

THE SECTIONS

Section I

EARLY MEGALITHISM

Megalithism is a phenomenon that occurred independently in various parts of the world and at different times. It consists of the use of **stones of great size: hence its name, composed of the two ancient Greek word mégas, meaning 'large' and líthos, meaning 'stone'**.

This practice had a mainly social value, as the huge stones were used to erect sacred and funerary monuments.

In Sardinia, the first evidence dates back to the Middle Neolithic (5th millennium BC). In the same period, similar examples can be found elsewhere in Western Europe, particularly in the Pyrenees. In the 'Protomegalithism' phase we find **megalithic circles** or 'circle' tombs, especially in the north-east of the island. One example is the necropolis of Li Muri in Arzachena, with tombs surrounded by stones driven into the ground.

The true megalithic phase starts with the **dolmens**, funerary monuments that spread over the island in the late Sardinian Neolithic (4th millennium BC). They consist of three or more huge stones, two or more of which are placed vertically to form the walls of a chamber, topped by one or more slabs placed horizontally. In Sardinia, about **240** dolmens have been counted, classified by type as follows: '**simple**', such as Alzoledda at Luras; '**corridor**', such as Motorra at Dorgali; '**gallery**' or '**allée couverte**', such as Ladas at Luras. Even the rock-cut chamber tombs known as **domus de janas** burials were often accompanied by a monumental 'dolmen corridor'.

In Sardinia there are more than **740 menhirs**, known as '*perdas fitas*' in Sardinian, i.e. 'stones planted' vertically into the ground. They were mainly erected between the 5th and 3rd millennium BC. They are found isolated, in pairs or in larger groups, as is the case at Pranu Muttedu near Goni, in southern Sardinia. Most are rough-hewn, but there are also more elaborate Copper Age examples, such as the **110 menhir-statues** that reproduce human features. They are interpreted as totemic or sacred elements, or as territorial markers. They appear until the late Nuragic Age (Iron Age) as small 'betyls' standing near the tombs of giants.

Sometimes, together with menhirs, we find **stele-menhirs** and **engraved slabs**, decorated with geometric engravings, and **sacrificial stones** or **offering tables**, bearing on one side *couvettes*, oblong cup marks which were probably used for ritual grinding.

A particularly striking megalithic monument is the sanctuary of **Monte d'Accoddi**. It is a terraced, truncated pyramid shape structure with a shrine at the top, accessed by a ramp. Nearby are menhirs, menhir-statues, offering tables and spheroidal blocks covered with small cup-marks. The temple, recalling the Mesopotamian ziggurats, was built in the second half of the 4th millennium BC and used at least until the 3rd millennium BC.

Section II

THE NURAGHI

More than any other ancient monument, **nuraghi** have characterised the Sardinian landscape for thousands of years.

An estimated **7,000** nuraghi were built between 1800/1600 BC and 1000 BC, from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age, as the greatest architectural expression of one of the most original and complex protohistoric 'civilisations' in the ancient Mediterranean, the result of the millenary megalithic experience. Folk tradition considered these structures to be home of the ogres, fabulous evil giants with human features. This is why one many nuraghi are dubbed locally **Sa Domu 'e S'Orcu**, the house of the Ogre.

Their original function is still debated, most probably they were fortified dwellings or perhaps strategic fortresses for the control of the territory. The nuraghi were often surrounded by a village of varying size, as in the case of **Su Nuraxi** at Barumini and **Seruci** at Gonnese. They are structures with a strong symbolic value that required an enormous collective effort, built at sites ensuring control over the resources of the territory. They are widespread across the island, from coastal areas, such as the Baleri nuraghi of Tertenia and Sant'Imbenia of Alghero, to inland areas, such as the **Ruinassas** nuraghe of Arzana, built **1200 m** above sea level.

In their best-known form, today they appear as imposing **truncated cone towers** with a circular ground plan, built with boulders of various sizes, with the dry stone technique. The stones are usually larger and more irregular at the base, smaller and more regular at the top. While some nuraghi have just one tower and are defined as 'simple' or '**single-tower**', complex nuraghi have a central tower, or keep, and one to five secondary towers, such as the **Arrubiu** nuraghe in Orroli.

The earliest nuraghi, known as **protonuraghi**, were erected between the end of the Early Bronze Age and the Middle Bronze Age. They appear as squat platforms with an ellipsoidal, quadrangular, triangular or irregular ground plan. They have corridors, niches and staircases obtained in the thickness of the wall, and single or multiple chambers.

