



Università degli Studi di Bologna
Dipartimento di Archeologia
Facoltà di Conservazione dei Beni Culturali - Sede di Ravenna

Papers from the EAA Third Annual Meeting at Ravenna 1997

Volume III: Sardinia

Edited by

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with

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European
Association of
Archaeologists

*Third Annual Meeting
Ravenna, September 24-28 1997*

BAR International Series 719
1998

Published by

Archaeopress
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports
PO Box 920
Oxford
OX2 7YH
England

BAR S719

Papers from the EAA Third Annual Meeting at Ravenna 1997: Volume III Sardinia

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Volume Editor: David Davison

Printed in England by The Basingstoke Press

ISBN 0 86054 896 1

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Oxford OX2 7BP
England

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NEW DATA REGARDING "ARCHITECTONIC PROSPECT DOMUS" OF THE BRONZE AGE IN SARDINIA

Paolo Melis

Attention was called to the existence in Sardinia of "tombe di giganti" which are entirely rock-cut, imitating the typical megalithic structures of the Nuragic era, for the first time at the start of this century (Prechac 1908; Mackenzie 1910), however only in the nineteen-seventies did the study of this class of monuments take place in a systematic way (Castaldi 1975).

In recent decades, research has uncovered new tombs, increasing the total to at least 80; it is therefore desirable that we examine this singular class of monuments again, in light of new acquisitions and new data.

As regards the area of diffusion, the phenomenon appears to be circumscribed to north-west Sardinia, and in particular to the Sassari area and to northern Logudoro, with the exception of a few extremely peripheral isolated cases. This geographical limitation coincides, with good approximation, to the formation of the limestone and Miocene sediments of the Sassari area (fig. 1): the same limestone tables in which, two millennia before, the funerary rock-cutting of the *domus de janas*, that developed in a very notable way and with its own characteristics, recognisable above all, in the planimetric module called *Sassarese* (Santoni 1976; Tanda 1977).

The origin of architectonic prospect rock-cut tombs must be researched on one side in the hypogeum traditions of the Neo-Eneolithic which were so strong in this north-western side of the island, and on the other side in the objective limitations placed by the particular type of rock (extremely soft and workable) and the morphology correlated with this, with the presence of vertical walls suitable for the realisation of monumental prospects.

We will now examine, in a more analytic manner, some of the principal characteristics of the monumental class.

Planimetry of Hypogea

We will first distinguish between two principal types: type A1, composed of Neo-Eneolithic hypogea of the "domus de janas" type which have been re-used, (18 tombs); type A2, composed of hypogea dug *ex novo* in the Bronze age (the more numerous group, 59 tombs); type B, characterised by a rock-cut structure but with walls lined with rows of stones (2 tombs).

The diffusion of types A1 and A2 does not seem to denote any differentiation: tombs of a new structure and those which have been acquired by the re-use of preceding "domus de janas" co-exist in the same areas and often in the same necropolis.

The two principal planimetric types, A1 and A2 have been further sub-divided into different articulations.

Among the A1 type, re-used *domus de janas*, we may distinguish the sub-types A1a and A1b, characterised respectively by tombs in which the original planimetry of the Neo-Eneolithic hypogeum has remained substantially unchanged, or has undergone some transformation in the phase of re-utilisation. A further specification of the subtypes with

the addition of the numbers 1 and 2 (A1a1, A1a2, A1b1, A1b2), regards, in the first case, the presence of a prospect sculpted directly on the rock, in the second the final application of a mono or bilitic stele (figg. 2a-b, 3).

As regards the tombs of new structure, the type A2, a further subdivision has been made in the sub-types A2a and A2b, depending whether the planimetry of the single chamber presents a circular or transversal elliptical plan, in the first case (fig. 4a), or one which is rectangular or in some way longitudinally lengthened, in the second case (fig. 4b).

A further specification, indicated by the numbers 1 or 2, regards respectively the absence or the presence of niches in the walls of the funerary chamber. In this second case, the sub-division in the varieties 2.1 and 2.2 is to indicate the presence of respectively one or more niches (figg. 4c-d, 5).

Detailed analysis of such planimetric motives demonstrates (fig. 6), among the tombs imposed on a preceding Neo-Eneolithic hypogeum, the notable prevalence of those which have undergone significant internal planimetric restructuring (15 cases), with respect to those where the original plan has been left untouched (2 tombs).

This data regarding the restructuring of pre-existing *domus de janas*, demonstrates how the phenomenon of funerary rock-cut tombs of the Bronze Age follows a burial ritual which is completely different, which is reflected not only externally by the addition of the frontal stele, but also internally by the organisation of the burial.

This difference may be noted above all by analysing the planimetric type A2 (fig. 7), which concerns the tombs created *ex novo* in the Bronze Age. The funerary chamber is rigorously monocellular, enlarged mostly by lateral niches, more rarely on the back wall. The lengthened plan type prevails (sub-type A2b: 38 tombs) over the circular or elliptical type (type A2a: 18 tombs): from this it is perhaps possible to recognise the influence of *tombe di giganti*, characterised by a lengthened funerary chamber.

Another significant factor which regards the tombs of circular plan, is the prevalence of those without niches (13 hypogea), in comparison to those which have them (5 hypogea), and amongst the latter, four present only one niche.

