



SAPIENZA UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA  
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE DELL'ANTICHITÀ — MUSEO DELLE ORIGINI

Estratto

# ORIGINI

PREHISTORY AND PROTOHISTORY  
OF ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

PREISTORIA E PROTOSTORIA  
DELLE CIVILTÀ ANTICHE

XLIII - 2019



EDIZIONI QUASAR

Estratto

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Rivista di Preistoria e Protostoria delle Civiltà Antiche  
Review of prehistory and protohistory of ancient civilizations

*Fondata da / Review Founder*

SALVATORE M. PUGLISI

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via Ajaccio 41-43, 00198 Roma - tel +39 0685358444  
email: [info@edizioniquasar.it](mailto:info@edizioniquasar.it)

ISBN 978-88-5491-116-1  
ISSN 0474-6805

Thompson Reuters, Master Journal List, Arts & Humanities Citation Index.  
ERIH-PLUS Journal list.



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*Origini* è una rivista annuale soggetta a processo di peer-review ed è pubblicata da /  
Origini is subject to a peer-review process and is published yearly by:

“SAPIENZA” UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA  
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità

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Registrazione al Tribunale di Roma n. 35/2000 (già registrata al n. 11810/1967)

La Rivista è stata stampata con il contributo dell'Ateneo

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Estratto

FROM COLLECTIVE TOMBS TO INDIVIDUAL BURIALS:  
CHANGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN SARDINIAN SOCIETY  
OVER THE SECOND AND FIRST MILLENNIA BC

Anna Depalmas\*

**ABSTRACT** – The paper aims to analyse the Sardinian funerary practices through the development phases of the Nuragic and post Nuragic cultural aspects, with the purpose to identify the transformations that occurred in society through this long development period. In Middle and Recent Bronze Ages, the so-called Giants' Tomb is the most widespread funerary structure, a monumental stone structure used as a collective tomb. In Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages, although Giants' tombs were still in use, other types of tombs came into use, both as collective (corridor tombs) and also as individual tombs (flat inhumations, pit or cist tombs). The analysis allows us to raise hypotheses about long-term changes in society. Monumental architecture and archaeological data will be considered in an attempt to outline the relationship between funerary practices and society during the Sardinian Late Prehistory.

**KEYWORDS** – *Sardinia, Nuragic Period, Giant's Tomb, post Nuragic Period, individual tombs, Late Prehistory*

**RIASSUNTO** – *Questo lavoro analizza le pratiche funerarie sarde attraverso le fasi di sviluppo degli aspetti culturali nuragici e post-nuragici con lo scopo di identificare le trasformazioni avvenute nella società durante questo lungo periodo. Nell'Età del Bronzo media e recente la cosiddetta "tomba dei Giganti" – una monumentale struttura in pietra utilizzata come tomba collettiva – è la struttura funeraria più diffusa. Nell'Età del Bronzo finale e nella Prima Età del Ferro, sebbene le tombe dei Giganti fossero ancora in uso, vennero utilizzati altri tipi di strutture, sia per tombe collettive (tombe a corridoio) sia per deposizioni singole (inumazioni in fossa, in pozzetto o a cista). L'analisi qui condotta consente di avanzare ipotesi sui cambiamenti a lungo termine nella società. Sono presi in considerazione l'architettura monumentale e i dati archeologici nel tentativo di delineare il rapporto tra pratiche funerarie e società durante la tarda preistoria sarda.*

**PAROLE CHIAVE** – *Sardegna, periodo Nuragico, Tombe dei Giganti, periodo post Nuragico, tombe individuali, tarda Preistoria*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will analyse funerary rituals during the evolution of the protohistoric cultural aspects in order to identify the long-term changes in society occurring in

the Bronze and Early Iron Ages. The relationship between funerary rites and society has been widely debated since the 1970s<sup>1</sup> at times with shared views among the scholars and at others with contrasting perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> While as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century several authors focused on the problem of the relationship between the society of the living and the society of the dead (es. Hertz 1907, Van Gennep 1981 (1909), De Martino 1958), it was only with the advent of processualism and then post-processualism that the debate entered the archaeological field (Brown 1971, Chapman *et alii* 1981, Hodder 1994 (1982)). For a critical overview of different positions see Chapman 2013.

In this sense Binford's view (1971) is emblematic. He differentiated himself from the anthropological approach according to which differences in mortuary practices are due to beliefs, intercultural contacts or fashion. In contrast, he suggested the importance of social differentiation, societies' complex organization and lineages in the variability of funerary practices. Binford used the concept of "social persona" as "the composite of the social identities maintained in life and recognized as appropriate for consideration at death" (Binford 1971: 17). Similarly, Saxe affirmed that relations that constitute the "social persona" would have a reflection in funerary rites. Later Chapman *et alii* (1981) agreed with Saxe on the idea that the acquisition of control over crucial (but limited) resources or the legitimization to their access thanks to a direct link with ancestors, is the reason behind the choice of corporate groups to bury the dead in certain specific places (Saxe 1970: 119).

The burial place is the space where the relationship between the living and the dead is realized, where the social group publicly defines the status that the dead had in life and where it re-defines its role as a community that accompanies one of its members through the rite of passage to the world of the ancestors. In this sense, according to the cognitive approach, funerary ideology is the active instrument to create relationships in the social group (Hodder 1994) and the community of the living not only controls, but perhaps also manipulates funerals according to its own goals (Parker Pearson 1993: 203).

These remarks are particularly important to draw our attention to that not necessarily the evidence in the forms of burial and grave goods are the mirror of analogous social forms and roles, so not in perfect agreement to Binford's well-known viewpoint about burial practices as a measure of "real" social organization (Binford 1971: 21-23).

However, while the distinction of the individual is self-evident in single burials, what do collective burials tell us about the society that produced them? Is collective burial really the mirror of an egalitarian society? And is the change from collective burial rites to individual burial rites a real sign of the development of a more complex society? In the following pages I will try to answer these questions with particular reference to the evidence of Protohistoric Sardinia.

## 2. FROM THE EARLY MIDDLE BRONZE AGE TO THE RECENT BRONZE AGE.

### *Monumental Tombs and Territory*

It is necessary to point out that the term Nuragic will be referred here only to aspects of the Middle and Recent Bronze Age, while the Final Bronze and Early Iron Age phases are intended as post-Nuragic.

In the Nuragic period, during the Middle (17th-15th BC) (Depalmas 2009: 123-130) and Recent Bronze Age (14th-13th BC) (Depalmas 2009: 131-140), six or seven thousand typical Nuragic towers were built: firstly, as corridor nuraghi; then, from the late Middle Bronze Age, false dome single tholos nuraghe towers predominated and later, in the Recent Bronze Age, complex nuraghi with two to five towers were more common (Vanzetti *et alii* 2014). Generally, villages may have grown around the nuraghi; although villages are also found which are not associated with nuraghi (Depalmas 2017).

