

## **0. Sardinia, the Island of Megaliths**

Original prehistoric civilisations developed on the island of Sardinia from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. They left a monumental imprint in the form of megaliths and other large stone constructions, such as the so-called nuraghes that dot the island's geography and make a profound impression on its landscape.

This exhibition aims to show the richness and diversity of Sardinian megalithism and, at the same time, evoke the ways of life, customs and beliefs of the communities that built the monuments, including the enigmatic Nuragic civilisation.

Organised in collaboration with several Sardinian museums and institutions, the exhibition presents a collection of exceptional archaeological objects. They include female statuettes associated with the Neolithic cult of the Mother Goddess; small bronze votive offerings representing characters from the Nuragic civilisation; and one of the enigmatic stone giants from the Mont'e Prama necropolis, which some consider to be the first free-standing large-format sculptures in the western Mediterranean.

### **Sardinia, an Island at the Heart of the Mediterranean**

Sardinia (Sardigna, Sardinna o Sardinna in Sardinian; Sardegna in Italian) is the second largest island in the Mediterranean. Located south of Corsica, it constitutes an autonomous region of Italy. It has an area of 24,090 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of over one and a half million (2023). Its capital is Cagliari (Casteddu in Sardinian).

The island of Sardinia has a special meaning for Catalan speakers, because in the city of Alghero (S'Alighera in Sardinian) Catalan is spoken in its Algherese variant, while the language spoken in most of the rest of the island is Sardinian.

## **1. THE FIRST MEGALITHISM**

Megalithism was a phenomenon that occurred independently in different parts of the world in different periods. It involved the use of large stones; the name derives from the ancient Greek *me-gas*, meaning 'large', and *líthos*, meaning 'stone'. It had a mainly social meaning, aimed at giving visibility to cult and funerary monuments.

In Sardinia, the first evidence dates back to the Middle Neolithic (mid-fifth millennium BC). In the same period, similar manifestations can be found in Western Europe, especially in the Pyrenees and the Atlantic territories.

Among the first Sardinian monuments were circular tombs with a central cist, especially in the northeast of the island, such as at the necropolis of Li Muri di Arzachena, from around 4000 BC, with tombs delimited by rings of stones driven into the ground.

True megalithism is manifested in dolmens, funerary monuments widespread from the Late Sardinian Neolithic (fourth millennium BC). They consist of two or three stone blocks that form the wall of a chamber and the roof. There are around 240 different types of dolmen all over the island. They can be simple, such as at Alzoledda di Luras; with a corridor, such as at Motorra di Dorgali; and with a gallery, such as at Ladas di Luras. There are even some hypogea or tombs cut into the rock; known as *domus de janas*, they are monumentalised with a dolmenic corridor.

### **The Great Builders**

Megaliths and hypogea are the funerary expressions of the communities that lived in Sardinia between the second half of the fifth millennium BC and the second millennium BC.

The pre-Nuragic communities lived essentially from agriculture and livestock and made tools of flint and obsidian, a volcanic rock abundant on the island that was traded with the outside world at least as early as the Neolithic. They also made small anthropomorphic statuettes with very marked female characteristics. They would also develop metallurgical production from the Copper Age onwards.

### **A Mediterranean Mother Goddess**

Numerous anthropomorphic statuettes with clearly marked female features have been found all over the island. The oldest depict obese women and date from the second half of the fifth millennium BC. They could represent a Mother Goddess who, as in other places in the Mediterranean, would have been worshipped since ancient times.

### **Monuments Designed to be Seen**

Most of the dolmens are located in northern and central areas of the island, in dominant and highly visible positions within their landscape settings. This fact has led to the idea that, in addition to their funerary and worship function, they could have played a role as territorial markers of the living and working spaces of the agropastoral communities that built them.

### **The Sanctuary of Monte d'Accoddi**

Particularly outstanding among the Sardinian megalithic monuments is the sanctuary of Monte d'Accoddi, a terraced structure in the shape of a truncated pyramid containing a shrine at the top accessible by a ramp. Menhirs, offering tables and spherical blocks with cup marks have also been found nearby.