If we examine the tombs of lengthened plan, of the sub-type A2b, we notice that conversely only ten have no niches, while 27 have, and amongst these, 11 have from two to four niches, or even five, as in the singular example of San Leonardo I at Ittiri (Castaldi 1975: 34-35).

We are evidently up against a type of realisation which reflects the different ways of intending the funerary ritual, while having in common the symbol of the curved stele. In fact as well as the different number and situation of the niches, other elements which may vary in the configuration of the funerary chamber have been recorded: the bench sculpted at the base, cavities in the bottom surface of the niches (certified for now in only 5 tombs, and certainly absent in at least 8), perhaps pits for offerings and something analogous to perforations

present in the prospect of the façade of the stele, the presence of a low transversal dividing septum in relief on the floor, which separates the two parts of the interior (two certified cases).

The external "stele centinata" prospect

Interesting prompts may be gathered from the analysis of the external parts of these tombs, characterised by the presence of a curved prospect, which is almost always realised in the centre of a semi-circular concave extended façade (exedra), limiting our observations to the motif of the stele, and ignoring for a while the other elements; the exedra, the excavation of the tumulus above the rock-face which is positioned over the prospect, the so-called upper exedra which encloses the very same tumulus.

Four types of stele may be recognised, sub-divided into sub-types *a* and *b*, depending on whether the motif is obtained in relief or simply by lowering the rock-face which has been previously prepared (fig. 8).

Type 1 is composed of a small moon-shape and underlying panel, with a small door opened in the latter; type 2 is like the preceding, except that the door opens below the panel; type 3 has a double panel underneath the small moon-shape; type 4 is instead without sculpted elements, and conserves just the external profile of the stele: in this last case, the presence or not of an exedra determines the sub-types *a* and *b*.

Quantitative analysis (Figure 9) demonstrates that type 1 is clearly prevalent (30 cases), followed by type 2 (15 tombs), type 3, however, is very rare (2 cases), double panelled, while there are 5 or 6 completely smooth prospects of type 4. The presence of a variety of prospects called "plain" may be explained as an element of decay of the cult, in a late phase of its expression.

Another fact of extreme interest is the prevalence of the sub-type *b*, realised by lowering the plane of the rock, with respect to *a*, realised in relief, amongst the latter, many cases regard applied steles, or steles of tombs often without exedra: examples which should be classified, if we are to follow a logical train of thought, half-way between those in relief and those which are lowered.

The prevalence of lowered motifs with respect to those in relief, would seem to transfer the prospective of symbolic interpretation from the design of the frame all together, to the geometric figures outlined, that is the small moon-shape and the under-lying panel: perhaps the abstract depiction of a couple of divine elements.

Association between planimetry and type of stele

As regards the association between the different types of planimetry of tombs and the types of "stele" (fig. 10), we may say that type 1 prospect is connected with plans of various typology, while that of type 2 seems to be associated largely with the tombs of new structure, and above all with those of lengthened form (type A2b). The type of "stele" with double panel (type 3) is, on the other hand, exclusive to re-used "domus de janas"; the data concerning type 4, characterised by a smooth "stele", is even more interesting: it regards only the tombs of new structure, and with lengthened plan, with a sole exception.

In conclusion, as the type 3 stele (the most complex) are retained the earliest of the sequence, as a result of vicinity to a supposed original model of megalithic structure (Contu 1978; Tanda 1984: 37-51), it

may be deduced that the tombs associated with it, characterised by restructuring of preceding hypogea, are to be considered the oldest. The fact that the steles of type 4, plain and therefore in a final stage of the cult, which are associated with a type of planimetry very close to that of the above-ground megalithic tomb with lengthened chamber.

The fact which regards the other two types of stele, which may be situated in an intermediate position in the series of evolution, and corresponding to the moment of maximum diffusion of the phenomenon. Type 1, associated with both restructured and newly constructed tombs, definitely precedes type 2, where there is a definitive separation between the area of the door and the motif of the "stele", in the same moment in which, in the planimetry of the tombs, the practice of re-using the tombs is abandoned and the use of exclusively new hypogea becomes the norm.

The perforations on the curved prospect

We will terminate this brief preliminary note, by analysing a detail connected with the motif of the stele façade: the three perforations dug above the prospect, perhaps originally intended to house a triad of small betyls.

Apart from their significance (Castaldi 1976; Tanda 1984: 38-39; Moravetti 1990; Lilliu 1995), the presence of the three perforations above the curved prospect seems to be an indispensable constant in this type of funerary architecture, linked with a cultural symbolism of particular relevance. There are only two tombs, which reasonably speaking, do not present perforations on the prospect; of the rest, 32 certainly have them, while in 24 cases the extreme degradation of the rock-front or even the absence of the top part of the prospect prevent any evaluation of this sort. Finally, of another 22 tombs we do not have sufficient information to ascertain whether they have perforations or not.

As regards the tombs without perforations, it is important to underline that the two cases (perhaps we may be able to add the third of the back prospect of Campu Lontanu) concern type 4 stele, that is, smooth: the perforations are missing from the plain façades; those, which we have already seen, are to be attributed to moments of probable final decay of the cult.

