









Università degli Studi di Cagliari

## A History of Sardinia

Text by Nicola Gabriele  
Translated by Sally Davies  
Book design by Giorgio Dettori

All rights reserved  
First edition October 2014

© Giorgio Dettori/Nicola Gabriele

# A History of Sardinia

Nicola Gabriele





## From the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic Age: the first men and the first Sardinian cultures

The first human presence in Sardinia dates back to the Lower Palaeolithic (from 500,000 to 100,000 BCE). The first humans arrived in Sardinia from Africa and the Italian and Iberian Peninsulas. The oldest traces of their presence were found at Perfugas (Sassari), and in the Corbeddu cave in the Oliena area. However, it was during the Neolithic period, from 6000 BCE onwards, that Sardinia began to be permanently inhabited. At this time, the Sardinians lived in caves and found shelter beneath the rocks, where they also buried their dead. They lived off shellfish and small animals, including the now extinct *prolagus*, which they hunted with harpoons and arrowheads manufactured from **obsidian**, a glassy volcanic rock, found in large quantities in the Monte Arci area, near Oristano. They made daily use of ceramic pots that they often decorated by pressing the still wet clay with the edge of a cardium shell, from which this **cardial** pottery gets its name. The people of this time were deeply religious, and the numerous female basalt statuettes bear witness to the origins of the Mother Goddess cult, widespread throughout the Mediterranean, which saw Nature as a mother and giver of life.

Several major primitive cultures developed and flourished during the Neolithic Age in Sardinia:

- **the Bonu Ighinu culture** (4000-3500 BCE) in the Sassari area, when the islanders learned to domesticate animals, cultivate wheat, and build simple shelters. In this period, the dead began to be buried in the small artificial caves that are found all over Sardinia, known as *Domus de Janas* in Sardinian (Fairy houses);

- **the Ozieri culture** (3500 BCE) lasted for an extremely long period and can be considered as the first great Sardinian culture. This was when men started to live in villages of huts (*pinnettas*), built with circular stone walls topped by a structure of wood and branches. Until quite recently, shepherds still used to build these huts as shelter during the long periods of transhumance. The men of Ozieri became skilled workers in crafting obsidian to make their arrowheads. Those communities are noted for their refined and decorated ceramic artefacts, but are probably best known for the tombs they built.



## The tombs

History, art, and archaeology in Sardinia are often merged with myths, legends, and folk traditions. This is particularly true of the popular terminology related to the ancient tombs of prehistoric populations. The Prenuraghic peoples built three kinds of tombs: hypogean tombs (*domus de janas*), megalithic tombs (dolmens, giants' tombs) and circular burial mounds.

1) *Domus de janas* are to be found almost everywhere in Sardinia (at Sant'Andrea Priu in Bonorva, in the Pimentel area, at Anghelu Ruju near Alghero, at Pani Lorimer in Santadi), although today they are often in a state of neglect;

2) *Dolmens* (from the Breton *tol* = table + *men* = stone) also known as "giants' tombs" are mainly found in the countryside near the towns and villages of Arzachena, Olbia, and Luras, in the province of Sassari, but they can also be seen in other areas (Mores, Dorgali, etc.).

There are various kinds of giants' tombs whose name stems from the belief that these large tombs were the burial place of gigantic men. The tomb often has a semicircular facade shaped like the horns of a bull and made either from layers of stone slabs stuck vertically into the ground or from a wall of huge boulders. The centre of the semicircular facade has a large monolithic stele with a door to the tomb at the bottom. Outside the grave, there were a number of stone benches where the relatives of the deceased could sleep and communicate with their loved ones in dreams, the so-called practice of incubation (from the Latin, *nightmare* = sleep).

3) Last but not least, examples of "circular" graves are only found in a small area of the Island, that is, in the countryside near Arzachena (SS). A number of stones are embedded vertically in the ground, marking off an area which often had a square stone box at its centre that probably contained the remains of the dead.

Quite often a huge number of large stones can be seen close to the tombs. These menhirs are found all over the Island, but particularly in the Barbagia area, and represent the icon of the **male phallus**, one of the two cosmic principles. Many other cultures were to follow the great culture of Ozieri in the years leading up to and into the Nuraghic Age:

- **the Abealzu and Filigosa culture** (2700-2500 BCE.) in the Sassari area, when men started to intensify the processing and production of metals and built

the unique terraced temple at **Mount d'Accoddi**. The monument is the only example in the Western world, similar to the Mesopotamian ziqqurath and was perhaps dedicated to a heavenly deity;

- **the Monteclaro culture** (2500 BCE.) which takes its name from a hill in the town of Cagliari. A number of megalithic walls, practically no longer existent, were erected at this time, which seems to suggest that the people lived in a climate of insecurity;

- **the Beaker culture** (2000 BCE.) that spread throughout the Mediterranean and reached Sardinia, as shown by the numerous examples of the typical bell-shaped pottery beakers, from which the name derives;

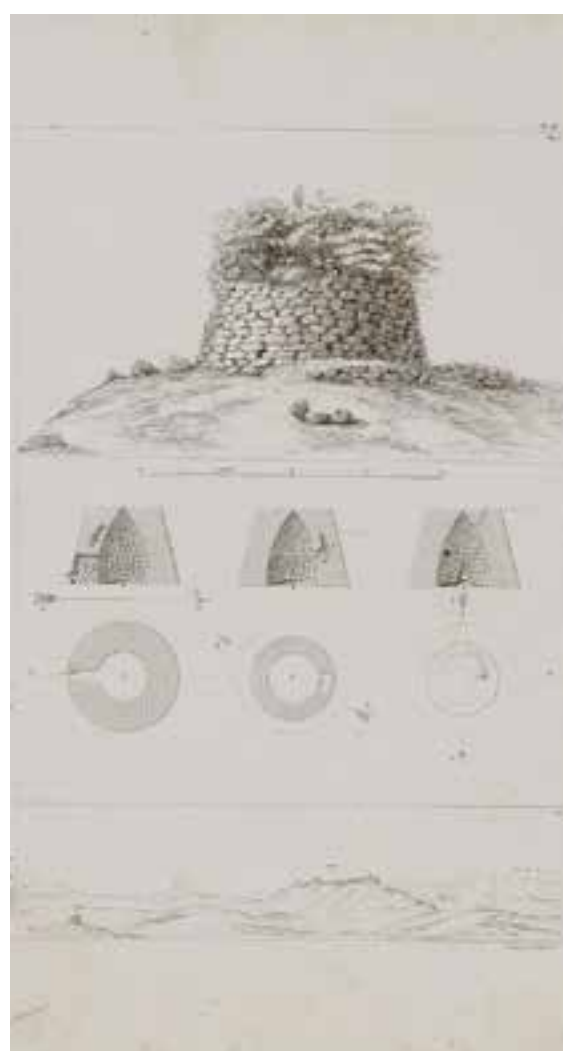
- **the Bonannaro culture** (1800-1600 BCE.) which preceded the Nuraghic civilization and whose people were in constant turmoil and on the brink of war. The pottery of this time is undecorated and simply made. This culture marked the dawn of the Bronze Age, the era of the Nuraghic people who were to leave the deepest mark on the Island.