The classical or '**tholos**' nuraghi, multi-storey round plan towers that could be more than **20 m** high, such as **Santu Antine** in Torralba, began to spread between the end of the Middle Bronze and the Final Bronze.

Soon the nuraghi became a **symbol** and a source of pride for the communities that had built them, and later still became places of worship.

Section III

THE GIANTS' TOMBS

According to folk tradition, the **giants' tombs** were the burial places of the ogres, fantastic creatures thought to have built and inhabited the nuraghi. In actual fact, they are Nuragic tombs built in the 2nd millennium BC to house hundreds of dead people of all ages, genders and social classes. They are the direct descendants of the *allée couvertes*, the funerary corridors that were especially widespread during the Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age.

So far, more than **800** have been found, spread across the island, but their actual number was probably much greater. They have been classified into four main types: hypogeum with architectural

façade; dolmen type with orthostats and rounded stele; with courses of large polygonal stones; with courses of *opus isodomum* (squared) stones.

The oldest of these collective tombs date back to the Early Bronze Age and the most recent to the Late Bronze Age, but almost all of them were used for a long time, up to Roman and even medieval times.

Seen from above, their ground plan recalls the shape of a bull's head. They usually have a rectangular burial chamber, closed on top by a dolmen-type roof or projecting walls, about 3 metres high and 15 metres long on average. The back of the chamber always ends with an apse and the chamber is covered by an earthen mound or walls of well-worked boulders. The chamber is accessed mainly through a side-opening whereas a small symbolic door is placed in the large slab fronting the tomb. The semi-circular space at the front of the tomb, framed by the façade and a stone bench or seat, is the **exedra**. This space was probably used for funerary rituals or for the cult of the dead and ancestors. In various ancient traditions, a common rite was dream incubation, a magical-religious practice that consisted in sleeping in a sacred place to receive revelations about the future, cures or blessings through dreams. According to Aristotle, in Sardinia, this practice involved lying for a few nights next to the tombs of the ancestors to get in touch with them and drive away terrible apparitions, nightmares and visions.

Sometimes the tombs of the giants are accompanied by carved monoliths called '**betyls**', from the Semitic *Beth-El*, 'House of the god'. These stone vary in number from one as at Is Concias at Quartucciu to six as in the case of Tamuli at Macomer. In some cases, small Iron Age shaft tombs are also found.

Section IV

THE SANCTUARIES

Nuragic religious spaces were dedicated to **water worship**, and spread throughout Sardinia from the Late Bronze Age (14th century BC).

These monuments bear witness to a historical transition period characterised by social, political and organisational changes, which reached their pinnacle and became most widespread in the Iron Age, between the 10th and 8th centuries BC.

The **sacred wells** were the most typical and widespread temples, composed of an above-ground part *in antis*, with a double sloping roof made of wood or stone. They could have an enclosed circular *tholos* chamber and an underground area with a stairwell leading to another *tholos* with the sacred water, as at Is Pirois di Villaputzu, Sa Brecca di Tertenia or Sa Testa di Olbia. Some of the sacred wells offer examples of highly advanced architectural solutions, as in the case of Santa Cristina di Paulilatino.

The **sacred springs** have the same architecture as the sacred wells. At Su Tempiesu di Orune, the water is channelled from surface springs and the atrium retains part of its double-pitched roof.

The **megaron temples *in antis*** seem to have a common origin with those of the Aegean Sea, with a rectangular or apsidal design, as in S'Arcu 'e Is Forros at Villagrande Strisaili. One of the largest and best-preserved is that of Domu de Orgia Rajosa in Esterzili, the legendary home of Orgia, a witch or fairy giantess who, having been banished, promised famine and destruction. This myth is most likely the legacy of pre-Christian cults that worshipped a female divinity of water and fertility.

The **altars** and **stone basins** for offerings can be in the shape of Nuragic towers and fortresses, as at Su Mulinu at Villanovafranca and Su Monte at Sorradile. In some cases, the nuraghi themselves were turned into places of worship, as at Nurdole di Orani.

A wide range of votive offerings were offered in the sanctuaries: utensils, weapons, bronze, silver,

gold and amber objects from the Baltic Sea and daily use objects, as in the sanctuary cave of Su Benatzu in Santadi. In the sanctuaries of Abini at Teti and Santa Vittoria at Serri, numerous bronze statuettes of Nuragic origin have been found: small bronze sculptures depicting human figures, animals, boats and even buildings.