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New data regarding "architectonic prospect domus" of the Bronze Age in Sardinia

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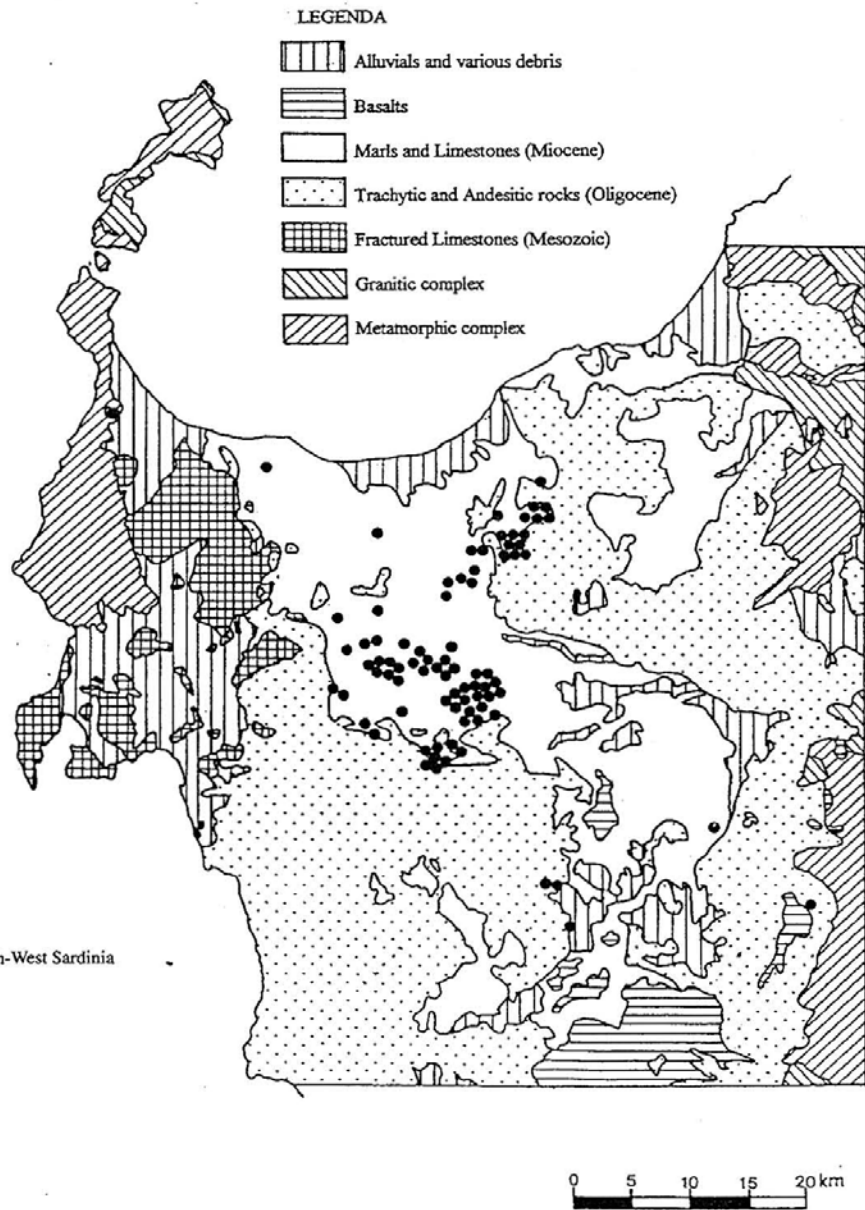


Fig. 1. Geological map of North-West Sardinia with tombs distribution.

