

Nuragic civilization is undoubtedly the most important autonomous cultural expression about ancient Sardinia, but it cannot be separated from the expressions preceding and following it.

The Nuragic civilization is autochthonous, namely an indigenous civilization formed in Sardinia by populations rooted on the island for thousands of years. It is based on the experiences of immediately preceding pre-Nuragic cultures. Since Sardinia is a large island, it was able to accommodate and sustain for at least 5000 years, sometimes in close contact with the surrounding world and at others in conditions of relative isolation, the development of prehistoric Neolithic people dedicated to agriculture and farming and those of the Copper Age and early Bronze Age (about 7000-1600 BC).

As can be seen from the results of the latest archaeological research, the Nuragic civilization has taken hold during the middle and late Bronze Age (about 1600-930 BC) and in the early Iron Age (about 930-730 BC).

In ancient times the Bronze Age was the age of heroes, capable of doing great actions for good or evil, powerful kings, brave and cunning warriors, ingenious builders. The atmosphere of those bygone times is still powerfully evoked by the Iliad and the Odyssey, poems written a few centuries later but deriving from oral tales which circulated in Greece during the Bronze Age. Most likely, Bronze Age Sardinia had experienced a non-urban, monarchic, yet rural and tribal, society, though still organized and lively, capable of transforming the territory, exploiting resources and making contact with the surrounding world.

The Iron Age is instead the age of the historical peoples, which were formed in different regions of Italy and in the islands identifying themselves with names which are still known regional communities. Besides, in the west, the Iron Age is the age of the great navigators, of colonization, of the first cities and early states.

The development of the Nuragic civilization could be divided into four major phases. The first is the phase of the archaic nuraghi (Middle Bronze 2: about 1600-1500 BC); the second is the phase of the classical nuraghi (Middle Bronze 3 and Late Bronze: about 1500-1200 BC); the third is the processing phase (Late Bronze: about 1200-930 BC); the fourth is the crisis and dissolution phase (Early Iron Age: about 930-730 BC). The scholar Giovanni Lilliu had also distinguished a fifth phase, which is now however no longer considered to be Nuragic in that since the end of the 8th cent. BC the peoples of Sardinia rapidly abandoned the Nuragic cultural heritage and blended with the descendants of Phoenician traders who had settled for quite some time on the island, mostly along the coast.

Theories seeing a sharp clash of ethnic and cultural blocks, resolved with arms to the advantage of lawless immigrants and to the detriment of the unfortunate Nuragic inhabitants, are now completely outdated. Rather, it should be admitted that the Phoenicians, a people with extraordinary innovation skills in the field of social organization, have increasingly taken advantage of every opportunity offered them by the collapse of the Nuragic world, whose demise had started a long time before and soon reached a rapid conclusion.

Architecture

The Nuragic civilisation is best known for the remains of its legacy in stone, which still punctuates nearly every corner of Sardinia: foremost being the archaic nuraghi, those carrying simple domes and complex ones; then there are the settlements, the megalithic collective tombs (“tombs of the giants”), temples and shrines.

Just as we see them today, the nuraghi and other Nuragic buildings are none other than the skeletons of themselves, fossil shells, stripped of all accessory structures, equipment and furnishings in organic

material, deprived of the actions and voices that once pervaded them and of the meanings, values and relationships that man infused in them.

In order to understand the nuraghi best use must be made of all tools available to archaeologists and to adopt them first to approach material reality, thus to the mentality, needs and experiences of the ancient builders and users, paying greater attention to the changes affected in subsequent millennia. The essential difference in the approach taken by archaeologists and by technical persons is that the former should always have for the main object of their reflections, not the artefact but the human being, rather human society as it develops.

Only then can the absurdity be felt of the question that scholars and curious persons have asked and continue to ask, namely whether the nuraghi were royal palaces or fortresses or watchtowers or temples or tombs. The military role of the nuraghi and the warrior nature of Nuragic society could have been accepted at the time when it was held that nuraghi and bronzes were contemporary and that both one and the other had lasted until the Phoenician and Punic wars, and even with the Romans. Yet since sometime this is no longer the case. It has now been established that the construction of the nuraghi does not represent the whole course of Nuragic civilization but only its early and middle stages: that is Nuragic civilization begins and develops but does not end with the construction of the nuraghi. They bind themselves strongly to the "tombs of giants", while the full strength of settlements and buildings and worship complexes occurs in subsequent stages. It is nowadays considered that the nuraghi were the work of a tribal society, undoubtedly a well-structured and clever one but with little or poor internal differentiation and above all with little internal specialization.

So originally, the nuraghi were not royal palaces because there was no royalty, they were not fortresses because no skilled warriors existed and they were not watch towers because there were no watch guards. Only toward the end of Nuragic civilization a few nuraghi were used as temples or as warehouses and storerooms, while only in Roman and mediaeval times were they used as tombs. It is likely that, during the centuries when they were built, the nuraghi performed all material and symbolic functions necessary for Nuragic daily life within the context of a predominantly rural economy and of a society which at the same time was structuring itself hierarchically. Thus, while not being primarily and simply houses, the nuraghi were certainly used for dwelling purposes and household activities, as evidenced by numerous findings attesting to the preservation, preparation and consumption of food, spinning, etc. Even though not being fortresses, they could well have been fortified places, in that they were "made strong" and equipped to protect persons and property, and above all might have been visible signs of the tribal community's power and wealth and of territorial ownership and control, in such a widespread and articulated manner as to be properly defined strategic.