At the start of Nuragic culture, when typical architectural structures and other characteristic elements gradually develop, and which we could define as "formative period", specific monumental structures dedicated to funerary use have not yet been found; in contrast Neolithic and Eneolithic traditions were still alive in the early Middle Bronze Age when not only

natural caves (Ferrarese Ceruti, Germanà 1978) but also and more importantly older hypogea, significantly identified with the burial places of the ancestors in that territory, were still being used (Webster 2015: 69-70).

### 2.a. Funerary structures

In many cases, at a short distance from the nuraghi and villages, one or more collective tombs, known as “Giants’ Tombs”, were built (fig. 1). However, there is no analytical study that evaluates this frequency statistically. More than 800 tombs are known (Moravetti 2014: 49), although a complete repertoire is still missing. The typical tombs of the Nuragic period were usually built in the Middle Bronze Age, although there is evidence that they were also built, and certainly used, during the Recent Bronze Age (Bagella 2004: 390-392). They have a curved facade with upright flat regular or rough stone slabs, or rows of the same. The vertical slabs or rows mark the limits of a semi-circular open space, the exedra, and of a funeral chamber whose entrance is at the centre of the semi-circle (fig. 4a-b) (Moravetti 1985). The building of these tombs seems to be perfectly in line with the tendency to create monuments and with the character of the collective and communal structures which typify the Nuragic buildings.

The construction methods of the funerary chamber, especially for the oldest tombs with arched stele and dolmenic structure, appear in continuity with the Eneolithic tradition of the corridor tombs or *allées couvertes* well documented all over the island and in some cases evidently adapted to create a new tomb of

Giants” (eg. Coddu Vecchiu and Li Lolghi of Arzachena) (Depalmas 2009: 125; Usai L. 2015: 94).

The oldest structures date from the beginning of the early Middle Bronze Age and are contemporary with the archaic corridor nuraghi. It cannot be excluded that their construction began even earlier, at the same time as the houses with a rectangular plan whose building coincides or perhaps precedes that of the first nuraghi (Depalmas 2009: 129-130).

They were built using upright stones with slabs arranged according to the trilith dolmenic technique and were covered with horizontal flat slabs, while in other buildings, still from the early or in the full Middle Bronze Age, the walls of the chamber were realized with progressively narrower courses of stone blocks, forming an ogival section<sup>2</sup> (Moravetti 1985: 152-159).

In the front of oldest structures there is a central mono- or poly-lithic slab with an arched top (known as *stèle centinata*) at the base of which is a little inlet or door, where the entrance to the tomb chamber was located (fig. 3a-b, d).

These were associated with the oldest tombs, which had standing stones in the dolmen tradition (early Middle Bronze Age), while in the more recent tombs, which used rows of stones, there was a squared off stone with three small circular cavities on the top, for housing three miniature baetyls (Bagella 2001).

Later, tombs were built in rows of perfectly smooth even stones, no central stele, but characterized by a stone with notches on top of the on-axis with the entrance façade (fig. 4). From excavation data we can state that the evolution from orthostatic Giants’ tombs “with stele” to the type with the facade made by rows of blocks (*a filari*) took

<sup>2</sup> There are evidences of an evolution of the tomb structures from the dolmenic structure types to those with rows in isodomic technique. This evolution seems to take place quite fast, probably always within the early Middle Bronze Age.