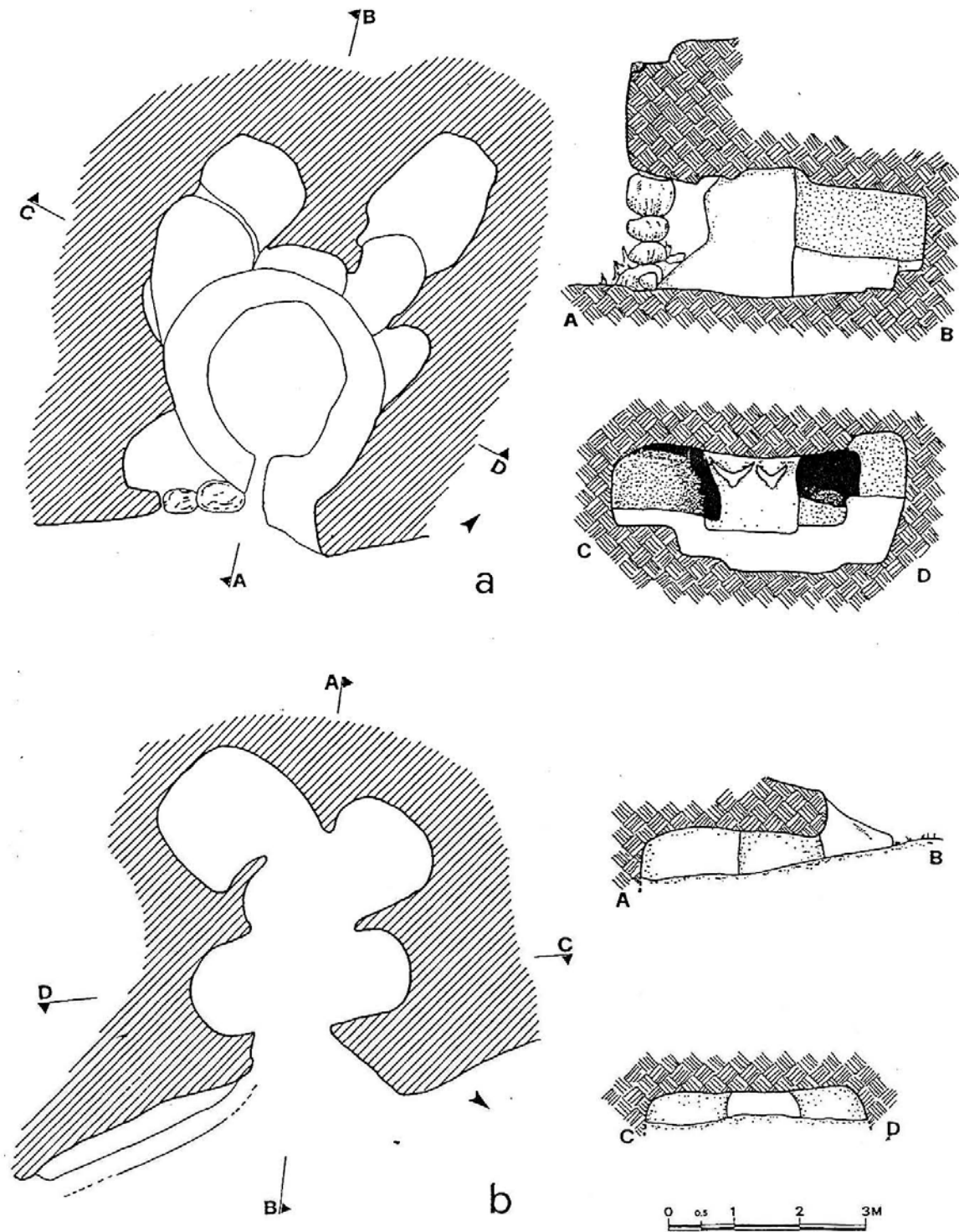


Fig. 2. Planimetric types: a) A1b1 (Mesu 'e Montes IV, Ossi); b) A1b2 (Sa Figu VI, Ittiri).