## Nuraghic Age

The long journey of the Nuraghic civilization begins around 1600 BCE, born from the meeting between Mediterranean people of different cultures on Sardinian soil. In fact, only one Nuraghic civilization has ever existed, and it was the Island of Sardinia that moulded and formed this unmistakable fusion of cultures. This was a period when Sardinian society was transformed, and this somewhat peaceful people started to take on a far more belligerent attitude. Copper, which had previously been little used, now started to circulate freely in Sardinia, demonstrated by the numerous archaeological finds of daggers and arrowheads.

This radical change suggests the arrival of a wave of new inhabitants to the Island (perhaps attracted by its mineral resources), who probably brought new skills and more advanced techniques. The newcomers were of Indo-European origin, as compared to the bones of the previous inhabitants which seem to be Euro-African.





# Nuraghes

The first **nuraghes** were built around 1500 BCE. The word nuraghe derives from an ancient root “**nur**” which means “**hollow heap**”.

The nuraghes are **truncated conical towers of stone** with a circular base, built by stacking huge boulders one on top of another. The interior of the tower has a *tholos* (false dome) structure, built by overlapping circular rows of blocks on top of each other, each row protruding slightly inward compared to the underlying one. Thanks to a uniform distribution of weights, the nuraghes have managed to stand erect for 3,500 years without the use of any kind of cement. The majority of the around 7,000 nuraghes in Sardinia are mostly simple structures. They normally have a single tower with an entrance at the base, a large interior chamber, with several niches, and a stairway carved into the inside walls, leading up to the top of the tower.

There are also many more complex nuraghes with multiple towers which are all connected to a central tower. These nuraghic structures were fortresses with many rooms and more than one floor, and had hallways, stairs, and covered walkways, such as the Losa Nuraghe at Abbasanta (NU), the Santu Antine Nuraghe at Torralba (SS) and the Su Nuraxi complex at Barumini (CA), a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The nuraghes are usually located on the top of a hill or on the edge of a plateau, but always in a position that dominates the surrounding area since these fortified constructions were used for defence purposes.

In fact, since the Island of Sardinia lies far from the mainland and the other islands of the Mediterranean, one may indeed wonder as to what or who made these Nuraghic people build such an extensive defence system.

These people had a strong cultural identity, but were organized into tribes and these tribes into clans. They were nomads and also farmers but mainly wandering shepherds, and, historically speaking, pastoral societies have always been warriors, since a shepherd always needs pastures for his flocks and often has to fight with his neighbours over a piece of land. This probably meant that clashes between different tribes, or even between clans, was not a rare occurrence. We therefore have a pastoral society organized into small hierarchical communities, led by a shepherd-king, who was a tribal leader with religious, political, and military powers.

The shepherd-king lived in the nuraghe and the village grew up around it. One of the best examples of a nuraghic village is still visible at Barumini (CA), where a cluster of huts, fences, and buildings of every kind surrounded the majestic nuraghic home of the king.

## Sanctuaries

The period between 1300 BCE and 900 BCE saw the building of several sanctuaries, the complex structures of many different types used for several different purposes: sacred temples, circular shrines for political meetings, spaces for business and trading. Evidence suggests that the shrines were used as meeting places for the different tribes on various religious occasions.

The most important building in the sanctuary was the **well temple** where the ceremonies connected with the water cult took place. In fact, the Nuraghic people had a naturalistic religion founded on the worship of the elements of Nature which contained the divine spirit. They worshipped stones and trees and particularly rain or spring water, which was such a precious commodity in a dry land like Sardinia.

Well temples have an entry chamber at ground level, and then a flight of stairs that leads down into an underground space with a dome-shaped false ceiling. The sacred spring is found at the back of this underground room at the foot of the stairs. There are about 40 well temples in Sardinia: the most famous ones are S. Vittoria at Serri (CA), S. Cristina at Paulilatino (OR) and Su Tempiesu near Orune (NU).

In addition to worshipping water, the Nuraghic people continued to practice the cult of the Mother Goddess and the Bull God, the powerful divine couple who had already been worshipped in the pre-nuraghic age as symbols of fertility representing the union of the two forces that generated life. The old types of tombs, such as the *domus de Janas* and the giants' tombs were, however, still used, and small stone *menhirs*, **bétiles** in the Sardinian language, often placed in front of them. These bétiles are phallic symbols of fertility, shaped like a cone and often carved with women's breasts or a pair of eyes that symbolize the wish to rekindle life in the dead.





## Bronze statuettes

The Nuraghic people were master metalworkers, particularly in bronze, and the discovery of their swords, daggers, axes, and other objects has revealed just how skilled they really were. They prepared the mould for these objects by hollowing out a matrix in a block of soapstone, a heat resistant volcanic stone. The molten bronze was then poured into the mould and cooled into the desired shape.

Instead, the bronze figures were made through **lost wax casting** in clay matrices. These statuettes are the culmination of the technical skill of the craftsmen-artists and express the spirit of the people. The bronze statuettes represented men, animals, votive boats and objects, and were used both for ex-voto (offerings to gods), but also for practical and ornamental purposes. The objects are stylized, but accurate in their realistic details and provide important historical evidence about many aspects of the social life of the Nuraghic people and the world in which they lived.

