
TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

www.trac.org.uk

Paper Information:

Title: Negotiating Nuraghi: Settlement and the
Construction of Ethnicity in Roman Sardinia

Author: E. Blake

Pages: 113–119

DOI: http://doi.org/10.16995/TRAC1996_113_119

Publication Date: 11 April 1997



Volume Information:

Meadows, K., Lemke, C., and Heron, J. (eds) 1997. *TRAC 96: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Sheffield 1996*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Copyright and Hardcopy Editions:

The following paper was originally published in print format by Oxbow Books for TRAC. Hard copy editions of this volume may still be available, and can be purchased direct from Oxbow at <http://www.oxbowbooks.com>.

TRAC has now made this paper available as Open Access through an agreement with the publisher. Copyright remains with TRAC and the individual author(s), and all use or quotation of this paper and/or its contents must be acknowledged. This paper was released in digital Open Access format in April 2013.

13. Negotiating Nuraghi: Settlement and the Construction of Ethnicity in Roman Sardinia

by E. Blake

During 700 years of Roman rule, Sardinia was a prime grain producer for the Empire and in turn the island received the characteristic accoutrements of a Roman province: urban centres, an extensive road network, villas, baths, aqueducts, and so on. However, the archaeological data does not support the 'traditional' picture of a fully Romanized province. In particular, there is little evidence of the typical rural settlement pattern of scatterings of small-scale farms, *latifundia*, and residential villas that has been described in other provinces. Instead, field surveys and excavations have brought to light a remarkable phenomenon of reuse and reoccupation of the nuraghi, the Bronze Age conical stone towers for which the island is famed. To favour pre-Roman structures over the newly introduced architectural styles and land-use patterns is a significant choice in the context of the struggles for power and the manipulations of cultural identity that underlay Roman Sardinia. This work posits that the nuraghi and their reuse were instrumental in the creation and negotiation of ethnicity as a means of social action in Sardinia.

The case for reuse in the Roman period has been well stated elsewhere, and the evidence, though not exhaustive, is convincing. The limited number of excavated nuraghi means that the evidence relies heavily on the collection of surface scatterings of material, primarily pottery. As the volume and organisation of the supply of ceramics to Sardinia is essentially unknown beyond inferences made from remains found, it would be overly ambitious to attempt a diachronic analysis of Roman period reuse at this juncture. The bulk of the information on the reuse comes from six field surveys in various parts of the island, examining 850 nuraghi in total. The percentage of reused nuraghi in an area ranged from thirty-four percent to seventy percent, with an overall average of fifty-six percent (Dyson & Rowland 1992:212–14; Diana 1958–9:317–21; Boninu 1988:306; Lilliu & Zucca 1988; Rowland 1984:289). Considering there are some 7000 towers on the island, we are obviously only looking at a small proportion of them, but these relative percentages are nonetheless significant, in light of the fact that the vast majority of these nuraghi appear to have been abandoned during the previous three centuries of Punic rule. In fact, the number of examples of Roman period reuse is ten times greater than the number of known Nuragic sites with Punic material. Moreover, all the known Nuragic sites with Punic material continued to be occupied in the Roman period (Webster & Teglund 1992:465). This relative comparison would seem to demonstrate the extent of the abandonment of native sites during the Punic era. Rather than a case of settlement continuity (/inertia?), we are looking at a phenomenon of *active* reoccupation.

Here I will focus on interpreting this phenomenon, to redress certain inadequacies I perceive in previous analyses. Interpretations in this text draw upon Giddens' structuration theory (1981) and Bourdieu's theory of practice (1977), while incorporating the concepts of time-geography and

phenomenology (cf. Barrett 1994; Thomas 1993), and considerations of the role of ideology in power relations (cf. Miller & Tilley 1984; Donley-Reid 1990). The thread binding these approaches together here is the theme of the construction of ethnic identity.