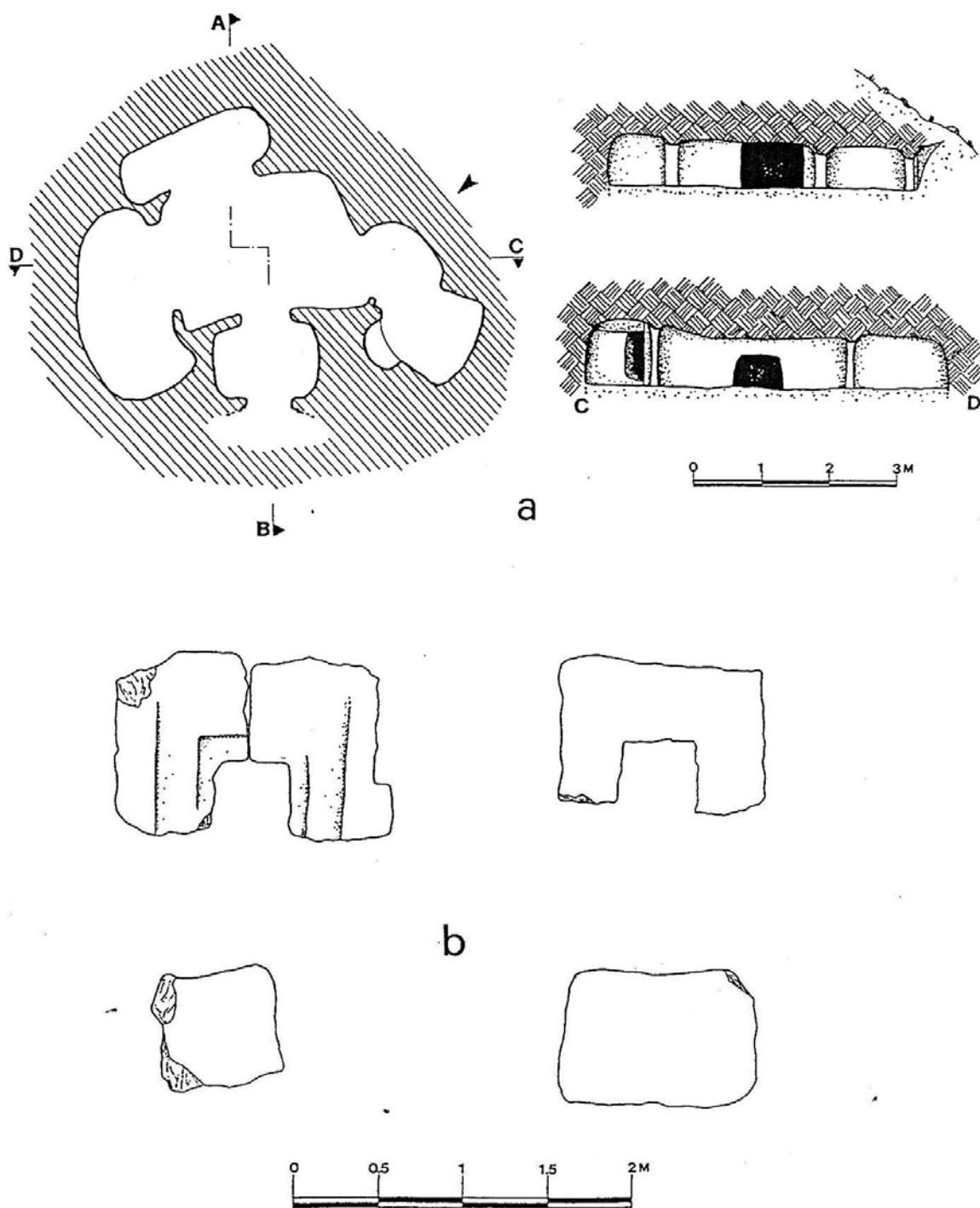


Fig. 3. Su Calarighe, Florinas (Planimetric type A1b2): a) Plan and sections of tomb; b) "Stele" fragments.

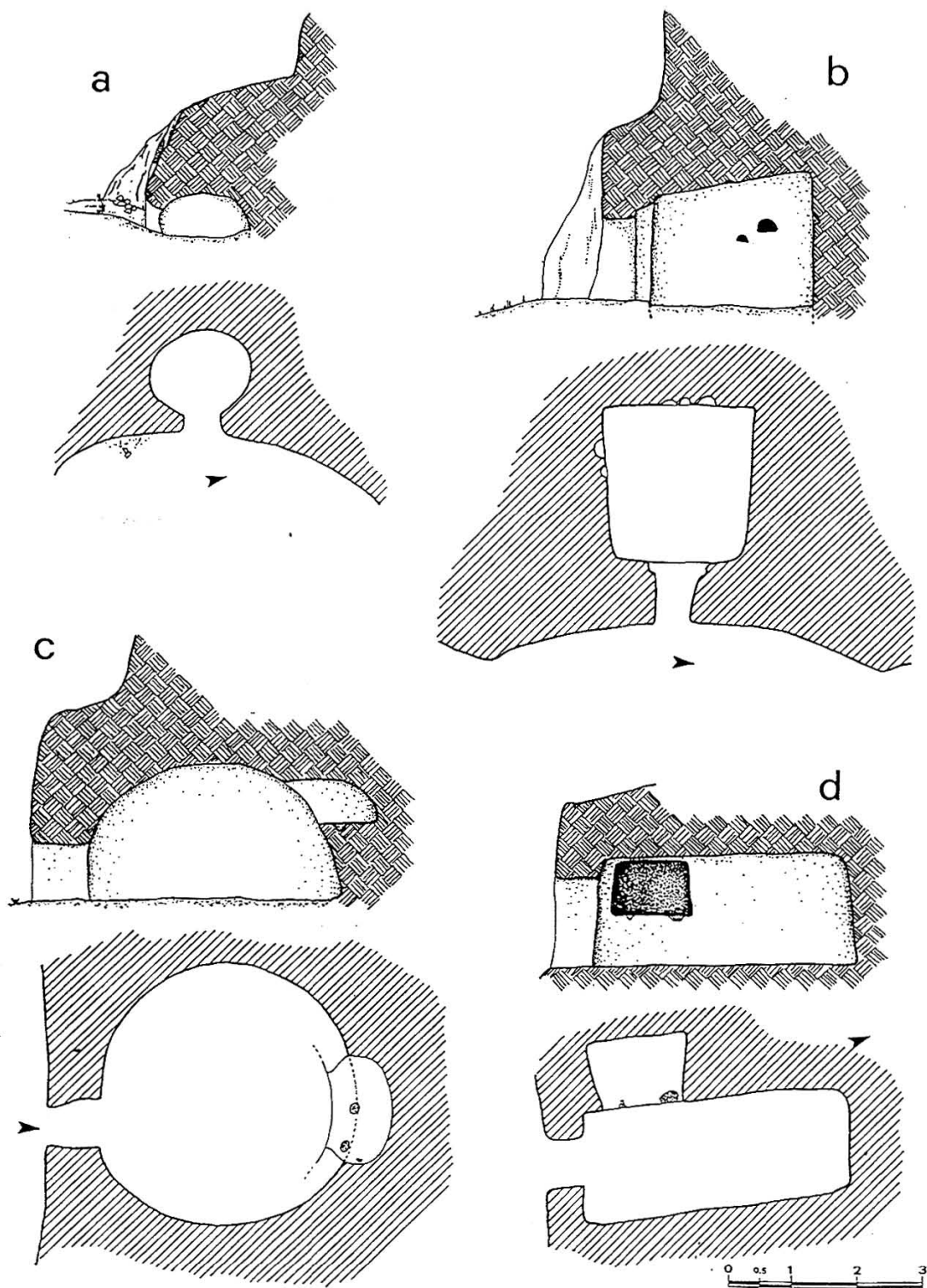


Fig. 4. Planimetric types: a) A2a1 (Balconeddu I, Florinas); b) A2b1 (Sa Figu VII, Ittiri); c) A2a2.1 (S. Antiogu, Ossi); d) A2b2.1 (Noeddale V, Ossi).