Each nuraghe formed part of a system and played a role within it. No nuraghe stood in contrast to the one next to it, but rather, each system compared with neighboring systems. The nuraghi systems often coincide with more or less well defined territorial catchment areas which are traditionally called "cantoni" (corners). More generally, clusters of nuraghi, settlements, tombs and places of worship, and also agricultural land, pastures, forests, the sea, mines and all other resources as are spread along the territory represent the heritage of the ancient Nuragic tribes.

Beyond Architecture

The monumental nature of Nuragic architecture, even like that of the pre-Nuragic period, is a double edged sword: what we gain in visibility and conservation we lose in the little care given to perishable structures and facilities and in our failure to understand through reasoning and analysis which go

further than what is material and visible. Moreover, the monumental nature and the conservation status of some nuraghi make us believe that the Nuragic peoples have only departed from that place yesterday. We are flattered to think that we are their direct heirs and that we can easily contact them or even empathize with them.

This gives us the illusion that it is enough to look to perceive and so understand. At the start each one of us, archaeologists and nuraghi enthusiasts, are affected by a fetishism of the stone that is added to the fetishism of the artefact and which even more conditions our questions and replies.

In fact, the nuraghi and other monuments are only the most visible face of the activities performed by Nuragic people. Not only the large nuraghi and settlements as such, but perhaps even more the dense groups of small nuraghi reveal real plans to transform farming with an aim of rendering productive large swathes occupied by the Mediterranean forest. In fact, cultivated fields and pastures are artefacts just as much as buildings, both having been strenuously constructed for the sole purpose of forming a domesticated environment which is adapted to man's needs who in turn adapted himself to them.

This could be viewed from a wide angle in observing the settlements, revealing a gradual demographic growth and thus a greater ability to invest in work and exploit resources. It really impresses when, in identifying and marking each of the settlements on field in a given "cantone" (corner), one seeks to assess the total population level and the degree of pressure exerted by it on an environment which is already depleted by the use of modern land reclamation techniques which certainly do not promote soil and plant regeneration.

To say that the nuraghi did not have any purely defensive function is not the same as affirming that Nuragic people never had any security concerns. Several Nuragic dwellings, among which are mainly those of the Nuraghe Losa, are surrounded and enclosed by walls with noticeable access control devices, having a specific defensive purpose. According to excavation data, some walls at least are connected with the time of the settlements' greatest expansion in the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age, which are also the phases of enhanced competition and conflict, but they neither necessarily imply a state of permanent war nor the existence of a militaristic society.

Although settlements are often overlooked because they are less Cyclopean than the nuraghi themselves and have less artefacts than sanctuaries, they form a huge reservoir of knowledge especially for the more advanced stages of Nuragic civilization. Even more, concerning the nuraghi, the settlements of various tribal territories were linked by tight political and economic relationships. We can even imagine a progressive productive specialization of settlements located within the different ecological niches of each territory. This implies a gradual differentiation of roles within Nuragic society. *Elites*, or family groups specializing in management functions, are formed and play a coordinating role at the service of communities, at the same time accumulating wealth and power. Thus, Nuragic societies between the end of the Bronze Age and early Iron Age transform themselves into local nobility and, eventually, aristocracy.

We cannot assume that Nuragic civilization had to follow a path of unlimited growth. Rather than explaining the end with the intervention of a single foreign human or natural agent, we must ask ourselves whether this civilization may have slowly made an exit owing to the degeneration of its constituent principles, to the disruption of balance within it, to the loss of moral and social cohesion. Could it be that the pace of environmental depletion exceeded the limit compatible with the technological level of the most advanced Nuragic civilization? Could it be that the implemented solutions, both economically and politically in order to increase the total product led to the overthrow

of the relationship between costs and benefits, between farm work and harvesting, between submission and consent, between fatigue and trust?

Nuraghe Palmavera, Alghero

The Palmavera complex is located on the promontory of the same name, one and a half kilometre from the sea, within the Porto Conte Park, in the municipality of Alghero. Built with blocks of limestone and sand, consisting of a central body with two towers and a bulwark, plus the huts of a village: today there are less than 50, but experts estimate that number to have ranged between 150 and 200 when the village was inhabited. The village was built in several phases. The first phase (15th-14th centuries BC) included the main tower, eight metres high and with a diameter of ten metres, inside which there is a large central chamber with beehive roofs. A flight of stairs led to the upper level and a terrace. Later (9th century BC), another tower was added, connected to the first by means of a patio and a corridor. The large meeting hut was built in the same period. Inside it stands the chief's round seat. Among the various decoration items found in the dwelling there was a small model of Nuraghe, a pre-historical art item typical of other Sardinian complexes (as many as 16 were found at Mont'e Prama). Today, inside Palmavera you can admire a copy of the model, while the original is held at the G.A. Sanna Museum, in Sassari. During the third construction phase (9th-8th century BC), a perimeter wall was built, with four towers. The village was later destroyed by a fire and repopulated during the Punic and Roman era.



The Palmavera Nuraghe in Alghero (www.algheroturismo.eu)

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