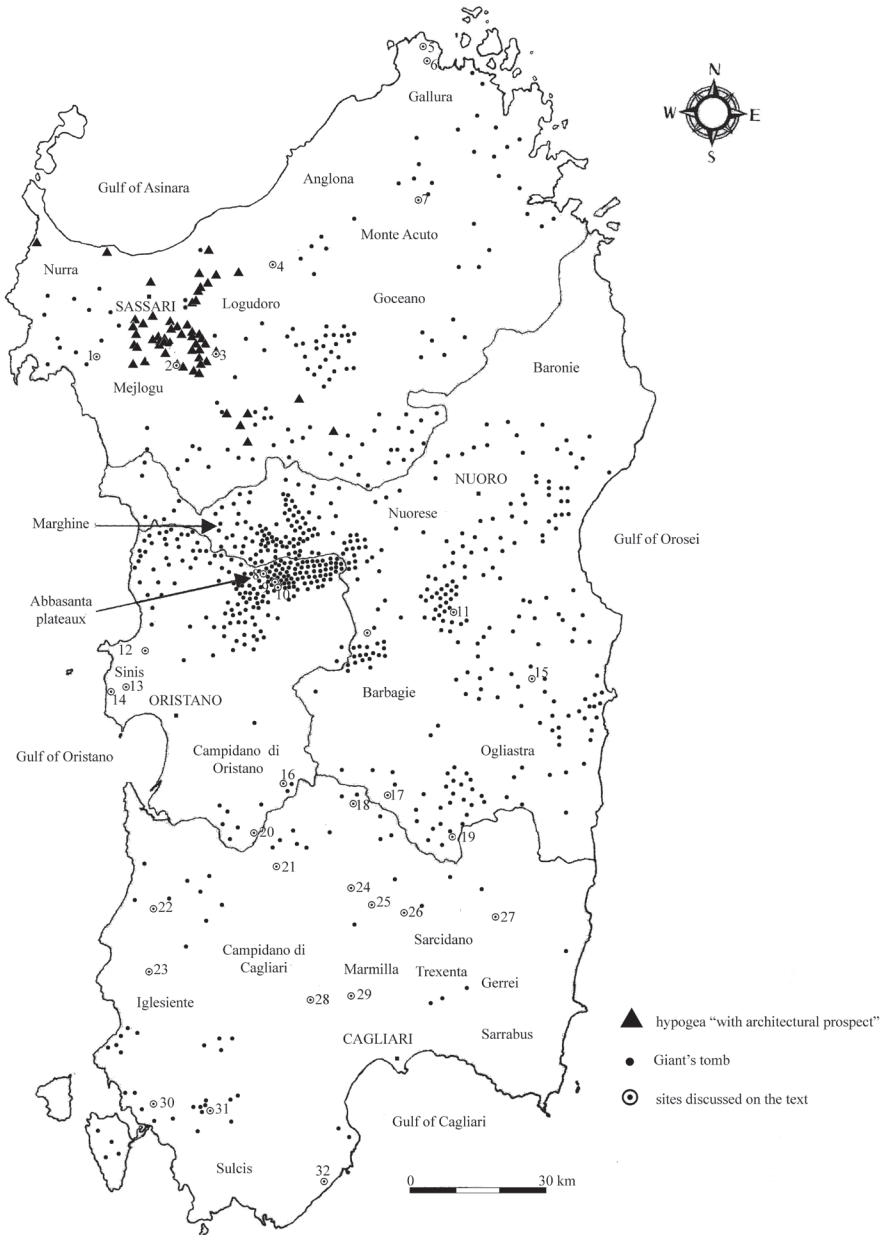


Fig. 1 - Map of Sardinia showing Giants' Tombs, tombs "with architectural prospect" and location of sites discussed in the paper. 1. Santu Pedru – Alghero; 2. Sa Figù – Ittiri; 3. Pedra Lada – Florinas; 4. Bopitos – Laerru; 5. Lu Brandali – Santa Teresa di Gallura; 6. La Testa – Santa Teresa di Gallura; 7. Sa Pascaredda – Calangianus; 8. Iscrallotze – Aidomaggiore; 9. Iloi – Sedilo; 10. Iloi-Ispiluncas – Sedilo; 11. Bidistili – Fonni; 12. Su Cuccuru Mannu – Riola; 13. Monte Prama – Cabras; 14. Su Bardoni – Cabras; 15. Genna Trocùlu – Villagrande Strisaili; 16. Motrox 'e Bois – Usellus; 17. Monte Is Casteddus – Isili; 18. Preganti – Gergei; 19. Orroli; 20. Sa Sedda 'e Sa Caudela – Collinas; 21. Sa Costa – Sarda-  
 ra; 22. Brunku Espis – Arbus; 23. Antas – Fluminimaggiore; 24. Sa Mandara – Guasila; 25. Brunku c'Amoradu – Orta-  
 cesus; 26. Campioni – Senorbi; 27. Cuili Pala Perdixi – Villasalto; 28. Perda Lada – Decimoputzu; 29. Su Fraigu – San  
 Sperate; 30. Badde Arena – San Giovanni Suergiu; 31. Is Lais – Villaperuccio; 32. Perda 'e Accuzzai – Villa San Pietro.

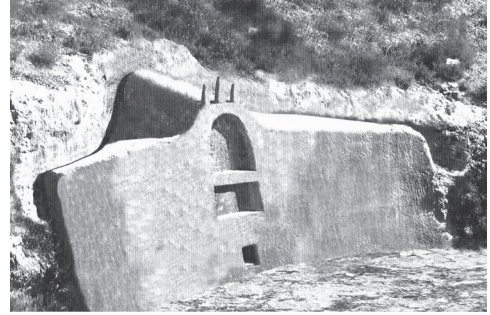
place already in Middle Bronze Age 1 or 2 (Depalmas, Vidili 2012: 1444; Bagella 2017: 280)<sup>3</sup>.

During the initial phases of the Nuragic civilization (Middle and Recent Bronze Age) the spaces of collective megalithic tombs seem to have been used for multiple purposes: they were still mainly reserved for burial rituals, but they are also religious sites and, perhaps, sites for the worship of ancestors, as is suggested by the erection of symbolic standing stones. The exedra of the tombs was the space where offerings were left and where the communal ceremonies took place. The presence of conic stones (baetyls) near the tombs suggests that ancestor worship may have been practised (Bagella 2017: 288) (fig. 3c-d). Also, during the Recent Bronze Age the only archaeologically visible places for religious ceremonies are at burial sites (Depalmas 2009: 139).

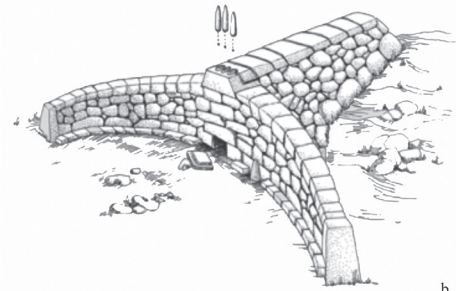
In north-west Sardinia a common type of Nuragic tomb is one cut from the rock or featuring a re-utilisation of pre-existing Neolithic hypogea. These tombs generally have a façade with a carved *stele centinata* that provides the name to this class of monument defined as tomb “with architectural prospect” (fig. 2a). An exemplar with no other comparisons is the tomb of Su Cuccuru Mannu – Riola, with rectangular chamber and exedra, both excavated in the sandstone, while the coverage was probably made of horizontal slabs (Usai 2014: 54).

### 2.b. Distribution

When the distribution of the Giants' Tombs is considered, it is quite interesting to note that the tombs with a central stele (i.e. *stele centinata*) are found almost exclusively in the central northern zone of



a



b

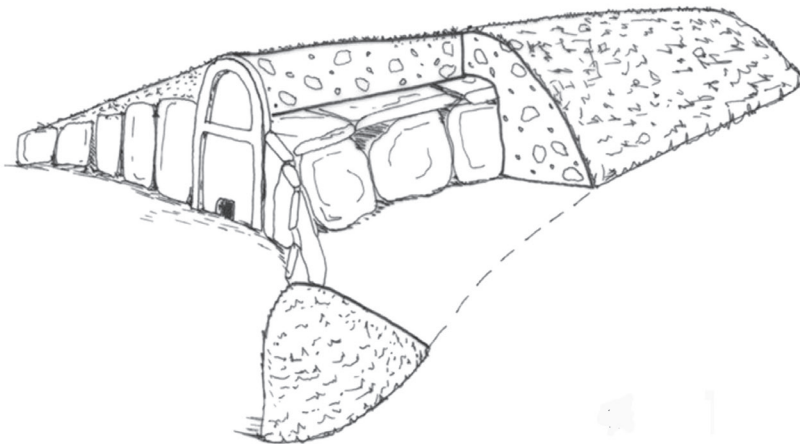
Fig 2 - Idealised reconstructions of the architectural prospect tomb of Molafà – Sassari (a) and of a squared stones courses Giants' Tomb with notched slabs on the top with the three miniature baetyls inside. (b). Adapted from Melis 2015 and Moravetti 2014.

the island (Melis 2014). Indeed, only five tombs of the central stele-type are found in the south of Sardinia: the Perda Lada tomb – Decimoputzu (Ugas 1990: 28), Badde Arena – San Giovanni Suergiu, Monte Is Casteddus – Isili (Bagella 2001: 120-3), Is Lais – Villaperuccio and Brunku c'Amoradu – Ortacesus (Moravetti 2014: 50). The lack of an element of religious and structural value, such as the stele, thus seems to represent a variation in architectural homogeneity, and may indicate that regional differences, which became more apparent in the Recent Bronze Age, were already emerging in the Middle Bronze Age. However, this may also be due to the scarcity of

<sup>3</sup> In the Giants' Tombs, the identification of the phases of use is based mainly on the associations of archaeological materials present in them, which do not necessarily derive from homogeneous stratifications, but whose presence still allows to document the use of burial through time (an example is that of the tomb 2 of Iloi at Sedilo: Tanda, Bagella, Depalmas 2003).