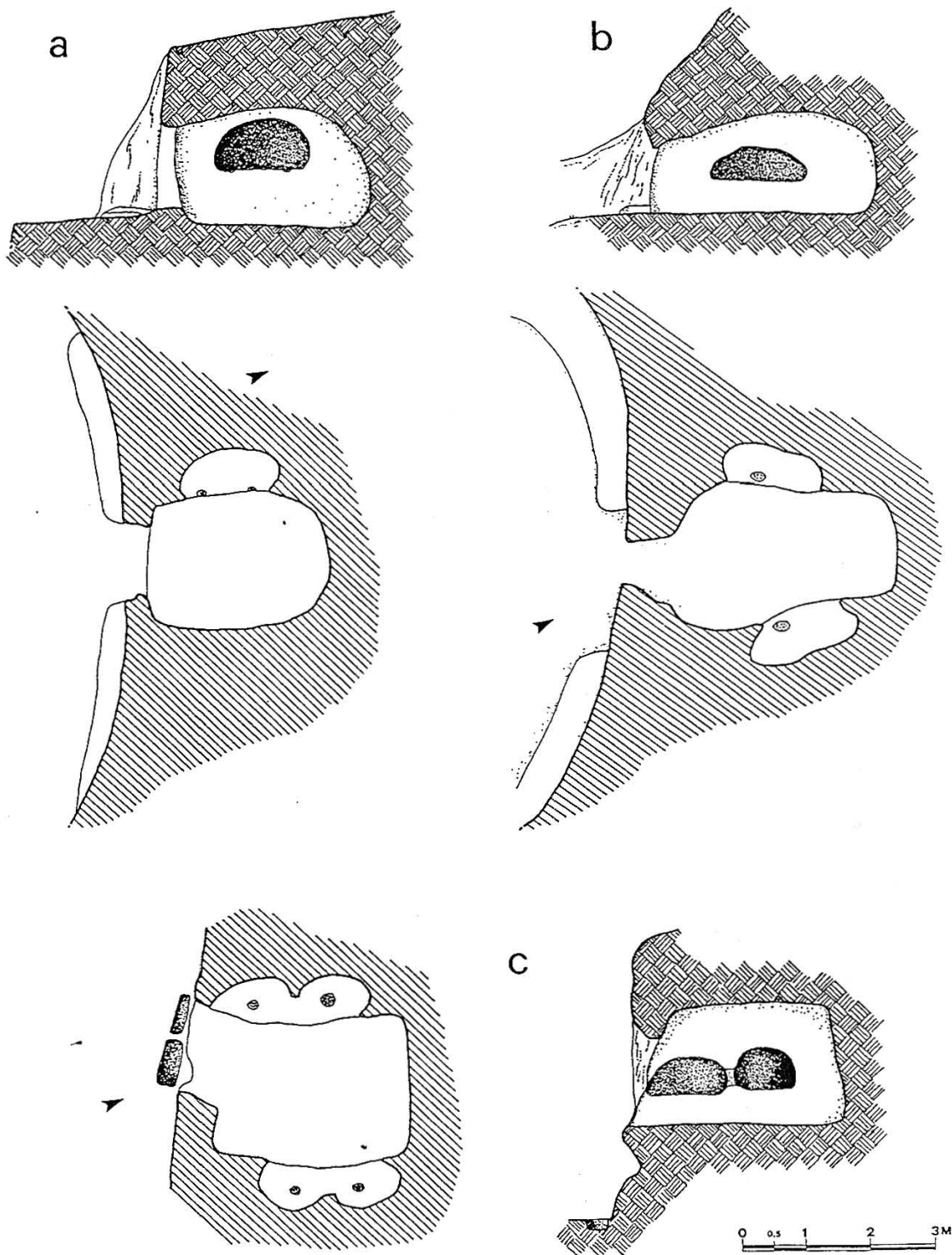


Fig. 5. Planimetric types: a) A2b2.1 (Sa Rocca 'e su Lampu, Florinas); b) A2b2.2 (Sos Montijos, Florinas); c) A2b2.2 (Noeddale IV, Ossi).