Certain Sardinian archaeologists have interpreted the reuse of these structures as a *reflection* of the strong native identity that continues to this day, as if the towers were somehow 'in their blood' (cf. Lilliu 1988). The remnants of the pre-Roman culture thus assume material form in the maintenance of the architecture. This is a culture historical approach, in which a culture is defined by its material remains.

The settlement reuse has also been explained from a functionalist – materialist perspective, concluding that the Romans permitted the native Sardinian way of life to continue to varying degrees, particularly in the interior where it was too difficult to wipe out, and with little to be gained from doing so. Proponents of this approach posit that Rome tolerated the continuation of the former settlement patterns and agricultural divisions as these afforded the highest crop yields; that, as the nuraghi were convenient pre-made shelters – often located near the only water sources in the area, it would have been practical for the people to reuse them (Webster & Teglund 1992:462–9). Such a view embraces an environmental determinism and an implicitly conservative stance that naturalises and ultimately risks valorising institutional control over the individual by assuming such a control to be the 'norm'.

Elsewhere, in a similarly materialist fashion, the reoccupation of the nuraghi is explained as an economic necessity for an underdeveloped economy, the inhabitants being unable to afford to live anywhere else (Mastino 1983:212). However, the archaeological evidence would seem to contradict this. The wealth of some of the Roman remains found at nuraghi, the presence of mosaics etc., make it clear that certain occupants had substantial means, enough to live elsewhere, or to construct a villa if they chose.

Implicit in the above interpretations is a notion of 'natural' opposition between Sard and Roman, subject populace versus dominant authorities. As a result, they do not consider the preservation of earlier traditions, by people who were nevertheless different from their ancestors in many ways, as an entirely *cultural* choice, not attributable to genetic coding or to purely environmental constraints. While the boundaries between the two groups and the cultures shifted and blurred over time, the individual was still confronted with the problem of ethnic affiliation and cultural identity, reconciling past distinctions with present realities. The presence of the virtually ubiquitous nuraghi, used, observed, and interpreted for over 2000 years, could not help but profoundly influence the manner in which these cultural exchanges were played out.

Each individual carries many identifying features, whether self-styled or externally imposed, such as age, sex, class, and so on. Of interest here is ethnic identity, and how it operates on both an individual and a collective level to mediate social action. I am defining ethnicity here as Shennan does, that it is a "self conscious identification with a particular social group at least partly based on a specific locality or origin" (1989:14). In the case of the Romans and the Sards we see the confrontation of two ethnic groups with two cultures, each vying for control of the resources of the island. The Sards engaged in resistance, often violent, against the Romans. The Romans called the indigenous population *civitates barbariae*, and designated the ever-rebellious central part of the island *Barbaria*, while the more acculturated regions were known as *Romania* (Tronchetti 1984:242).

Yet the indigenous culture that the Romans encountered was neither uniform nor static. Prior to Roman occupation, the island was no stranger to external influence. The social, economic and political systems evolved over the course of the millennia, and even the genetic makeup of the native popu-

lation changed with the influx of others. We cannot truly speak of a homogeneous Sardinian people. And yet the island-wide repetition of architectural forms and similarities of material culture and social practices would seem to point to a society that did share a common culture. However, it is one thing to perceive a cultural group, it is quite another to know whether or not the people identified themselves as such. It is not until the historical period, when the resistance of the indigenous population to the Carthaginians and the Romans is well documented. At this time we can infer with some security the existence of a self-conscious group affinity, that may or may not have existed before their arrival. The post-contact Sardinian culture was perhaps more distinct than the pre-Roman one.

Likewise, who were the Romans who colonised Sardinia? Roman period inscriptions on the island indicate names of North African origin, Greek names, and others from the Italian peninsula (Mastino 1983:193–4). Many Romans in Sardinia were themselves the products of a similar dialectic occurring elsewhere in the Empire. So, even from the first contact between Romans and Sardis, these identities were more constructed than physical. However, this makes them no less real.