The edifice was built in the second half of the fourth millennium BC and was used at least until the third millennium BC.

### **Menhirs and Menhir Statues**

In Sardinia there are more than 740 menhirs, stones driven vertically into the ground. They occur singly, in pairs or in larger groups, such as at Pratto Mutedu (Goni), in the south of the island. They were erected mainly between the fourth and third millennium BC.

Most are not figurative, but there is no shortage of more elaborate examples, such as the 110 menhir statues from the Copper Age that reproduce human features. They are interpreted as totemic or worship objects, as well as territorial markers. They were in use until the end of the Nuragic Age (Iron Age) in the form of small baetyls placed near the so-called "giants' tombs".

Often associated with the menhirs there are also menhir steles and slabs decorated with geometric incisions, and the so-called sacrificial stones or offering tables with small bowls, perhaps for food offerings.

### ***Domus de Janas***

More than 2,400 hypogea (collective tombs), known as *domus de janas* or 'fairy houses', were cut into the rock during the fourth and third millennia BC. Although they are neither technically nor conceptually megaliths, the construction and use of *domus de janas* was in many cases contemporary and, likewise, they distinguish the prehistoric Sardinian world.

*Domus de janas* often form necropolises of six or more tombs, such as that of Anghelu Ruiu in Alghero. Their ground plans vary, although the essential nucleus always consists of an antechamber and a main chamber. Some contain architectural elements carved in stone (ceilings, hearths, etc.), which appear to represent the houses of the living in the same period.

### **The Expression of Bull Worship?**

A significant number of *domus de janas* are decorated with corniform motifs, in other words depicting horns evoking the image of a bull. They are interpreted as symbols of wealth, strength or fertility and could indicate the worship of that animal or an associated divinity.

## **2. NURAGHES**

Nuraghes have characterised the Sardinian landscape for millennia, more than any other ancient monument. There are estimated to be some 7,000 of them. They were built during the Bronze Age, between 1800 and 1150 BC, as the maximum architectural expression of one of the most original and complex protohistoric civilisations of the ancient Mediterranean, the fruit of the millenary megalithic experience.

They are found all over the island: on the coast, such as the Baleri di Tertenia and Sant'Imbenia nuraghes in Alghero, and inland, for example, the Ruinas di Arzana nuraghe. The archaic or corridor nuraghes appear between 1800 and 1500 BC. They take the form of platforms with an ellipsoidal, quadrangular, triangular or irregular ground plan and have corridors, niches, stairs and single or multiple chambers.

The classic nuraghe or tholos (covered by a false dome) began to spread between 1500 and 1150 BC. The most widespread are truncated conical towers with a circular ground plan, several floors and dry stone walls, with larger, irregular blocks at the base and smaller, regular ones at the top. Settlements of different sizes often grew up in their surroundings, such as those of Su Nuraxi di Barumini and Seruci di Gonnessa.

### **What was the Purpose of Nuraghes?**

Most archaeologists agree on the versatility of the functional and architectural evolution of nuraghes over the centuries. They were defensive and residential structures, as well as markers and instruments of territorial control. They were also the centre of the social, administrative and religious life of a community. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, they often became places of worship.

### **The People of the Nuraghes**

The construction of nuraghes evidences considerable architectural knowledge and proves the existence of a cohesive society, with specialists in trades and resources that went beyond the needs of day-to-day life. Archaeological finds indicate that the basis of the economy was agro-pastoral, complemented by gathering, hunting and fishing.

The Nuragic people knew the art of navigation and were in contact by sea with the eastern Mediterranean through Cypriot and Mycenaean sailors. The local development of metallurgy generated an important production of implements linked to the various economic activities.

The Nuragic civilization is still surrounded by many enigmas, such as those concerning its organisation and internal structure, especially before the beginning of the Iron Age (10<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries BC). It is believed to have been a society organised in tribal communities with a well-defined territorial base and led by chieftains or tribal leaders who exercised great military and religious power.