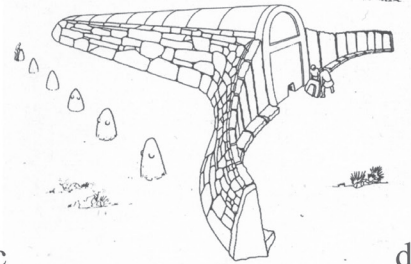
a



b



c



d

Fig. 3 - Coddu Vecchiu – Arzachena, Giants' Tomb facade with *stele centinata* (a); idealised reconstructions of Giants' tombs with *stele centinata* (b, d); baetyls near Giants' Tombs of Tamuli – Macomer (c). Adapted from Sardegna Digital Library ([www.sardegna.digitalibrary.it](http://www.sardegna.digitalibrary.it)) (a, c); Tanda 2003.

archaeological data in South Sardinia, and/or a lack of the stones used in construction. Another possible explanation is that this area has been farmed more intensively and the stones have been removed from the fields.

The distribution of Giants' Tombs in such a densely-populated area as the Abbasanta plateaux (territories of Aidomaggiore and Sedilo), seems to follow some alignments that had the function of territorial markers (Vidili 2012: 1036). Tombs were mostly built at the edges of the plateaux, in a high position, visible from remarkable distances, and especially from the lowland Tirso river valley which was an important communication route (Vidili 2009: 165-166). In contrast to this, visibility between the nuraghi and the tombs does not seem here to be significant, as shown for 91% of the cases examined by Blake in north-eastern Sardinia (Blake 2001, 2002). The visibility of the Giants' Tomb in the territory was assured by the monumental nature of the structures, which, both for those tombs with arched stele and those with front rows, could even reach a height of 4 meters.

The study of distances between tombs and towers, in this area of Sardinia, demonstrates that the tombs could have been shared by more than one nuraghe, and that the ratio is about two nuraghi for each tomb with an average distance between the nuraghi and the tombs of 1 km (Vidili 2012: 1032). It is possible to deduce that the community occupying a few nuraghi shared the same funerary area for the whole group. The construction of a Giants' Tomb was considered the foundation for long-term settlement, because the tombs, both those with stele and those with rows, were used over very long periods and even when new nuraghi were built there was no construction of new tombs, instead the old ones continued to be used (Vidili 2012: 1033).

In some other areas of Sardinia, with a lower density of nuraghi, the ratio between the tombs and the nuraghi is different. For example, there is one tomb for every ten nuraghi in the area of Monte Acuto or even one tomb for every twenty nuraghi in the area of Marmilla (Webster 1996: 143-144). On one hand, the funerary building represented the unity and the identity of the group around a communal ritual, on the other, it had the role of territorial marker, by indicating with its monumentality the ownership of a territory, by a certain group through their connection with the burial place of the ancestors.

Particularly significant for this sense of connection with the past, is the use of the artificial Neolithic rock-cut tombs. These are found all over the island and are called "domus de janas". Even during the initial phase of the Nuragic period, when the first Giants' Tombs were built, these hypogea continued to be used as tombs, as well as being expanded according to new plans and with significant hybrid additions. An example of this can be found in the province of Sassari, where a *stèle* is carved on the facade of the rock at the entrance of some hypogea (Melis 2014) (fig. 2a). But the distribution of rock cut-tombs with carved stele on the rock facade, contemporary to the megalithic tombs, seems to be located in a limited area in north-western Sardinia (fig. 1).

The assumption that other types of burials, invisible to us today, have been used as an alternative to the Giants' Tomb, although plausible, is not yet demonstrable from an archaeological point of view. If this hypothesis would provide an explanation for the few tombs compared to nuraghi and for the long time of use, it should be remembered, however, that the identification of ossuaries in the area of the Giants' Tombs (eg Tomb 2 Iloi - Sedilo) could be a much more widespread phenomenon than what appears from our incomplete and imperfect archaeological record.

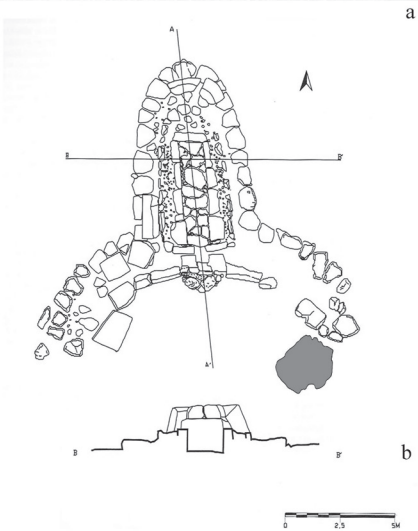


Fig. 4 - Iloi – Sedilo, Tomb 2. Remains of exedra facade (a); plan and section (b). Photo by A. Depalmas; image adapted from Tanda 2003.

### 2.c. Ritual and Functional Aspects

When considering Nuragic rock-cut tombs with carved stelae on the facade from north-western Sardinia, the small entrance door is generally even smaller and, as in the case of built tombs, there is a short corridor immediately behind the door. This element is considered fundamental in the rite of passage that implies the introduction of the corpse to the tomb, and represents a sort of *stomion*, that is a liminal space between the world of the living and the world of the dead, not dissimilarly to structures well known in peninsular Italy, in the Mycenaean world and in the Balearic Islands. The explanation for this is not at

all easy or plain, as is suggested by similar interpretations proposed for other contexts, such as the hypogea of Trinitapoli and of San Ferdinando in Puglia where, according to the reconstructions, the rituals practised were connected with a sort of fecundation of the mother earth through the entrance in the temple-womb. The echo of the pain of birth, which is repeated in death, is strongly recalled in the symbolism of a narrow passage through which the deceased makes his or her departure from human life (Melis 2014).

The interpretation of the central *stèle centinata* of the Giants' Tombs has been debated by several authors: some scholars have suggested that it could represent a door-stele, that is the representation in stone of a wooden door, which closed the *allées couvertes* (Castaldi 1975: 5-6); some others, such as Contu (1978) and Tanda (1984: 36-51), thought it was a sort of architectural decoration, derived from a pre-existing two storey building, not attested archaeologically, which probably had a vaulted roof on the second level, and a lower room with a flat roof and *alae* on the front; others have suggested the stèle was an evolution of the fake door of the *domus de janas* (Moravetti 1985: 145) or even the reproduction of the internal structure of the tomb (Perra 2000: 224). Finally, it has been suggested that it is a key symbolic element of the Giants' Tombs and is a shared liturgical element; in particular, the partition of the stèle itself in three sections (small door/entrance, the squared frame and the lunette) would recall the three parts of the tomb and the tripartite rite of passage of the funeral: entrance to the underworld, transit in the *stomion*, arrival in the womb of Mother Earth (Melis 2014: 36-38). Another element with religious significance consists in the three removable stone elements (or possibly of perishable material) that were installed on top of the most evolved ste-

lae, in the tombs with architectural prospect, or on the top slab of the tombs with rows on the front.