Indeed, since the Nuraghic people left no written records, their architecture and craftwork are our only means of getting some idea of their lifestyle and culture. The bronze statuettes reproduce tools or means of transport, such as carts and small boats, or sometimes people of different social rank: chiefs, priests, warriors, shepherds, musicians, boxers, mothers with their children. Then there are supernatural beings with multiple eyes and arms that are part of a still mysterious religious world, and animals, such as cattle, sheep, mouflon, wild boar, deer, foxes, dogs, and doves. The so-called "Giants", the boxers and archers from Mount Prama, near Oristano, are the only stone sculptures dating to the Nuraghic period ever to be found in Sardinia. The statues are oversized examples that reproduce the iconography and stylistic models of some of the bronze figurines.



## Phoenician and Carthaginian Sardinia

Around the tenth century BCE, in the period of maximum development of the Nuraghic civilization, other Mediterranean populations started to arrive in Sardinia and establish trade, political, and military relations. The first to arrive were the Phoenicians, a Semitic people of sailors and merchants who founded numerous colonies throughout the Mediterranean. Several of their most important trading centres were first established in Sardinia between 1000 and 900 BCE.

In fact, the name "Sardinia" is recorded for the first time on a sepulchral column, known as "the stele of Nora" (kept at Cagliari's Archaeological Museum), which dates from the ninth century BCE. The inscription actually reads "SHRDN" since, as in most Semitic languages, it is written without vowels.

Initially, the Phoenicians built small towns to use as seaports, but within a century these settlements were transformed into proper towns. Karalis (today's Cagliari), Nora, Bithia, Tharros, and Sulci became reference points for Mediterranean trade. Other smaller towns such as Othoca, and Cornus at Oristano, Neapolis near Santa Maria di Nabui and near Monte Sirai in Carbonia were to spring up in a later period.

The Nuraghic people and the Phoenicians were probably on peaceful terms. The fact that most of the Phoenician cities were located on the coast, where there were no Nuraghic settlements, suggests that they had no reason to be in conflict. In all probability, they may even have cooperated and done business with each other. The contact with the Phoenicians brought new knowledge to the islanders along with several spiritual and material benefits. Writing was introduced to the Island and the local people came to know the **town** as a new way of organizing the community. They also came into contact with deities that were so different to those they had worshipped for centuries. Their living conditions also changed since the Phoenicians taught them how to make better use of the Island's natural resources. Thanks to the Phoenicians, **palm and olive tree** cultivation began on the Island, and the people learnt how to produce **salt** and about different ways of **fishing**. The Phoenicians also helped the Sardinian populations to exploit the Island's mineral deposits and to understand the value of iron and gold.

In 510 BCE, Sardinia passed into the hands of **Carthage**, a powerful Phoenician colony that rose up on the coast of North Africa. The Carthaginians were

great merchants and were destined to become a powerful economic, political and military force. Their arrival in Sardinia was probably to lend force to the developing Phoenician colonies, who, at some point, may have felt threatened by the inland Nuraghic communities.

In 509 BCE, after years of struggle and thanks to the division between the Nuraghic tribes, the Carthaginians under General Hamilcar and Hasdrubal occupied the Island. Punic occupation radically transformed Sardinian society, used to living in small Nuraghic villages, since the town now became the centre of political, economic, religious, and military power.

Punic towns had plenty of buildings and efficient facilities, such as roads, aqueducts, and sewers. The highest authorities in the hierarchical Carthaginian society were the Sufeti, or judges, who ruled together with a senate of elders and a people's assembly, while slaves had no political or civil rights and were at the base of the social pyramid.

Under the Carthaginians, Sardinia became an important trading centre in the Mediterranean, making the Tharros trading port one of the richest towns on the Island. The Carthaginians also introduced **coins** to replace the **barter system** previously used by the Nuraghic peoples for trading.

Many examples of Punic craftwork have come to light on the Island, especially the bronze or terracotta idols, also found in some of the Nuraghic complexes. Sardinian bronze statuettes have also been discovered in other areas of the Mediterranean, since the Phoenicians used them for trading.

The Phoenician-Punic people introduced Sardinia to the worship of the god Hammon and the goddess Tanit, who were the manifestations of a single god known as Baal. A clear example of Sardinian-Punic religious syncretism is the God Sid, the ancient name of the deity that the Romans renamed Sardus Pater. The God was venerated in the Shrine of Antas (Fluminimaggiore) and, in fact, the local people added the Sardinian name Babai, that is to say, "father" to the god's original name.



## Necropolises and Tophets

Sardinia also has several enclosed shrines (*tophets*) where the Phoenicians used to place the urns containing the ashes of children, who had perhaps been sacrificed to the gods. The remains of the Punic necropolises can still be seen at Sulci, Bithia, Monte Sirai, and Tharros. The dead were cremated and their ashes placed in a terracotta urn, which was then put inside a stone box that was finally covered with earth. At the Tuvixeddu necropolis in Cagliari, and in Sulci and Monte Sirai, the tombs are real burial chambers dug into the rock. In some cases, the entrance to the tomb was either through a well that was covered with earth after the ashes had been put to rest, or through a corridor called a *dromos*.



## The Roman Age

In 238 BCE, the Romans took control of Sardinia, at the request of the Punic mercenaries who had rebelled against Carthage. The first period was marked by the resistance of the Sardinian-Punic peoples, which culminated in the failed rebellion of Ampsicora, a powerful Sardinian-Punic landowner, in 215 BCE. In 227 BCE, Sardinia became a Roman province administered by a magistrate, although the Roman conquest had very little effect on the economic life of the Island. However, the creation of a public latifundium alongside the private estates, which either belonged to Sardinian-Punic landowners or had been assigned to Roman nobles, was crucial for crop production to supply the needs of Rome and the Peninsula. The Nuraghic Barbaricini continued to live as shepherds in the mountains and inland areas of Sardinia, where they put the land, pastures, and woods to communal use.