The ethnic polarity on Sardinia would have become less meaningful over time, as the descendants of the Roman colonisers and the indigenes saw themselves as a fusion of the two. Yet, though the people no longer embodied the dialectic after the first generations, the tensions between the cultures still existed, internalised, within each person who decided the manner in which to reconcile for themselves the two opposing traditions. Thus, one might live in a nuraghe, eat off *terra sigillata*, and leave Roman coins earned from selling grain to Rome as offerings at a Nuragic cultic site. The reuse of the nuraghi did not necessarily imply a total rejection of *Romanitas*, but rather a negotiated syncretism of the two cultures. It was necessary for the reconciliation of the two cultures to occur at the individual level. For this reason, we can speak of a distinction between Roman and Sard in the absence of ‘Roman people’ and ‘Sardinian people’. The polarity would have been replaced by a conceptual continuum of relative proportions of both cultures, with each individual situated along it.

“Nuraghi patently have to do with power.” David Trump (1991:43) wrote this in reference to their Bronze Age construction and use, but this statement applies to the Roman period as well. Power is a key concept here, whether it be about enabling an individual – *power to* – or about social control – *power over*. While the Romans used physical force to gain control, they could not maintain power and further their interests through physical coercion alone – they had to legitimise their position and naturalise it, through ideology. They did this by distinguishing themselves from the natives, ‘the other’, marginalised in *Barbaria*. Yet, simply distancing the natives was counter to the exploitative aims of domination: the Romans had to simultaneously *envelop* them. To this end they offered the material enticements (the ‘carrot’ to accompany the military ‘stick’) of new products, from decorative arts (mosaics, fine pottery) to foodstuffs (wine, fish paste) to entertainment (public baths, amphitheatres, temples) to public works programmes (aqueducts, roads). As to their own interests, these were to make the province function as best as it could for Rome, by supplying the grain, the mining resources, and acting as a market for Roman goods. The Romans would want to impress upon the locals that it was to their advantage to partake of the Roman way of life, the *better* way of life. In Romanization, as in all colonialism (cf. Sider 1987:22), there is thus a paradox between marginalisation and inclusion.

Just as the Sardinian identity was branded as ‘the other’, the nuraghi can be seen as physically marginalised. In the Nuragic period, the nuraghi were the focal points for habitations, either as single homesteads or as the key structure in a Nuragic village. With the construction of urban centres on Sardinia, the nuraghi ceased to be the ‘dominant locales’. Roads were built that bypassed the tow-

ers: they were reduced to being merely *along* the road, rather than being a starting point or final destination of a journey. This manipulation of physical movement would serve further to disenfranchise the Sards.

The nuraghi, as something altogether *not* Roman, with a significance independent of the Empire, would counter the claims of the Roman propaganda. Though ruled by an external culture, the indigenes had the power to choose to reuse structures from a cultural tradition alternative to the dominant one. The reoccupation of the nuraghi most obviously meant resistance to the Roman way of life, but the meaning varied with the context and the individual. It also was a form of evasion, a way of distancing oneself from domination rather than resisting it. From the Roman perspective, this was self-marginalisation; from a Sard perspective this was an act of re-centring. It could signify an incorporation of the new culture, when elements of both are evident on site. It could even be an act of collaboration, of subversively linking the Roman-based power of the present with these symbols of past Sardinian power, thus dehistoricising or rather, falsely historicising the current power structure. The reuse of the nuraghi was an adaptation to changed social conditions out of which a new order was created, here a new identity distinct from Roman or Sard – Romano-Sard. In this way, to reoccupy a nuraghe need not signify an attempt to relive the past, but rather a negotiation of the past in the present. To recreate one's (perceived) ancestors' actions in the present, to make them a contemporary reality, is to replace linear time with a sense of time that renders the past more real than the concept of the present offered by the Roman culture. This would permit more ideological 'room' to manoeuvre, to avoid being duped by the Roman ideology.