Another element relating to funerary rituals is the bench that is often found at the base of the exedra of tombs with rows, but that is also attested as an added element in older tombs with orthostats (es. Iscrallotze – Aidomaggiore: Depalmas, Vidili 2012: 1442). Abundant pottery, especially open shapes such as pans, basins and bowls, and more rarely jars, have often been found at the foot of the bench, or on top of it; these may well have been used for the donation of offerings and the consumption of ritual meals within the funerary ceremonies. Some traces of burnt areas at the extremity of one of the sides of the exedra such as those found in Tomb 2 at Iloi - Sedilo (Tanda 2003: 82) would suggest that magic and ritual fires were also initiated in relation to meals offered to the dead (fig. 4).

It is more difficult to explain the function of niches found in the Giants' tombs (and also common in the nuragic hypogea) or the function of benches inside the hypogea, as excavations have not revealed evidence that can explain the use of either of these elements. Even comparison with other cultural and geographical areas, such as the Balearic Islands does not provide reasonable explanations: for example a bench was used as an ossuary according to Plantamor Massanet (1991: 117), and as a bed for depositions according to Rossello Bordoy (2000: 201, 204). In the case of Nuragic *domus* such as Pedra Lada III in Florinas it is possible to believe that the benches were used as seats during funerary rituals performed inside the tomb (Melis 2014: 84).

To conclude, in general, in the Giants' Tombs materials are mostly found outside the chamber tomb, and are related to communal rituals, feasts and ceremonies offered to the dead; on the contrary funerary grave goods are limited to a few pots,

scarce ornaments (bone, faïence and glass beads) and very rare metal objects. Emblematic in this respect is the case of tomb Bidistili – Fonni, where 197 of the total 207 items from the excavation were found in the exedra, and only 8 inside the funerary chamber (Lilliu 2010: 43).

#### 2.d. Burials

While in many cases it has not been possible to recover any skeletal remains from Giants' Tombs, because of secondary intervention and also because of the acidity of the rock that dissolves organic material, it is well attested that they were used for collective burials. A long-standing debate persists, about whether the inhumations were primary or secondary inhumations, in the latter case following the stripping of the flesh. The poor preservation of the bones makes it very difficult to identify which practice was adopted.

In the Giants' Tomb of Lu Brandali it was possible to identify about fifty bodies still laid out with their original anatomical connection, therefore they were probably primary depositions (Antona 2005: 60); in contrast the La Testa tomb contained the remains of about eighty inhumations that had been pushed towards the bottom of the chamber, probably to make space for new depositions (Antona 2005: 68). About fifty skulls were identified in the tomb of Preganti – Gergei (Lilliu 1988: 336-337) deposited on different levels and mixed up with several other bones. In the chamber tomb of Iloi 2 there were very few skeletal remains, probably those related to the last burials of the tomb, which dated to the Early Medieval Age; however, the presence within the space limited by the exedra, of a pit excavated in the rock in order to bury skeletal remains, possibly indicates that the chamber was regularly emptied in order to create space for new burials (Tanda 2003: 30) (fig. 4b).

The Sa Sedda 'e Sa Caudela – Collinas tombs are particularly important because they testify different treatments of the bodies according to the age and/or social role of the deceased. The site is composed of two tombs (A and B), without exedra and partially cut from the marly bedrock. Tomb A, a dolmenic structure, contained a pot with metopal decoration, bone, faïence and glass beads of the Middle and Late Bronze Age. In addition, the study of skeletal remains has identified a minimum of 103 individuals, of which at least 25 were children between 1 and 10/12 years old. Tomb B, built with courses projecting inwards, was paved with small slabs and red river pebbles. The grave goods included glass, faïence and bone beads, scarce pottery fragments and two jars: the biggest, covered by a pan, contained infant burials. This tomb contained 239 individuals, of which 166 were above 12 years old and 73 infants between 12 years and neonatal age and 5 fetuses. Of these 46 were buried in a trapezoidal lithic cist (0.90/1.15 x 0.85/1.10m) to the south of the entrance, with skulls and long bones, laid in a circle on the superior level, together with scarce grave goods (pottery fragments, a red small pebble, bone beads). The materials from Tomb B and the cist date from the late Middle Bronze Age up to the Final Bronze Age and indicate a prolonged use of the tomb (Atzeni *et alii* 2012).

Details about skeletal remains found in Nuragic hypogea are not very different from those of the Giants' Tombs and the space available in the hypogea was not different or more limited than that of the Giants' Tombs (Melis 2014: 100). With reference to funerary practices, the problem of how the bodies of the deceased could be introduced into the tombs through a very small door has often been pointed out. Recently for the tomb Pascareda-Calangianus a wooden or stone removable element has been suggested, a sort of hatch located in

between the roof slabs of the funerary corridor, about halfway along its length (Antona 2008: 717). A similar interpretation has been suggested for the installation of the two counterposed facing notched slabs, on the top of tombs with rows (Perra 2000).

### 3. FINAL BRONZE AGE–EARLY IRON AGE.

#### *Stratified Society and individual tombs*

In the Final Bronze Age (1150–1020 BC) the construction of nuraghi slowly ceased and the population moved into villages. In this phase the ground plan of the huts was not limited to the circular form, as there were also trapezoid, rectangular, elliptical and other shapes. There were central courtyards in the groups of huts that formed the villages (Depalmas 2009: 147–148).

#### *3.a. Funerary Structures*

The most common funerary practice seems to have been the re-utilisation of earlier structures built during the Middle Bronze Age without any alteration to the pre-existing architectural layout, apart, in some cases, from the substitution, even only partial, of the stele, such as in the case of the tomb Genna Trocùlu – Villagrande Strisaili (Mazzella 1992: 171). In fact, there are virtually no new Giants' Tombs on record, but, following a custom which had already been partially adopted in the Recent Bronze Age (Depalmas 2009: 148), there are:

- tombs with corridors with squared and projecting rows of stones such as Sa Costa –Sardara (Taramelli 1913: 100–101), Motrox 'e Bois - Usellus (Contu 1958: 157–181), Bopitos - Laerru (Taramelli 1915: 393–397) (fig. 5a-b),
- semi-hypogea tombs like Su Fraigu - San Sperate (Ugas 1993b: 103–120),
- tombs covered by tumuli such as Brunku Espis - Arbus (Taramelli 1927).