Roman domination was to last for nearly **seven centuries** and had a profound effect on the Sardinian way of life, language, and culture. Signs of the Roman presence can be seen all over the Island: the remains of bridges (Porto Torres), aqueducts, forums (Nora), streets, temples (Fluminimaggiore), spas (Fordongianus) and theatres (Cagliari, Nora).

The Romans founded new towns such as Turris Libisonis (Porto Torres) and developed many of the pre-existing coastal ones, such as Carales (Cagliari), Nora, Tharros, and also some inland towns, such as Forum Traiani (Fordongianus), Augustis (Austis) and Valentia (Nuragus). Several towns were elevated to the rank of municipality with administrative autonomy, whose inhabitants had the same civil, though not political rights, as Roman citizens.

The Romanization of Sardinia was driven by the strong military presence and the creation of the first **road network** linking the north and south of the Island. The introduction of **Latin** had a major influence on the Sardinian language, although it took a while to reach the inland areas. Latin eventually became so deeply rooted that Sardinian clearly maintains many of the characteristics of a neo-Latin language.

The Roman age in Sardinia also saw the spread of **Christianity**, and Sardinian Christians were both persecuted and martyred. One of the first was Antiochus, who died in 127, and who is now Sardinia's patron saint and protector; he was followed by Simplicius, Gabinus, Lussorius and Saturninus, sentenced to death between the third and fourth centuries CE, under Diocletian. Between 315 and

371 CE, the Sardinian bishops Eusebius and Lucifer were exemplary preachers of Christianity, while in the following century, two other Sardinians, Symmachus and Hilary, were nominated Pope. Tradition has it that under Diocletian, a Roman soldier Ephysius (250-303 CE) was sentenced to death, but converted to Christianity and became a martyr. He is now the Patron Saint of Cagliari and May 1 sees great celebrations in his honour.



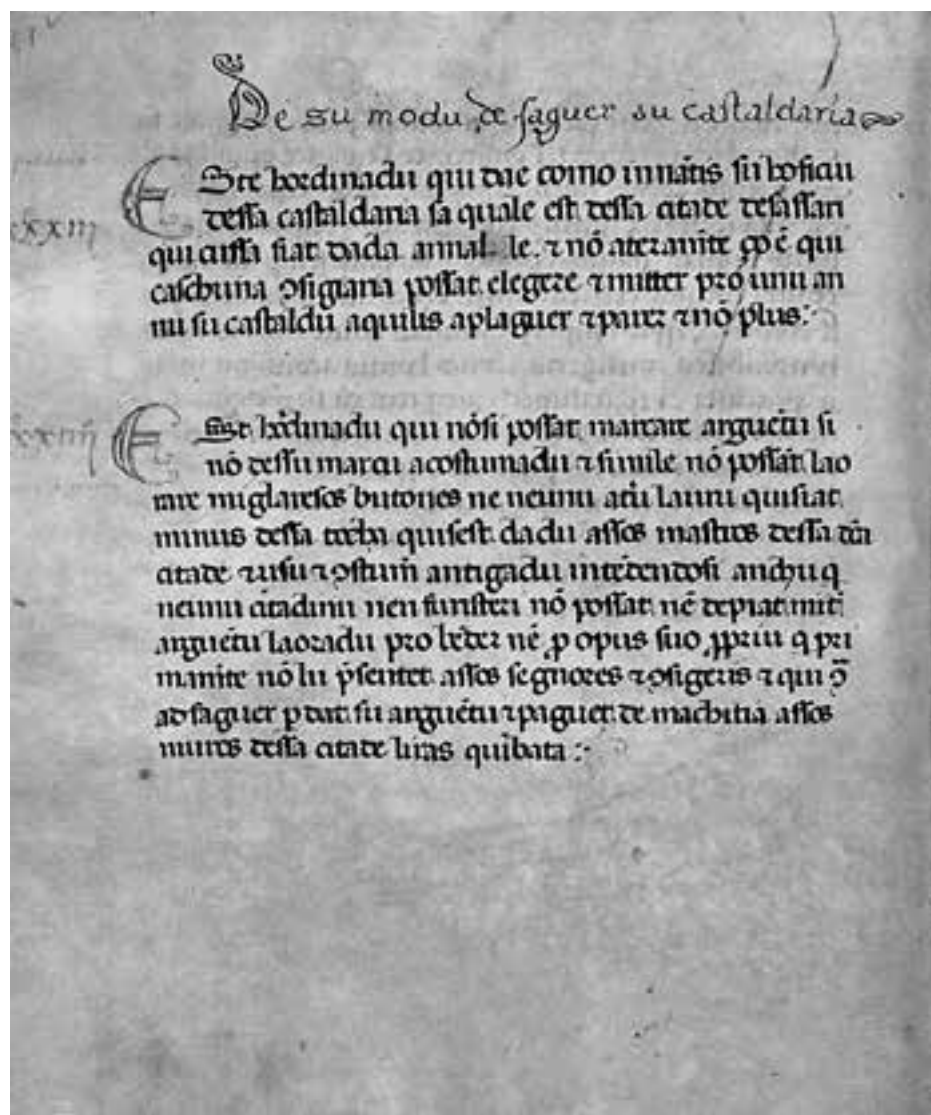
## The invasion of the Vandals and the Byzantine conquest

From 455 to 534 CE, Sardinia was occupied by the Vandals, a barbarian tribe, who did little to bring social or economic changes, but who were quite ready to collect taxes from the landowners. However, this was the period when **Christianity became more widespread**. In fact, the Vandal rulers practiced Arianism, an early Christian heresy opposed to the Church of Rome, and they used Sardinia as a place of exile for disbelievers. This led to the arrival of bishops and monks who carried out intense work of evangelization amongst the Sardinian population who were still tied to the ancient forms of religion and the pagan rites of the Nuraghic age.