### **Ogres' Houses**

According to Sardinian folk tradition, nuraghes were inhabited by ogres, evil giants with human features. For this reason, one of the most common names used to refer to nuraghes is Sa Domu de S'Orcu, 'the House of the Ogre'.

### **3. THE GIANTS' TOMBS**

The so-called giants' tombs are the most characteristic funerary monuments from the Nuragic civilisation between 1800 and 1000 BC. They are collective burials that accommodated hundreds of deceased of all ages, genders and social groups. More than 800 have been documented, but the number could be higher. They are considered direct heirs of the megalithic galleries and corridor tombs of the Copper Age.

Seen from above, the giants' tombs reveal a planimetric scheme reminiscent of a bull's head. They have a rectangular burial chamber some times more than 25 meters long, enclosed by a dolmen-type roof. The rear external part has an apsidal shape and the chamber is covered by an earthen mound.

The chamber is accessed through a side opening and a small door leads to the exedra, an open semicircular space with a monumental façade and a large bench to sit on. In front of the giants' tombs there are often one or more small monoliths and, sometimes, anthropomorphic betyls, possible representations of divinities.

#### **A Space for Magical and Religious Practices**

It is believed that the exedras of the giants' tombs were used to celebrate funerary rituals or those related to the worship of the dead or ancestors, and even some quite unique magical rituals. One of these would have been the so-called rite of incubation, which consisted of sleeping near a sacred area to have revelations about the future in a dream, or to receive cures or blessings. Aristotle tells us that this practice in Sardinia involved sleeping a few nights near the tombs of the ancestors to come into contact with them and repel terrible apparitions, nightmares and visions.

#### 4. THE SANCTUARIES

The Nuragic religious spaces were dedicated to the worship of water. They spread mainly from the Late Bronze Age (14<sup>th</sup> century BC), a time of social and political change, and reached the peak of their splendour at the beginning of the Iron Age (9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC). They were also places of community and tribal meeting on a local, regional or island level.

Sacred wells were the most common sites. They consisted of an external part with a porch and a double-pitched roof made of wood or stone. They could have a circular chamber covered with a false dome (tholos) and an underground area, with a staircase leading to another tholos with the sacred water, as at Is Pirois di Villaputzu, Sa Brecca di Tertenia and Sa Testa di Olbia. That of Santa Cristina di Paulilatino is an example of extreme perfection in architectural solutions.

Sacred springs had the same architecture as sacred wells. At Su Tempiesu di Orune, the water was collected from a spring that emerged on the surface; part of the gabled roof has been preserved in the atrium.

The megaron-type porticoed temples, with rectangular or apsidal ground plans, such as S'Arcu'e Is Forros di Villagrandi Strisaili, appear to have a common origin with those of the Aegean Sea.

The altars and offering basins, such as those at Su Mulinu di Villanovafranca and Su Monte di Sorradile, are similar to those of the Nuragic towers and fortresses. Sometimes the nuraghes were transformed into places of worship, as at Nurdole di Orani.

#### Ex-votos

In the sanctuaries, all kinds of votive offerings were offered to the divinities. They included tools, weapons, metal ornaments and jewels made of precious Baltic amber, along with small bronze sculptures that reproduced human figures, animals, boats and even buildings. These are the so-called *bronzetti*, one of the best-known and most characteristic artistic productions of the Nuragic civilisation.

Outstanding among the anthropomorphic figures are warriors and high-ranking figures, often bearing attributes of their status and authority. Protagonists of trades and activities are also identified (shepherds, musicians, boxers, etc.). The female figurines were probably priestesses or women of high social status. Many of the votive offerings would have represented the offerors themselves, who were requesting divine favours or expressing gratitude for them.

#### Evil Witch or Pre-Christian Deity?

One of the largest megaron-type temples in Sardinia is the Domu de Orgia Rajosa in Esterzili. Popular tradition explains that it was the home of Orgia, a legendary witch or evil giantess who, once captured, foretold famine and destruction. The myth is the probable legacy of pre-Christian cults to a female deity of water and fertility.