The two tombs of Bopitos – Laerru are built with regular blocks that delimitate a rectangular room (I: 5.10 x 1.80m; II: 5.20 x 1.80/2.10m) (fig. 5a-b), which, in the case of tomb I, found intact, had an elevated area with a circular pit cut into the bedrock in front of the entrance. By the end of the Final Bronze Age a tradition of tombs with semi-subterranean gallery and without exedra in the front can be identified in the southern part of the island. In Sardara, the Sa Costa tomb is a very large trench (more than 1 m wide) built with stones, paved and roofed with slabs. The Su Fraigu – San Sperate tomb, has a chamber (4.80 m long) excavated in the marl rock and covered with masonry slabs (Ugas 1993: 11). The tombs with architectural prospect of north-western Sardinia were also used in this time.

Within the category of individual tombs there are rectangular “pseudo-chamber trenches (*cassone*)”, such as Su Bardoni – Cabras built with sandstone slabs (2.10 x 1.20/1.25 m) placed on the calcareous bedrock, or Campioni – Senorbì, with a sandstone covering slab about 2 m long (Taramelli 1931). The most common type of individual tomb however is the cylindrical pit firstly identified at Su Bardoni / Muras / Cuccuru de Spinu Crabiu – Cabras, wrongly named as Is Aruttas – Cabras (Usai 2014: 55) with five tombs excavated in the marl sandstone (diameter c. 0.50 m, depth 0.50-0.40 m); this type is also known from Antas – Fluminimaggiore, where five cavities were found, covered by a small mound of medium-sized stones (diameter 0.80/0.87 m, depth 0.35-0.68 m) (Ugas, Lucia 1987: 255-259) (Bernardini 2011: 354-355).

The largest and richest cemetery is Mont'e Prama – Cabras with more than one hundred tombs<sup>4</sup> aligned in rows. The oldest group of pits to be identified was probably covered by a small earthen tu-

mulus with *cippi* in the shape of nuraghe models on top of it; another group of a later date had cylindrical pits, closed by big slabs, in order to create a slab-paved area for communal use, again with nuraghe monumental models on top. Pit tombs of the third phase take the form of pseudo-*cista*, with the presence of vertical slabs on the two sides, squared openings and closing slabs (Bedini 2014: 153).

### 3.b. Ritual Aspects and Burials

It is precisely at this time that we can observe the rise and development of sanctuaries and places of worship focused on springs or wells or in any case buildings connected with water, as well as the spread of structures for community ceremonies such as rotundas or meeting huts. The emergence of monumental complexes and structures expressly designed for rituals and ceremonies is directly linked to the diminishing role of the Giants' Tombs as the location of religious ceremonies.

In fact, the creation of tombs with a corridor but no exedra, such as the Perda 'e Accuzzai tomb – Villa San Pietro (Cocco, Usai 1992) and Tombs A and B of Sa Mandara - Guasila (Lai 1992), seems to indicate a change in ritual practices; in fact, the exedra was devoted to performing communal rituals and the deposition of offerings and its elimination is significant (Bagella 2004: 392). The absence of the exedra in the new tombs might indicate that the Giants' Tombs have lost their centrality as tomb-temple (Perra 2006: 643-649), in a moment when the water cult began to be administered in distinctive places capable to attract great resources as votive offerings (Depalmas 2009: 148-149).

A new element, different from the Middle and Recent Bronze Ages, is the deposi-

<sup>4</sup> So far 120 tombs have been documented (Zucca 2017: 294); but this number will grow rapidly with enlargement of the excavation areas.