In 534, Justinian, Emperor of the East, came into conflict with the Vandals in an attempt to regain control of the western part of his territories. With his victory, Sardinia became part of the **Byzantine Empire**. Under Byzantine rule, Sardinia now experienced a long period of peace, despite its location on the very edge of the Empire. The main authorities on the Island were the *praeses* and the *dux*: the *praeses* resided in Cagliari and had an administrative role, responsible for emanating laws and in charge of justice and taxes on the Island. The *dux* lived in Forum Traiani and was a military figure, whose main role was to ensure defence against enemy attacks and the repeated incursions of the Barbaricini, the inhabitants from the mountainous areas around the Gennargentu.

## Arab invasions and separation from Byzantium: the origin of the four Giudicati [Judicatures]

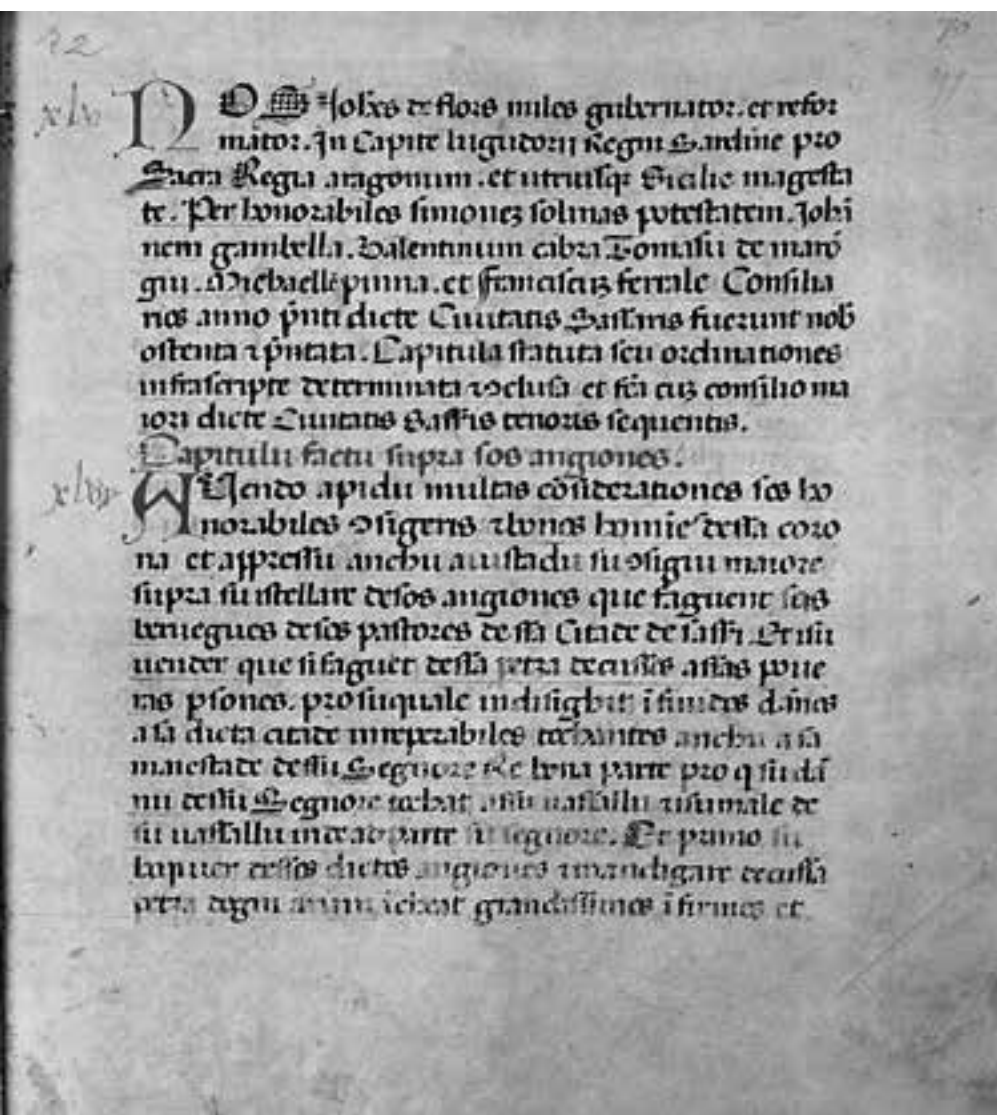
Between the eighth and ninth centuries, the arrival of the Arabs had a devastating effect on the whole of the Mediterranean area. Sardinia lost all commercial and political contact with Byzantium and was left alone to face the Muslim attacks. The constant looting of the coastal towns led to their depopulation, since the inhabitants were forced to move inland in search of safety and to avoid being captured and sold as slaves. Furthermore, at the beginning of the ninth century, the Sardinians were forced to form an independent political organization to fight off the ever increasing Muslim onslaught. The powers of the *dux* and the *praeses*, the two Byzantine judges who had previously ruled Sardinia, were put in the hands of a single authority which, in turn, delegated the power to four judges from different parts of the Island territory. Sardinia was divided up into four autonomous areas, which went on to establish their own administrative and political institutions and gain full independence from the central Byzantine power. This was how the four *Giudicati* of Cagliari, Torres, Arborea and Gallura came into being.



## Society during the Giudicato period

The head of the Giudicato system was the Judge, whose role was similar to that of a European ruler in the Middle Ages. He was protected by an armed guard and lived in a palace from which he managed the affairs of state and justice. Every Giudicato, known as *Rennu* (kingdom) or *logu* (territory), was divided into smaller areas called *Curatorie* (provinces), governed by a *Curatore*. Each *Curatoria* included a number of *Villas* (villages), under the control of a *Majore de Villa* (town mayor). The judge ruled with the assistance of an assembly called *Corona de Logu*, made up of the judge himself, his officials, and the people, who only had an advisory role.

The *Giudicato* society was divided into three classes: the *liberi* (officials, small landowners, craftsmen and merchants), the *colliberti* (freed slaves with certain obligations to their masters), and *servi* (who were employed as workers but were free men). The feudal system had not yet reached Sardinia, and indeed, a servant's life on the Island was far different from that of the serfs in the rest of feudal Europe. A Sardinian servant only had to work 3-4 days a week for his master and in the rest of his time could work for himself and his family.