Section V

THE DECLINE OF MEGALITHISM

During the Iron Age (10th-6th centuries BC), the organisation of Nuragic communities appeared to change as the social structure evolved and some groups stood out above others, forming the first aristocracies.

The absence of new Nuragic constructions from the 12th-11th centuries BC seems to reveal a crisis in the previous organisation of the territory. The existing towers started to deteriorate, but most were still functional and in use, even though some were converted into places of worship, such as Su Mulinu at Villanovafranca, while others were totally transformed, for example Nurdole at Orani. A large production of **model nuraghi** or miniature sculptures in stone, ceramic and bronze can also be observed. Some of these stone models were used as altars for collective rituals, and have been found in the centre of the so-called **meeting huts**, which were probably intended for village gatherings.

Villages became larger in size, and the number of new villages not associated with nuraghi increased. New types of dwellings appeared, such as the large *insulae*: houses split into sections with internal courtyards. The use of large collective tombs also began to give way to small individual tombs with circular pits or stone cysts, although collective tombs were never completely abandoned.

These circumstances reveal that the millenary megalithic culture that had characterised the architecture of prehistoric Sardinia was coming to an end. The changes were certainly accelerated by continuous cultural and commercial exchanges with the outside world, where individual interests prevailed over the interests of the community. It is no coincidence that from the 9th century BC, Nuragic artefacts were increasingly found among the rich grave goods of Etruria, in central Italy, and at least from the 8th century BC, stable settlements of Phoenician and Greek merchants appeared on the island.

Bronze figurines representing a well-established and varied warrior society were offered in the sanctuaries: infantrymen, archers, boxers. The production of bronze weapons increased, and the symbol of power seems to be the **gammadion hilt dagger**, a short-bladed weapon for hand-to-hand combat, unique to the ancient world.

The monumentalisation of the necropolis of Mont'e Prama at Cabras through the introduction of large two-metre-high stone statues, depicting armed men and models of nuraghi, testifies to a desire to narrate the identity and lineage of individuals, perhaps a way of highlighting a social status acquired through merit or heroic ancestry.

Section VI

THE NURAGIC HERITAGE

The social changes of the Iron Age did not erase the legacy of the Nuragic civilisation; life continued around most of the nuraghi without any real interruption, even in the Punic, Roman and medieval periods. However, architectural and archaeological findings show the loss of some characteristic features.

Between the 9th and 8th centuries BC, settlements of Phoenician merchants sprang up along the

Sardinian coast, apparently living in harmony with the local people, sometimes sharing living quarters, as at **Tharros** in Cabras, and places of worship, as at **Antas** in Fluminimaggiore. Things changed in the 6th century BC, when the island became a target of the expansionist ambitions of Carthage. A first attempt at conquest was pushed back by the Sardinians in 540 BC, but around 509 BC, the year of the first treaty between Rome and Carthage, the Sardinian coast came under Punic control. Numerous attempts by the Sardinians to drive out the Carthaginians were unsuccessful until, following the revolt of the Punic mercenaries in 237/238 BC, Sardinia passed into the hands of Rome.

The population's genetic ancestry and cultural environment remained linked to their origins, emphasised by the cult of the "**Sardus Pater**" (Sardinian Father), worshipped in temples, such as the Roman temple at **Antas** near Fluminimaggiore, and represented on coins, including the famous Atius Balbus coin, and in small sculptures, such as those of Decimoputzu and Gesturi.

The Nuragic legacy is evident from historical and epigraphic sources, funerary inscriptions and military diplomas, which reveal the persistence of pre-Latin Nuragic personal names.

Further evidence is provided by boundary stones, such as the one at Cuglieri bearing the pre-Latin ethnonym **Uddadhaddar(itani)**, and the inscription on the architrave of the Aidu Entos nuraghe 'ILI IVR IN NVRAC SESSAR M C' (the rights of the Ilienses of Nurac Sessar), which indicates both the name of a tribe of pre-Latin origin (Ilienses) and the oldest evidence of use of the term nuraghe.

Lastly, the legacy of megalithic culture persisted into the Middle Ages, as shown by the letter that Pope Gregory the Great wrote to Hospito, *dux Barbaricinorum* ("leader of the Barbaricini"), in 594 AD, complaining that the mountain people of Sardinia continued to "worship" stones and wood, i.e. the menhirs and betyls of the pre-Nuragic and Nuragic religion. Once again, we see evidence of the legacy of the millenary megalithic culture that still today characterises the landscape and culture of **Sardinia**.