## **5. THE SUNSET OF MEGALITHISM**

The gap in the construction of nuraghes from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC reveals a crisis in the social and territorial structure. During the First Iron Age (10<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), certain groups began to stand out. They formed the first aristocracies.

Nuraghes began to show signs of decline, although most continued to function and some of the rooms became places of worship, as at Su Mulinu di Villanovafranca, or were completely transformed, as at Nurdole di Orani. However, we see a rich production of miniature nuraghes in stone, pottery or bronze. They could have been used as altars for collective rituals, placed in the centre of huts for meetings or community assemblies.

The settlements grew in size; the number of those not connected to nuraghes increased and new types of housing appeared, including dwellings with an interior courtyard. Although the large collective tombs were not completely abandoned, they began to give way to individual burials in small circular pits or in stone cists. The millenary megalithic culture that characterised the architecture of prehistoric Sardinia was coming to an end.

### **A Consolidated Warrior Society**

The changes on the island were accelerated by continuous cultural and commercial exchanges with the outside world and by the establishment of stable settlements by Phoenician and Greek merchants as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

In the sanctuaries, the bronze offerings represented a consolidated and diverse warrior society, including infantry, archers and boxers. Bronze weapon production also increased and the symbol of power appears to be the dagger with a handle in the shape of the Greek letter gamma. This bladed weapon was ideal for hand-to-hand combat and is unique of its kind in the ancient world.

The very monumentalisation of the necropolis of Mont'e Prama in Cabras, with its large stone statues representing armed men and miniature models of nuraghes, shows a desire for identity narration and to emphasise the high social status of certain individuals, acquired either through their own merits or for being considered descendants of heroes.

### **The Exceptional Necropolis of Mont'e Prama**

The necropolis of Mont'e Prama in Cabras is one of the most remarkable Iron Age monuments in Sardinia. The site was discovered by chance in 1974 and has been the subject of several excavation campaigns.

Archaeologists have documented some 125 tombs dating from between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the late 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The majority correspond to the burials of young men whose bodies show traces of having carried out intense physical activity.

The site has also yielded a spectacular set of male stone statues over 2 m tall, and several nuraghes and baetyls on a reduced scale. It is believed they were erected near the tombs and formed a kind of sepulchral path. Their physiognomy is reminiscent of Nuragic bronzes from the



late Bronze Age, as well as of ancient oriental models. For this reason, some consider them to be the oldest free-standing large-format sculptures in the western Mediterranean.

### **Warriors, Ancestors or Deified Heroes?**

Scholars disagree on the identity of the statues in the Mont'e Prama necropolis. Some consider them to represent the warriors buried in the necropolis, while others believe they evoke mythical ancestors or deified heroes. Consequently, the site would have been a monumental sanctuary built for the hero cult alongside a communications route. It is also believed that the sculptures were intentionally destroyed, probably following the Carthaginian occupation of the island from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

## 6. THE NURAGIC HERITAGE

The social changes of the Iron Age did not erase the legacy of the Nuragic civilisation and life continued in many places even during the Punic, Roman and medieval periods, although with changes in the architecture and objects in use.

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, Phoenician merchants settled along the Sardinian coasts. They shared living space with the local people at places such as Tharros di Cabras, as well as places of worship, for example at Antas di Fluminimaggiore.

Things changed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when the island became one of the targets of Carthage's expansion. A first attempt at conquest was repelled in 540 BC, but by 509 the Sardinian coasts were under Punic control. Attempts to drive out the Carthaginians were in vain until the revolt of the Punic mercenaries in 237-238 BC caused Sardinia to fall into the hands of Rome.

However, certain elements of the cultural substrate survived, such as the cult of *Sardus Pater* (the Sardinian Father), venerated in temples like that of Antas and depicted on coins and figurines. Roman historical and epigraphic sources also reveal rich pre-Latin onomastics of Nuragic tradition.

The ancestral heritage persisted in the Early Middle Ages, as evidenced by a letter written by Pope Gregory the Great in 594, in which he complains that the mountain people of Sardinia continue to worship stones and wood. Once again, we see the legacy of the millenary megalithic culture that still characterises the Sardinian landscape today.