The eleventh century saw the arrival of the first monks in Sardinia. The Benedictines of Monte Cassino received donations of numerous churches with all their worldly goods and servants. The presence of these monks on the Island had a number of important consequences: the abbeys, which employed serfs to work the land of their vast estates and tend to their huge numbers of flocks and herds, became important agro-pastoral centres that contributed to the renewal of crops and working methods. The monks also promoted the construction of churches and basilicas that sprang up throughout the Sardinian countryside. Some of them still exist today and are real jewels of Romanesque art, such as the fascinating church of the **Santissima Trinità di Saccargia (SS)**.

In the meantime, Pisa and Genoa demanded territories on the Island as recognition for helping the Sardinian *Giudicati* to defeat the Arabs. This marked the beginning of a gradual Pisan-Genoese infiltration of the Island, strengthened by the arrival of many members of the nobility. Numerous merchants and businessmen also moved to the Island at this time which contributed to the development of trade throughout Sardinia. The process of settlement was, however, not a peaceful one, since the two maritime republics were great rivals and their conflicts often involved the members of the four *Giudicati*.

As time went by, the *Giudicati* started to depend more and more on Pisa and Genoa for economic and political matters, and one by one, they eventually lost their independence. The first *Giudicato* to fall into foreign hands was Cagliari, when the capital, Santa Igia, built in Cagliari's hinterland as defence against the Arabs, was destroyed by the Pisan army. A new walled town (**Kastrum Karalis**) was built on a hill nearby, and from this time on began to play a prominent role in the Island's political and economic affairs. The ancient *Kastrum Karalis* is now the **Castello** neighbourhood in Cagliari. You can still see the ancient fortified ramparts, the San Pancrazio and Elephant towers, and the Castle of San Michele.

A few years later saw the fall of the Torres *Giudicato*, which was divided up between a number of Genoese families and the *Giudicato* of Arborea, and shortly after the *Giudicato* of Gallura fell to Pisa in 1296. At the end of the thirteenth century, only the *Giudicato* of Arborea remained and was actually able to resist and preserve its autonomy for a further century.

## The Catalan-Aragonese and the resistance of the *Giudicato* of Arborea

In 1297, Sardinia came under the Aragonese influence, when Pope Boniface VIII created the **Kingdom of Sardinia and Corsica**, in order to resolve the conflict between the French and Aragonese over the possession of Sicily. Sardinia was assigned to King James II of Aragon, which marked the beginning of Aragonese occupation of Sardinia.

The only ones to oppose this domination were the people from Arborea. In the second half of the century, first *Giudice* Mariano and then *Giudicessa* Eleonora led them against the Aragonese in the fight to gain control of the Island. Eleanor is certainly one of the best-known figures in Sardinian history, not only because she was a woman, but also as she represented an ancient lost freedom and the last strong resistance to foreign domination. In actual fact, she was very successful and managed to win back most of the Island, with the exception of Cagliari and Alghero.

### The “*Carta de Logu*” [Code of Laws]

Eleonora's name is also linked to the completion of the work begun by her father Mariano, namely, the code of laws known as the *Carta de Logu*. The Charter was written in the logudorese language and defined criminal law, administrative order, and the people's rights and main civil obligations. It was to remain a legal benchmark for Sardinian society until the first decades of the 1800s.

However, in 1403, Eleonora died of the plague, and a few years later in 1409, the Arborean army was defeated at Sanluri by the Aragonese under Martin the Younger, son of the King of Aragon. This marked the end of the *Giudicato* of Arborea, the last bastion of Sardinian autonomy in the face of foreign powers. From that moment on, Sardinia became a Catalan-Aragonese possession, and one of the federations of states controlled by the Crown of Aragon.

In 1479, Ferdinand the Catholic ascended the throne of Aragon. His marriage to Queen Isabella of Castile several years before had officially created the State of Spain, and as a result, Sardinia now became "Spanish". The Island was divided into two administrative areas: the Cape of Cagliari and Gallura (*Capo di Sotto*) and the Cape of Sassari and Logudoro (*Capo di Sopra*) and ruled by a viceroy, who resided in Cagliari and had military, judicial, and legislative powers. The Sardinian **Parliament** or *Stamenti* was the most important institution and was composed of three *Bracci* [estates]: a military arm, an ecclesiastical one, and the royal estate. The military *Stamento* consisted of the feudal lords and other nobles of lesser rank; the ecclesiastical one was composed of representatives of the clergy, while the royal *Stamento* was formed by representatives of the city. Parliament was convened every ten years and was supposed to represent the different social components of the Island, but, in actual fact, only ever gave voice to the privileged classes. It had legislative functions and was usually convened to vote on the *donativo*, the amount of taxes that Sardinia had to pay the Spanish king.

The Aragonese introduced **feudalism** to Sardinia and the Island was divided into fiefs assigned to the Catalan-Aragonese nobles or local lords. The feudal lord was the highest authority in each territory and had the power to impose taxes on peasants and shepherds.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, during the reign of Charles V, the Sardinian feudal lords strengthened their position by increasing their privileges and abusing their powers. At this time, the **coastal towns** also often had to face the frequent Arab raids that set out from North Africa.

In 1556, Charles V abdicated and separated the crown of Spain from the imperial one, and his son Philip II became King of Spain while Charles' brother Ferdinand assumed the title of Emperor. Philip II set about restoring order in Sardinia, reorganizing state bureaucracy and controlling the feudal nobility, who had enjoyed too much freedom up till then. Thanks to the Spanish king, the partly existing system of coastal towers for sighting pirates was also strengthened. Even today many of these towers can still be seen dotted along the Island's shores.

The pestilence and famine of the seventeenth century were two difficult moments in Sardinian history. The plague arrived from Catalonia, and spread from Alghero throughout the Island, sparing only the Barbagia and Ogliastra areas. The famine of 1680 led to a new demographic collapse and an economic crisis that severely damaged the Island's production facilities. In the same period, the Spanish Crown greatly increased taxes in Sardinia in order to finance the Thirty Years War against France. At this point, Parliament and particularly the

feudal class came out against the policy of the court, which sparked off a series of dramatic events culminating in the assassination of Don Augustine of Castelvì, the Marquis of Laconi, in Cagliari in 1668. He had headed the anti-government faction and had also fought for the granting of more powers to the parliament. Shortly after his death, the Viceroy Marquis of Camarassa, the representative of royal power, was also killed, causing a violent reaction on the part of the Spanish Crown which tried to repress this parliamentary revolution and impose its authority on the Sardinian aristocracy.