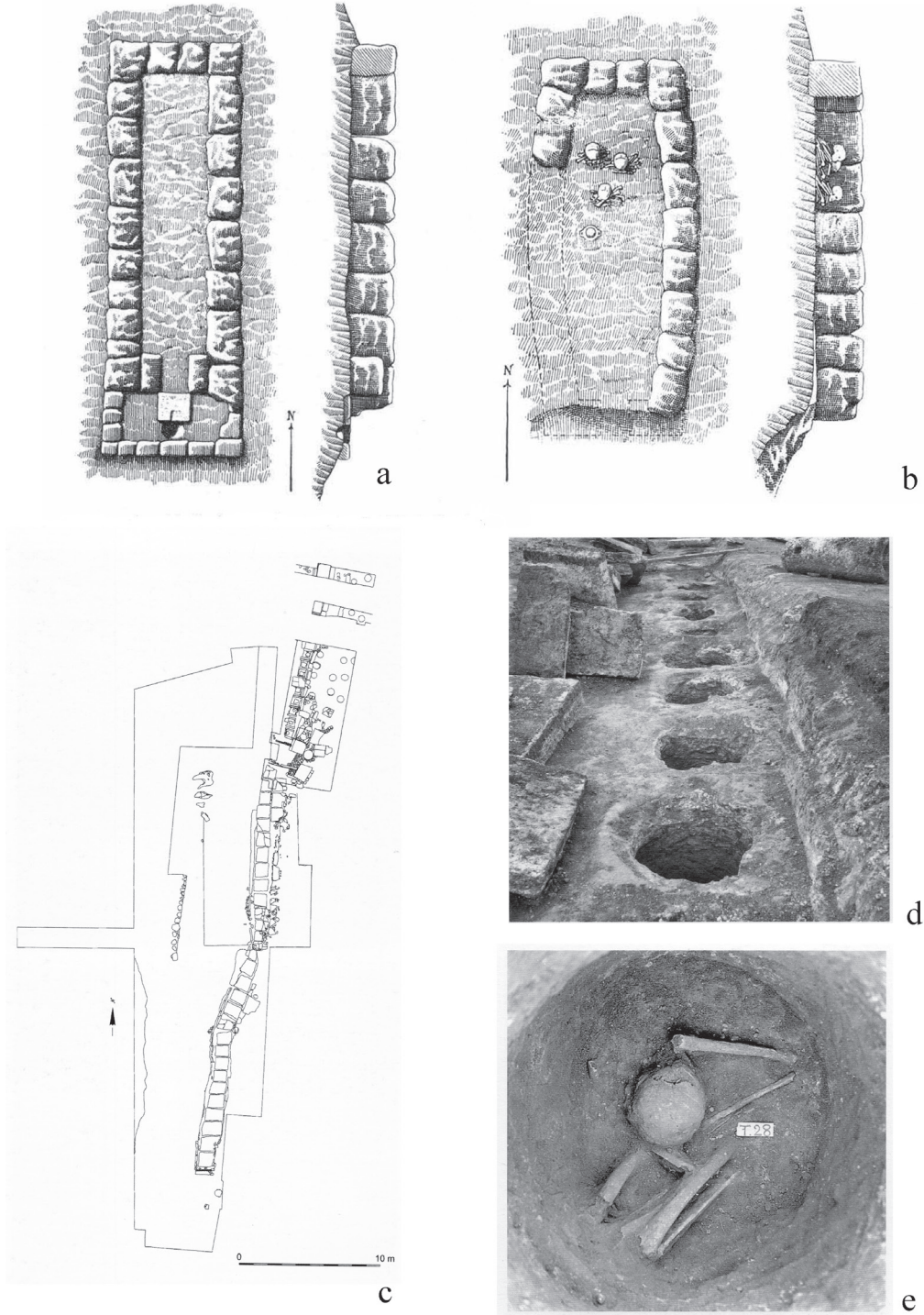


Fig. 5 - Bopitos – Laerru. Tomb I (a) and Tomb II (b); Monte Prama – Cabras. Burial pits alignment (c-d) and skeleton remains into a pit (e). Adapted from Taramelli 1915; Tronchetti 2014; Fonzo, Pacciani 2014.

tion of grave goods related to one or more individuals. In particular, an increase in prestigious objects is attested. A good example of this is the glass or amber beads and metal artefacts, deposited inside the tombs, also with miniature vessels at Perda 'e Accuzzai or normal size vessels at Cuili Pala Perdixi – Villasalto (Manunza 2008: 79-81); these new practices seem to indicate a new care and investment in the individual.

In addition to pottery vessels, still in limited quantities, weapons and bronze figurines are now also found, such as in the Giants' Tomb of Orroli, where a sword and fragments of bronze deer figurines were found (Perra *et alii* 2015). Among grave goods there are also personal ornaments such as oblong bone beads, amber and glass beads, copper and silver rings and bracelets and the iron knife with a stellite handle from Motrox 'e Bois, Allumiere type amber beads, golden laminated silver and crystal from Antas – Fluminimaggiore (Ugas, Lucia 1987: 256-258), and the bronze bracelet and the glass necklace elements from Su Fraigu – San Sperate.

In the Su Fraigu tomb, there were at least 292 primary inhumations dating to a period over 50 years, in addition to a few ornaments (bronze bracelets and glass, faïence and shell beads), among which an olivine seal with a childbirth scene of Cretan production and dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century BC is particularly noteworthy (Ugas 1993: 11). In the pit tomb of Sa Costa skeletal remains of “many individuals” were found, with burn marks, and on the

floor of the tomb there was a “big thin bronze sheet broken in many tiny fragments”, that Taramelli defined as a “bed of honour” of the first individual deposited in the tomb with two bronze figurines archers (Taramelli 1913: 101).

In Tomb I at Bopitos – Laerru, the small pit in front of the entrance contained charred remains that Taramelli explained as sacrifices carried out on the slab with a channel<sup>5</sup> located between the entrance and the pit. Inside, toward the bottom of the chamber, were found the skeletal remains of four individuals, that according to the excavator, were deposited in a “seated or crouched” position (Taramelli 1915: 395); in Tomb II, on the contrary, ten individuals were found “in a fetal position” (Taramelli 1915: 396)<sup>6</sup>.

As regards individual trench burials, in the Su Bardoni – Cabras tombs few semi-burnt skeletal remains were found (Usai 2014: 173-181) while in the Campioni – Senorbì tomb, the skeletal remains of an inhumation were found together with a votive sword with a handle and fragment of a bronze sheet (Taramelli 1931: 78-80).

The funerary rituals of individual burials are peculiar and recurrent: in the Su Bardoni – Cabras (i.e. Is Aruttas) tomb a skeleton was found, “seated” in a contracted position (Santoni 1977); in the Antas individual circular pit tombs, inside three pits there was a kneeling buried body and in the layer above, semi-burnt skeletal remains, including human remains (Ugas, Lucia 1987: 255-259; Bernardini 2011: 355).

<sup>5</sup> It cannot be ruled out that the slab was really the closure of the tomb.

<sup>6</sup> Taramelli's description (1915: 395) in relation to the depositions of the first tomb is the following “the skulls well preserved and of the dolichocephalic type, were on top of the vertebrae, the ribs, the pelvis, and the remains of the femurs and tibias, in such a way that it seems that the dead bodies were originally deposited in the room in a seated and crouched position”. Unfortunately, there is no photographic evidence of the discovery and the drawing by Edoardo Benetti seemed made up to illustrate the description of the author. In fact, it seems quite unlikely, that dead bodies deposited seated in an open space of a large room were preserved in such a way. If the description is accurate, it is more likely that the bones of the skeleton were intentionally deposited in small piles with the skulls on top of them.

Also peculiar are the grave goods of Tomb 3, which were crystal beads, barrel beads, cylindrical and biconic amber and glass beads, pendants and a bronze anthropomorphic figurine (Ugas, Lucia 1987: 256-257); furthermore a boar figurine and a pin with an articulated head, inscribed with syllabic Cypriot writing of the first millennium BC were found near the two circular pits more recently (1992-93). Around the cemetery, small pits with charred remains and animal bones, have been interpreted as spaces for votive offerings (Bernardini 2011: 355).

In the necropolis of Mont'e Prama – Cabras the remains of forty-one individuals found in primary deposition in individual tombs were analysed (fig. 5c-e). It is possible to confirm that the deceased were laid in a sitting position at the bottom of the shafts with their knees close to their chests and their ankles crossed; their arms were more or less bent at the elbow and their hands rested on their chests. The skull, bent downwards towards their chest, later fell into the space between their abdomen and thighs (fig. 5e). There were more males than females: only one body is definitely female while five others could be female. There were no children or old people, but many adolescents or very young adults; most of the adults were young rather than mature. The incisors of twenty-one of the thirty-six individuals with upper teeth were “shovel” shaped (60%). Since this character is hereditary, the high percentage indicates a closed community, with a high degree of inbreeding, leading to the conclusion that the individuals buried in Mont'e Prama might belong to the same family group (Fonzo, Pacciani 2014).

Nuragic tombs with architectural prospect also continued to be used. In particular, the re-use in the Final Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age of Tomb II at Sa Figù is noteworthy; in the exedra of this tomb a

pilgrim's flask was found, which might relate to libation rituals; a similar hypothesis is also possible for the Iron Age tomb of the Santu Pedru rock-cut tomb cemetery, where pottery as askoid jugs, was found (Moravetti 2012). Here Tombs VI and VIII have yielded evidence of Iron Age (if not Final Bronze Age) activity with the cleansing of older burials and the deposition of abundant grave goods (Moravetti 2012: 93-94).