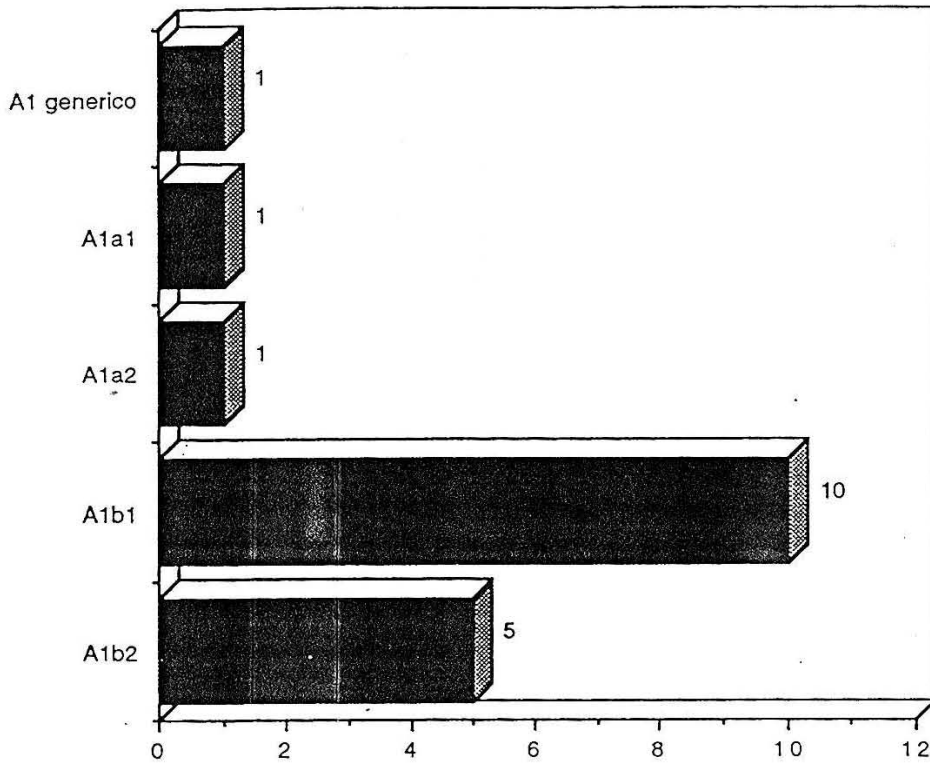


Fig. 6. Planimetric type A1: frequency of sub-types.

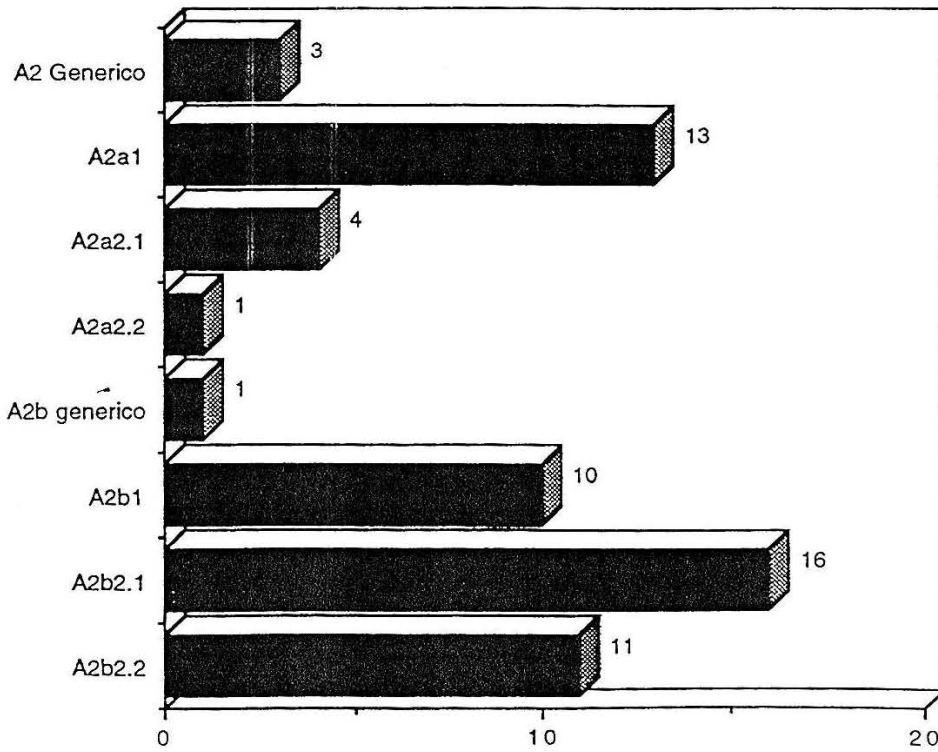


Fig. 7. Planimetric type A2: frequency of sub-types.

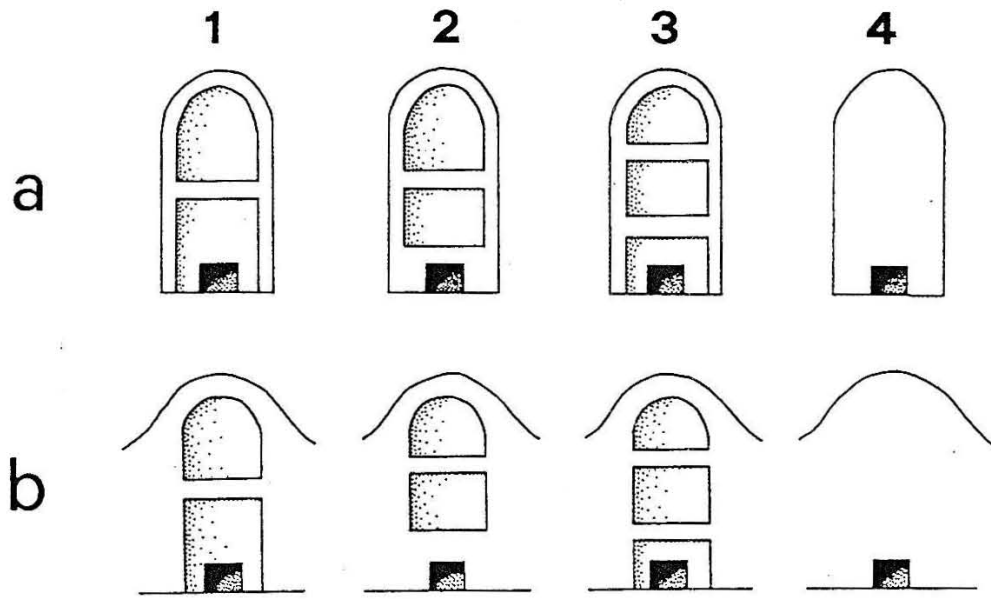


Fig. 8. Classification of stele prospects.