One may ask, why, if the nuraghi were such symbolically powerful structures, did the invaders not raze them to the ground, or at the very least forbid the locals to use them? What if, as some argue, (cf. Webster & Teglund 1992:466; Dyson & Rowland 1992:209) the Romans actually encouraged the natives to reoccupy them? While the power struggle in question was clearly perceptible, much of the ideological side of the conflict would have been subliminal, unconsciously played out. The Romans, not impressed with the nuraghi themselves, would not have *read* them as encoding a threat to their position, seeing them as little more than piles of stones. Further, the authorities perhaps reasoned that a 'little identity was a good thing', if it made the Sards work collectively and effectively.

An individual's decision to restore a nuraghe and use it, possibly after hundreds of years of disuse, whether motivated by pragmatism, nostalgia, or a combination of both, conscious or unconscious, can only have been possible if he or she ascribed a positive meaning to the structure. Once it was occupied, each action, each movement in or around it, would be seen as a repetition of movements made there in the past: sweeping the earthen floor, cooking over a hearth, letting one's eyes adjust to the darkness inside as one entered the tower. Thus there is no inherent collective memory of the 'Proto-Sard' people – there is only a common *habitus*, a bank of experience and actions. By maintaining the same configuration of space over time, they render both dimensions (seemingly) static. But the nuraghi did not embody the past: rather, a multiplicity of pasts could be ascribed to them. The variations in reuse of the monuments, the choices made, are indicative of the actual diversity of the population underlying the collective spirit.

Inferring how a nuraghi was reused generally requires at least partial excavation, and ultimately one must still rely on guesswork. Because so much of the evidence of reuse is based on finds from surface surveys, for the moment we can do no more than sketch out a rough typology, which has yet to be analysed in terms of geographic or chronological variation. Nor have accurate numbers of each type been compiled. Nevertheless, it is crucial to an understanding of this phenomenon to

attempt such a categorisation of variation in the manner of reuse, as each has its own significance. Five general types of reuse emerge, though it must be kept in mind that some cases do not fit neatly into one category, but in fact have multiple and overlapping functions:

The simple reoccupation of the nuraghi, the most common form of reuse, is the most straightforward link between past and present, and expression of Sard ethnicity. The new inhabitants would perceive the tower as a home, as the original occupiers conceivably did, despite differences in the use of space between periods. The later residents would be visiting the same water sources, they would have the same view of the landscape, and have their sense of belonging to this heritage constantly reaffirmed, just as they would be ideologically prepared for this reaffirmation.

The reuse of the nuraghi in a manner different from their purported original functions emphasises that the people were not bound to the past, but were of the present, calling on the past for information and inspiration, using it for their own ends in a tacit negotiation between old and new.

Some sixty nuraghi show signs of Roman style architectural additions, such as walls and new buildings, and very rarely, mosaics. These 'ambitious' sites are frequently at the more complex, 'grandiose' nuraghi, but this is not always the case. There is little question that such sites were permanent residences, and that their owners enjoyed a certain wealth. The inhabitant could be using the trappings of Romanization as a form of elite competition. Conversely, he or she could be identifying with the island's powerful past, relating it to the Romans' current power. In fact the two scenarios need not be mutually exclusive: perhaps a Romano-Sard was exerting his or her personal status by calling on both cultural traditions. For example, under the assumption that the Nuraghe Santu Antine was the residence of a powerful person in the past, the later occupants could hope for similar respect *just because they reside there*, such that practice structures thought. Thus one is recalling a space's past significance while firmly placing it in the context of contemporary power symbols.