Another significant example of re-utilisation of earlier hypogea during this phase is in Sedilo. Here, in the partly ruined cell of the rock-cut Tomb 2 of Iloi-Ispiluncas, a small stone *cista* was constructed between the Final Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. Inside the *cista* there was a carinated bowl with burnt plant remains. The most plausible explanation for this finding seems to be that it was part of a ritual connected with the veneration of the ancestors by one of the groups of Early Iron Age people in the area, perhaps from the village of Iloi which lies above it (Depalmas 2000: 23, 26, 73, 185).

The analysis of skeletal remains found in the Gallura region (North East Sardinia) allow us to hypothesise that there were social differences between different groups in the area. Malnutrition was found mainly in those occupied with pastoral activities and buried in caves, while those buried in Giants' Tombs were better fed. The former, malnourished and dedicated to pastoral activities, were affected by rachitism, alveolar pyorrhoea, tartar, strong dental wear; while the latter, whose general health was better, bore traces of tumours and hyperostosis (Germanà 1999: 25).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

From the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, the first Nuragic communities built towers and lived in densely occupied territories. Among these people, one of the first cultural expressions to appear were

stone-built tombs<sup>7</sup>, indicative of a shared idea of monumentality. Throughout the early Middle Bronze Age, several Neolithic and Eneolithic tombs continued to be used for the deposition of the deceased, according to practices that stressed continuity with the past in order to legitimize the ownership of a territory through descentance from their first occupiers.

In some areas of particular importance for settlement density and morphological characteristics (*e.g.* Abbasanta plateau), the monumentality of the Giants' Tombs, similarly to that of nuraghi, seems to relate to the intention of sanctioning the occupation of a certain territory, and in this sense, the highly visible position of some funerary structures seems to fulfil this purpose. The Giants' Tomb, in fact, is an important landmark and its prolonged use through time ratifies the link with the ancestors.

The semi-circular area in front of the tomb (exedra) is the space reserved for performing communal rituals, which most likely concerned ritual communal meals, drinking ceremonies and feasts, as indicated by pottery containers, mostly pans for cooking ritual (?) bread, found systematically within this space and on the perimetral bench.

The surface of the area bounded by the exedra and reserved for ceremonies has a small size and this is an element to be considered especially in relation to the very large spaces that already in the Neolithic are reserved for worship (*e.g.* Monte d'Accoddi) and that then there will be in the great shrines of the Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

However, this seems to be a clear indicative factor of the size scale of the social group that uses the tomb and celebrates the ceremonies, which therefore corre-

sponds to units on a family basis and not to larger tribal groups.

Inside the funerary room the deceased were laid both in primary and secondary deposition; space for new depositions was created by pushing the remains of the previous ones towards the back of the room; however, when the space was exhausted an ossuary pit was dug in the area of the exedra. Along with the inhumations, scarce grave goods were sometimes deposited, pieces of metal (pins for the shroud), a few vessels and personal ornaments, etc.

If we evaluate the cultural aspects of the Nuragic period of the Middle and Recent Bronze Age, both in the settlement and funerary domains, a strongly unified society based on family lineage seems to emerge. The amount of energy spent on the construction of the monumental structures signifies the social aggregation and the intention of the community to create and reinforce over time a strong group identity. In the Middle and Recent Bronze Age there is no solid evidence of differences in social status within the community. Indeed, no indicators have been found of role distinctions either in the artefacts connected to outstanding or powerful figures or in individual tombs or even in distinctive decorations.

Therefore, if the society of the living had elements of social distinction, these are not identifiable by way of the archaeological record and in any case the funerary evidence indicates a lack of intention in declaring single individuals' status.

Regarding the practice of collective burial, it has been observed that the groupings "were always "family" based, either extended family or lineage (Wason 1994: 89). With reference to the specific case of the Giants' Tombs, it can be agreed that communal burial would indicate "that an

<sup>7</sup> In some cases, in fact, it seems possible to hypothesize that the Giants' Tombs predate the nuraghi and were built by communities living in stone rectangular and / or apsidal houses (*e.g.* Monte Trigu – Sedilo, Depalmas 2015).

important aspect of status in death (and significance for living) is being part of a social group, probably with unambiguous kin-based membership” (Wason 1994: 92).

The progressive replacement of the “*stele centinata*” with a row facade (“*a filari*”) implies a change in religious beliefs that began with the introduction of miniature *baetyls* on the top of the “*stele centinata*” and continued with the loss of the *stele* and what it represented, presumably a few generations after the founders of the tomb itself; until it ends with the disappearance of the *exedra* and the cultic elements in the *façade*.

If like the *baetyls* (Perra 2006, 646) miniature *baetyls* can also be related to the memory of the family ancestors, at the end of the process, in the Final Bronze and Early Iron Age, their disappearance presupposes the dissolution of the ancient previous family bond.

The Final Bronze Age and Early Iron Age saw a cessation of the construction not only of *nuraghi*, but also of the Giants’ Tombs. The latter were instead re-utilised and their continued use is also well-attested; different types of tombs were also built, as well as collective (corridor) or individual (trench or pit) tombs. In this phase, substantial changes in society are attested. Social stratification appears. This can be seen from the use of individual tombs.

This is the shared opinion of many scholars, including Gilman (1981: 1) who argues “the very passage from collective to “individualizing” burial rituals (...) suggests the development of social stratification” and also Renfrew (1974: 74) who identified in the distinction between collective and individual burials one of the features distinguishing individualizing and group-oriented social structures (i.e. chiefdoms).

There are many clues that testify changes in Sardinian society from the Final Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age; therefore, what can be observed in the funerary

domain is coherent with a general trend of transformations in the settlements, the territorial organization, the production systems and the typology of the artefacts.

The adoption of the single individual burial is therefore one of the signs of a deep change affecting all aspects of “*post Nuragic*” – i.e. Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages – society. According to Alessandro Usai (2014: 187-188), the scarcity of evidence of individual burials is due to the difficulty in identifying pit tombs without slabs, except for fortuitous and accidental discoveries. Therefore, rather than being rare in antiquity, this phenomenon is under-represented in the archaeological record.

Other changes that can be detected in funerary practices, such as the tombs without *exedra* and the re-use of chamber rooms of Giants’ Tombs, are also indications of increased social differentiation; as are the increased number of grave goods, often prestigious items or other elements indicating the status of the deceased (such as weapons).

However, the connection with the place and the tombs of the ancestors is not eliminated, but rather reinforced, as indicated by the continued use for new depositions of the Neolithic hypogea or the common offering for the ancestors.

It could be said that in this time, the search for a connection with the past is practiced by individual families that in the choice of a specific burial place went to great lengths to legitimize their status through descent from the first inhabitants of the territory.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks go to David Finbar Brett for his re-reading and suggestions to refine the English form of the text.

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments that greatly contributed to improve this article.

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