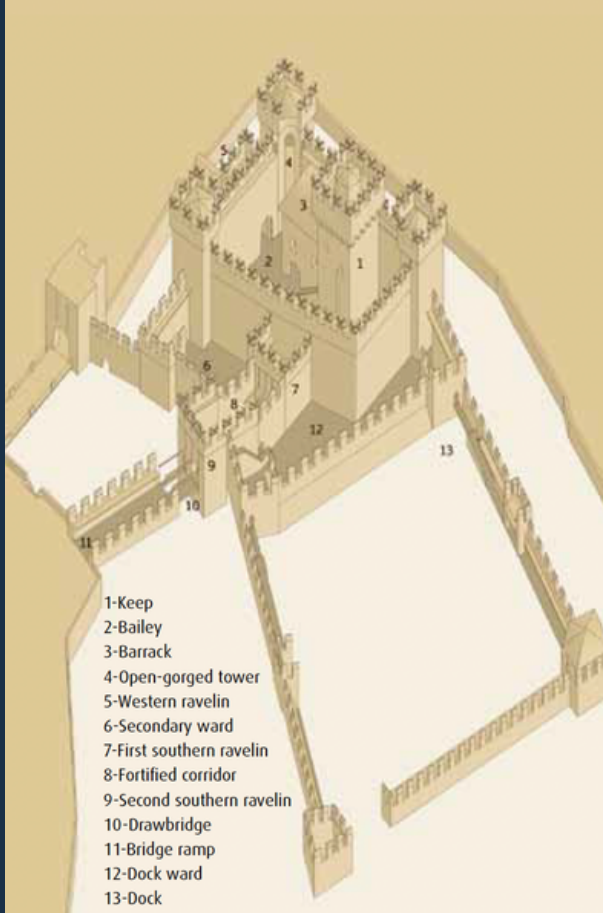
Until a few years ago, a real **lapidary** was kept inside the castle, with artefacts from the Middle Ages, among which precious marbles from the Longobard period, currently on display at the Archaeological Museum located in the Grottoes of Catullus.

The function of the **dock courtyard** (Fig. 7) is as secondary protection of the walls and, in fact, it is enclosed by walls crowned by the so-called “Guelph merlons”. A staircase leads to the wallwalk that overlooks the dock (Fig. 8), in which the Venetian and Scaliger fleets took shelter and which is an exceptional example of a 14th century port fortification. It is, in fact, the oldest dock to reach us almost intact, like the one belonging to the fortress of Lazise, now under the ground, on the Verona side of Lake Garda.

The **dock** has an irregular trapezoid shape and the outward sloping of the wall could be a precaution to protect the water basin inside it from the “pelèr” wind blowing from the north. Two walkways run along it on three sides: the upper one for defence of the militias and the lower one, used for mooring the boats. The basin within the dock – which has been buried by the accumulation of debris over the centuries and which became a walkable courtyard throughout the nineteenth century – was dug up in 1919 and went back to containing water from the lake. In 2018, following restoration work that also led to the construction of a staircase in the northeastern tower, the dock was finally opened up to the public.



8. The dock



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Opening hours: Castle visiting times are seasonal. Please refer to the website

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