An absence of characteristic domestic items in certain nuraghi in conjunction with the presence of some Roman storage vessels and other foodstuffs has been interpreted as indications of a storage function (Boninu 1988:306). The use of the nuraghi as storehouses holds the strongest case for a simply pragmatic explanation, especially since, as has been argued, this transformation could have been the work of early Roman immigrants thinking of minimising labour by putting the 'old piles of stones' (sic) to use. However, intentionally or not, by entering and exiting the structure one would be unconsciously affirming its validity, and would be repeatedly reminded of its solidness, its circular shape presenting an alternative configuration of space to the Roman angularity of the roads and buildings. Its Roman users would be in unfamiliar territory, literally and figuratively, encountering this 'other' tradition.

We find both Roman period cremations and inhumations in and around nuraghi. To bury someone in a nuraghe is a deliberate act – it would have been no more difficult to dig a grave in an open area. It is generally thought that the presence of graves in nuraghi should be seen more as evidence of abandonment than reuse, as Romans traditionally kept the dead and the living strictly separate (Toynbee 1971), and the indigenous (pre-Roman) peoples also seem to have delineated alternative places for the dead (Lilliu 1988). While this act may indeed indicate that the site was no longer inhabited (though even this is questionable, as in the late Empire some of these cultural mores collapsed) this is not to say that this is not a form of reuse. We cannot know in each case whether the site was chosen simply as a distinctive marker, or if the burial signals a conscious intention to place the deceased in this significant place, as a way of according the death more ideological resonance.

In a relatively rare, but certainly significant form of reuse, some nuraghi were turned into cultic centres. These are identified by collections of votive offerings, a hearth and an altar, which in several cases is in the shape of a nuraghe. While some scholars consider the cult to be of Punic or Roman origin (cf. Lilliu 1988:472; Ugas & Paderi 1990), the location of the ritual sites in the nuraghi and the Nuragic-shaped altars make an incorporation of indigenous cultic practices likely. The transformation of the nuraghe into a sacred place, as a cult site, is a transfer of domains from the socio-economic-political, to the ideological-religious domain where the tower could be ascribed more power, as it had been unseated from its former position. In its pre-Roman context, its significance (its meaning if you like) would have been so cemented as to preclude any need to state explicitly, 'this structure is to be honoured and considered sacred'. Its position was secure enough in the social domain, as a dominant locale. With the advent of a rival, expanding culture the nuraghe's significance would have had to be asserted more overtly. The use of Nuragic space and of nuraghe shaped altars, was a forceful and direct way of making this point. A cult necessarily implies a collective co-operation of individuals, which distinguishes this sort of reuse from the others, in that what is occurring is not so much individual choice as collective action, especially considering the apparently regular nature of the rituals and the homogeneity of the offerings.

Thus, the encounters of the Roman period peoples with these ancient structures were in no way uniform. Even the categories of reuse described above are themselves too general to capture the unique nature of each such encounter. Each experience of reuse resulted from a complex set of contingent factors specific to each site's history, involving an individual's mental preconditions and modes of existence, as well as the physical state and location of the nuraghe in question.

That not all of the nuraghi were reoccupied brings home the importance of the individual as the decision-maker in social practice. Different external factors affected this decision-making: it seems that towers closer to the agricultural land were more frequently reused. Likewise, the proximity of scarce water sources was crucial. Certainly some of the structures, already 2000 years old by the early Empire, were uninhabitable, due to collapse. Nevertheless, the considerations that go into decision-making, be they economic, spiritual, ecological, must be perceived by the decision-maker as worthy considerations, and must still be filtered through the mind to be of any influence. There needed to be an *acknowledgement* of a dearth of water for that to be a factor in the choice not to settle in the lowlands. We are thus looking at a social phenomenon, not an ecological one. Some people clearly decided to live in towns, elsewhere. Thus, at an individual level, a choice was made between living in a nuraghi or not living in one, or using it as a tomb or a granary, and while the populace perhaps shared a common perspective and engaged in similar behaviour, we cannot generalise and *retrodict* the choice as it rested finally with the active agent, whatever the environmental influences on the decision may have been.