## The brief Austrian digression and the transition to the Savoy household

In 1700, Charles II of Spain died without heirs and was succeeded by Philip of Anjou, grandson of King Louis XIV of France. He was opposed by the Emperor of Austria, who proposed Charles of Habsburg as a pretender to the throne of Spain. In 1708, a British military contingent under the command of the Habsburgs of Austria occupied Cagliari, and the Emperor's viceroy was installed on the Island. For around ten years, Sardinia belonged to the Habsburg Empire, until in 1717, Cardinal Alberoni, a Spanish minister, temporarily re-conquered Sardinia. The 1720 London Peace Treaty redrew European geopolitics in an attempt to maintain a balance of power, and Sardinia was assigned to the Savoy household, with Victor Amadeus II as its king.

All this upheaval meant that the Island was very much left to its own devices for a considerable period of time, and banditry and rural crime became the order of the day. The situation of disorder and insecurity that had already existed in previous centuries on the Island, now started to grow even more serious. In fact, in view of all these problems, the Savoy government had originally hoped to rid themselves of the Island in exchange for some other territory. When this failed to happen, the government of Turin tried to bring order to the Island. Military forces were used to tackle the problem of banditry, especially in the mountains of Logudoro and Gallura. These repressive measures mainly hit the people living in the various villages, who were subjected to raids and mass arrests. On the contrary, banditry continued to persist, since its existence was tied to the misery of the people, and the House of Savoy's initial main aim was to bring the Island under control and ensure internal order. The institutional system of the Kingdom of Sardinia of the Spanish age was preserved, but the Piedmont King avoided convening Parliament, thereby preventing the nobility, clergy, and the bourgeoisie from making their demands heard.

However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the House of Savoy changed its attitude towards Sardinia, and the new king, Charles Emmanuel III, undertook a series of reforms. Count Lorenzo Bogino took over the administration of Sardinian political affairs in 1759 and attempted to stop the feudal lords from overreaching their power and also to provide the Sardinian villagers with a means to oppose them. His reformism also touched education and culture. In 1760, the Italian language replaced Spanish in schools and in

official documents. The period between 1764 and 1765 saw the re-opening of the Universities of Cagliari and Sassari, which had fallen into decline after their inauguration in the seventeenth century.

The period also saw an attempt to solve the problem of depopulation by the creation of new towns which were actually colonies. The village of Carloforte with its inhabitants of Ligurian origins was founded back in 1738, while Calasetta and Santa Teresa di Gallura sprang to life in 1771 and 1808.

However, such attempts at modernization were not enough. Sardinia remained a backward area, since technical and agricultural advances were limited in a land where feudalism still reigned and which was still managed by each separate community.

Eventually the people's discontent and poverty brought them to revolt. Some villages rebelled by refusing to pay their feudal tributes, and the authorities were forced to take military action to restore order. The protest movement continued in the 1790s, also due to the effect of the French Revolution.

When the Republic of France decided to spread her revolutionary principles throughout Europe, a French army arrived in Sardinia (1793), and went on to occupy Carloforte and Sant'Antioco and attack the port of Cagliari. The Island was not defended by the Savoy government, but by the Sardinian population themselves, convinced by the aristocrats and clergy of the risks of having these violent, heretic and slave-driving French as rulers. Such warmongering was effective, and the volunteers from Cagliari managed to resist the French attempt to land, and later liberate Sant'Antioco and Carloforte.

The Sardinians were hopeful that this event might have led the Piedmont government to grant more autonomy to the local ruling classes. However, the King still refused to accept their demands, and in 1794, the population of Cagliari rose up and sent the Piedmontese packing. The revolt in the town gradually gained momentum with the anti-feudal riots in the countryside and gave rise to a real revolutionary movement. A key figure in these events was the magistrate Giovanni Maria Angioy who took the lead against feudalism and the Piedmontese. However, in 1796 he was defeated along with his troops and had to escape to France to avoid arrest, where he eventually died in exile. The Savoy repression of the Island was intense and many lives were lost, and as soon as the Sardinian revolutionary moment was over, power returned to the barons, and taxes and abuse were once again the order of the day.

## Nineteenth century Savoy reformism

Such events meant that Sardinia's economy, and above all Sardinian agriculture, continued to remain in the dark ages. The Turin government tried to reform the Island's agricultural system with the so-called "**Edict of the chiudende** [enclosures]" (1820-23), a landmark measure that abolished the common land rights that had been around since the time of the Vandals. The Edict authorized the people who worked a particular piece of land to close it off with hedges or walls and was intended to encourage the emergence of a class of small and medium-sized landowners to improve production systems. Unfortunately, this privatization was carried out in great haste and often illegally, especially since small farmers did not have the means to build fences or walls and were often subject to gross injustice on the part of the wealthier landowners. Moreover, the closure of the land also affected the shepherds who no longer had any open space for their animals to pasture.

The reform continued under Charles Albert of Savoy who **abolished feudalism** in 1836-37. His so-called "**Perfect Fusion**" abolished the administrative and legal differences between Piedmont and Sardinia, and effectively unified the Kingdom. The Sardinian ruling classes now had to renounce the independence guaranteed by institutions that had existed from the period of Spanish rule, but in its place, they were offered the chance to take up public, administrative or parliamentary office in the new Savoy state, made constitutional by the Albertine Statute.

In actual fact, things did not change much for Sardinian society and, indeed, the new laws, custom-made for the territories of Piedmont and Liguria, along with increased taxes, caused further hardship, poverty, and a new wave of resentment and indignation towards the government of Savoy.