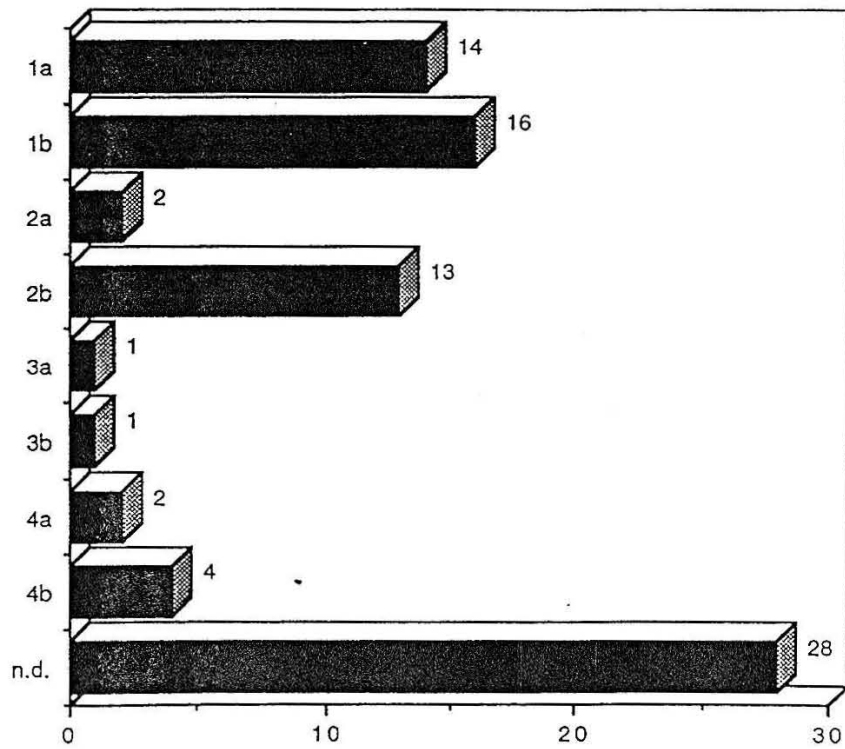


Fig. 9. Frequency of stele types.

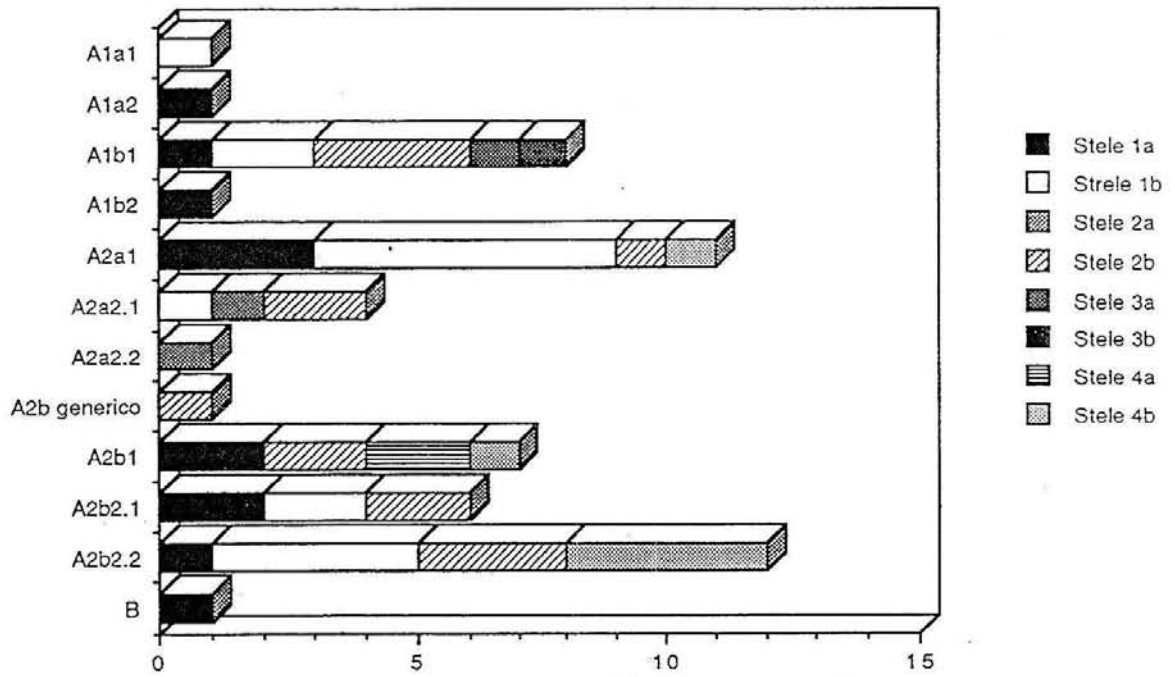


Fig. 10. Association between planimetry and type of stele.