To conclude, the nuraghi did not merely symbolise ethnicity, they helped to instil and maintain it, as well as temper the effects of cultural disruption. Yet the relationship between towers and people was a recursive one: the nuraghi were as dependent on the people to imbue them with significance as the people were shaped by the presence of the nuraghi. The choice of what to do with these monuments, to use them or reject them in favour of a 'Roman' use of space, rested with the individual, according to his or her disposition, or sense of self, and the decision made would in turn influence that personal identity. Thus *through* the nuraghi, (as opposed to *because* of them) island identity was perceived, negotiated, perpetuated. This is an important example of Romanization, demonstrating as it does the role of material culture in the *process* of cultural identity.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Ian Hodder for commenting on a draft of this paper, and Henry Hurst and Catherine Hills for sound advice on an earlier incarnation of it. Thank you also to Anna-Grazia Russu, for generous use of several slides (for the spoken version), and for warm hospitality during my time in Sardinia.

Bibliography

- Barrett, J. C. 1994. Defining domestic space in the Bronze Age of southern Britain. In *Architecture and Order: Approaches to Social Space* (eds M. Parker Pearson and C. Richards). London: Routledge.
- Boninu, A. 1988. Testimonianze di età romana nel territorio di Torralba. In AA.VV. *Il nuraghe S. Antine nel Logudoro – Meilogu*. Sassari, pp. 305–314.
- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diana, A. 1958–9. Esplorazione archeologica nel Campidano. *Studi Sardi*, 16:316–49.
- Donley-Reid, L. 1990. A structuring structure: the Swahili house. In *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Space* (ed. S. Kent). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 114–26.
- Dyson, S. and Rowland, R. J. jr. 1992. Survey and settlement reconstruction in W-C Sardinia. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 96:203–224.
- Giddens, A. 1981. *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, Vol. 1: Power, Property and the State*. London: Macmillan.
- Lilliu, G. 1988. *La Civiltà dei Sardi*. Torino: Nuova ERI.
- Lilliu, G. and Zucca, R. 1988. *Su Nuraxi di Barumini*. Sassari: Delfino.
- Mastino, A. 1983. A proposito di continuità culturale nella Sardegna romana. *Quaderni sardi di storia*, v. 3, Sassari: 189–218.
- Miller, D. and Tilley, C. (eds) 1984. *Ideology, Power and Prehistory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rowland, R. J. jr. 1984. The Countryside of Roman Sardinia. In *Studies in Sardinian Archaeology* (eds M. Balmuth and R. J. Rowland). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 285–300.
- Shennan, S. 1989. Introduction. In *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (ed. S. Shennan). London: Routledge, pp. 1–32.
- Sider, G. 1987. When Parrots learn to talk, and why they can't: domination, deception, and self-deception in Indian – white relations. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29:3–23.
- Thomas, J. 1993. The Hermeneutics of megalithic space. In *Interpretative Archaeology* (ed. C. Tilley). Oxford: Berg, pp. 73–97.
- Toynbee, J. 1971. *Death and Burial in the Roman World*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Tronchetti, C. 1984. The Cities of Roman Sardinia. In *Studies in Sardinian Archaeology* (eds M. Balmuth and R. J. Rowland). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 237–83.
- Trump, D. 1991. The nuraghi of Sardinia, territory and power: the evidence from the commune of Mara, Sassari. In *Papers of the 4th Conference of Italian Archaeology: The Archaeology of Power pt. 1* (eds E. Herring, R. Whitehouse, and J. Wilkins). London: Accordia Research Centre, pp. 43–7.
- Ugas, G. and Paderi, M. 1990. Persistenze rituale e culturale in età punica e romana nel sacello nuragico del vano e della fortezza di Su Mulinu – Villanovafranca (CA). *L'Africa Romana VII*. Gallizzi: 475–86.
- Webster, G. and Teglund, M. 1992. Toward the study of colonial-native relations in Sardinia from c. 1000 BC–AD 456. In *Sardinia in the Mediterranean: a Footprint in the Sea*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 448–73.