## Sardinia becomes “Italian”

In 1861, with the unification of the kingdom and the declaration of the new nation-state, Sardinia became “Italian”. True to say that actually very little changed on the Island, which, just like the rest of the South, was way behind the central and northern Italian regions. Maritime transport to and from the Island was inadequate and expensive, the internal road network was in a precarious state, taxation was at its highest, and the agrarian crisis was getting worse. The government continued to reduce the number of common lands, which led to widespread discontent and even rioting in the Nuoro area (1868). Banditry was often the expression of public discontent and indeed, although bandits inspired a certain amount of fear, they often became legends among the rural populations, since they were admired for their boldness in opposing the established order. The State came down hard on all the people, who suffered reprisals and arrests that went on for years, and the cultural conflict between the rural areas and the state became ever more acute. Indeed, these rural communities were never sympathetic towards the government and continued to weep for their fugitives and celebrate them in poetry and literature.

Against this background of crisis, Sardinian mining was the economic sector to undergo the most development, especially since the mines were rich with deposits. For many years, the Iglesiente mining complex was Sardinia’s only industrial centre with more than 15,000 workers. (The now abandoned area has been turned into a museum and is open to visitors). Iglesias, Montevecchio, and Buggerru were the centres that most attracted workers from the nearby areas, especially when agricultural unemployment was at its highest. Mining work offered a chance to avoid the pangs of hunger, even if working conditions were terrible and the wages very low.

It goes without saying that with the advent of labour movements, Sardinia was the setting for numerous political claims regarding workers’ living standards. The most notorious case was that of Buggerru (1904), which ended with a massacre that went down in history and caused a wave of indignation throughout Italy. It also gave rise to the first general strike of all categories of workers.

## The War and the Sardinian Action Party

Sardinia played her part in Italy's participation in the First World War between 1915 and 1918. Most of the Sardinian soldiers were farmers and shepherds, who enrolled in the "Brigata Sassari" which distinguished itself so often for the bravery of its troops. However, the war did little to alleviate the general crisis, which led the veterans who had fought in the trenches to form an organization of ex-combatants based on their pride and brotherhood. The movement managed to broadcast its program and its causes and actually managed to achieve remarkable electoral success.

In 1921, the ex-combatant movement became the Sardinian Action Party, with Emilio Lussu as one of its founders, and a new point of reference for many Sardinians came into being.

This was a period of numerous political upheavals at a national level, which also saw the institution of several new mass parties, such as the *Partito Popolare Cattolico* and the *Partito Comunista*. The latter was founded by the Sardinian intellectual Antonio Gramsci, who was later imprisoned by the fascists, and who was to die in prison in 1937 on account of his sufferings.

The arrival of Fascism in Sardinia and Mussolini's "fascist" laws, aimed at getting rid of the opposition, led to the disappearance of all the parties and any political and civil liberties, but more especially to the loss of that dream of an autonomous Sardinia. Fascism operated land reclamation programmes and created new towns (*Fertilia* in the Nurra area and *Mussolinia*, today's Arborea, Oristano), but rural living conditions remained basically unchanged.

Fascism did, however, bring great and important changes to the mining industry. The Iglesiente mines underwent massive development and the coal resources of the Sulcis area were fully exploited, and 1938 saw the building of the new town of Carbonia. Rural Sardinia showed very little interest in the Fascist state and also expressed very limited consent for the regime, while the urban bourgeoisie were among its staunchest supporters. Of course, the policies of this totalitarian regime were also put into effect everywhere on the Island, for example, control of the press, schools, and social and public manifestations. Any opponents to the regime were arrested and put in prison, and many of these militant Sardinian anti-fascists then took their ideas abroad as they emigrated to France, Tunisia and South America.

The Second World War from 1940 to 1943 also had a profound effect on the Island. The resulting military control of Mediterranean trade and Sardinia's

insularity meant that the islanders were forced to rely on their own limited resources. In 1943, the Island also had direct experience of the horrors of war when Cagliari suffered heavy Allied bombing. With the fall of fascism and the armistice, the German troops evacuated Sardinia before the war ended. The probable lack of a strong Resistance movement meant that there was a gap between Fascism and post-fascism. The profound changes in social and political life that eventually came about on the Island were the result of the events that happened in the immediately following years. In fact, in 1947, and thanks to American funds, a malaria control programme using DDT freed the Island from the disease and made previously infested or swampy areas accessible.

## Autonomy and the Revival Plan

In 1947, Sardinia, along with Sicily, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia and Valle d'Aosta, was recognized as a Special Statute Region on account of its particular nature, history and culture. In 1948, the Autonomous Region of Sardinia was instituted.

This was followed in 1962 by the so-called "Revival Plan", which offered substantial state funding to boost the economy and called for intervention in various sectors, but especially in industry. However, the hope that industry could play a leading role in Sardinia's economy was excessive and misplaced, and several of the actions actually brought negative results. Craftwork, agriculture and farming often paid the price of these decisions, which heightened public discontent and led to a new outbreak of banditry and increased emigration. All these negative phenomena, along with urban crowding, the crisis in the mining sector, and environmental degradation clearly showed just how weak the Sardinian economy and its structures really were.

## Today

The primary sector (6.2% of the workforce) has shepherding as its main industry. In particular, the sheep population (over 3.5 million heads in 2008, 43.5% of flocks in Italy) recorded a strong quantitative growth, and sheep-farming is considerably spread throughout the territory. Agri-food production has been transformed, and the increasing number of wineries, dairies, and oil mills are today one of the Island's points of excellence, especially in the field of specialized crops, and in viticulture.

The state plays an important role in several of the Island's industrial centres that offer employment to 21% of the workforce: the Porto Torres petrochemical plants, the Portovesme metallurgical complex for processing lead, zinc and aluminium, the chemical fibre plant at Ottana, Cagliari's oil and petrochemical refinery, as well as Villacidro's chemical fibre plant, the papermill at Arbatax and several others. This "development pole" policy underwent a period of crisis in the 1980s, when the large state-owned industries started a process of reorganization and rationalization that resulted in the loss of many jobs.

Today, the Sardinian economy is primarily based on the tertiary sector (72.8% of the workforce in 2008) and mainly regards activities related to tourism. The tourist market has grown substantially in recent decades and helped to change the image of Sardinia, from a "place of exile" to a "holiday paradise".



