

Sardinia

Stone Age to Nuraghen





Sardinia is one of the largest islands in the western Mediterranean and played an important role during paleolithic times with regards to human settlement and cultural developments right until the Bronze Age. Compared to other islands cultural developments here were far more diverse as the island was target of many waves of human invasion. These changed the islands culture ongoingly. Therefore, we find multiple cultural traces and even can still see today many prehistoric buildings. In this article we try to give you a brief overview of the islands interesting history.

Special Structures

Many buildings like the ancient towers you will find also on other islands such as Corsica. Same with the menhirs which have been erected alone or in rows plus the numerous dolmen graves. But the unique Nuraghen tower villages and the impressive so-called giant graves are to be found only in Sardinia. What else is special to the island?

Obsidian Tools

Unique to Sardinia are also the numerous obsidian discoveries originating from the Monte Acci vulcano. Already 9.000 years ago the inhabitants produced from this hard glassy looking obsidian rocks super sharp cutting tools. These tools were produced in mass and were a sought after export article generating good income. The raw rocks were up to seven kilogram heavy and normally had a black color. But rare red colored obsidian as well as transparent examples were of special interest

receiving much higher prices. Archaeologists discovered at the volcano four obsidian quarries with numerous tool production sites and over hundred settlements for about thousand workers in the peak.

Early Settlements

We know that our ancestors at a very early stage about 50.000 years ago already used boats and were able to reach islands. About 12.000 years ago the sea level was around hundred meters lower than today and Corsica was connected with Sardinia via a land bridge. In caves experts discovered next to animal bones also human remains from paleolithic times proving an early human settlement of the island.

Active Stone Age

About 15.000 years ago groups from the western Mediterranean invaded Sardinia. A DNA analysis even showed that clans from the Basque region were amongst them. They possibly moved along the foot of the Pyrenean mountains until they reached the Mediterranean Sea. Interestingly on both sides of this mountain chain in northern Spain and southern France archaeologists discovered many caves with human remains and beautiful neolithic cave paintings. And it was not only this invasion because experts can prove many more waves of new arrivals.

Neolithic Cultures

Groups of the so-called Cardial or Impresso culture reached the island about 10.000 years

ago. Most of these cultural names are based on the way they decorated their ceramic wares or at which site they were first discovered. Thereafter followed the Su Carroppu, Filiestru and San Ciriaco cultures. About 6.700 years ago the Bono-Ighinu culture lasted for 700 years. The next 800 years the Ozieri culture dominated the island.

Bronze Age Cultures

About 4.700 years ago began the Abealzu-Filigosa culture which ran contemporary to the Monte-Claro culture. The island was large enough to have various cultures in different areas of the island. 500 years later followed the Bonnanaro culture. And 3.600 years ago, started the famous Nuraghen culture, which today stands for the renowned history of Sardinia. This culture became famous for its legendary towers attached to defensive walled villages plus its impressive megalithic giant tomb structures.

New Cultural Ideas

Many new cultures were succeeded only a few hundred years later by others. This did not mean that there was a total change in population. Moreover, the new cultural influences were based on an active long distance sea based trade, which imported new ideas with traders and artisans settling on the island.

Cardial or Impresso Culture

This was a culture predominant in the whole western Mediterranean region. It started to extend via the typical trading routes from the Adriatic coast to Italy plus the islands of Sicilia, Malta, Corsica, Baleares and finally via southern France to northern Spain. Be-

cause of this enormous extension experts today raise the question was it really only one culture or various which have not yet been distinguished? The name originates from the way their ceramic ware was decorated through impressions of heart shaped mussels in wet clay pots. The first so-called impresso type ceramic ware was already produced 8.500 years ago in Corfu Greece and appeared 500 years later on the Adriatic coast.

Bono-Ighinu Culture

With its important cultural sites Grotta Verde and Filiestru it followed on the Su Carrappu culture. During this time still many caves were used as living quarters and first stone stelae or menhirs were erected for religious purposes. The so-called baking oven tombs were now more and more hewn into rocky surfaces. A fertility cult developed which for the first time produced corpulent female figurines. Potters





already had the skills to manufacture highly developed ceramic ware which can be seen in various local museums. New research results came to the conclusion that the Bono-Ighinu and Ozieri cultures were one and the same, but had two distinctive phases. The first lasted for 700 and the second for 800 years.

Ozieri Phase

The last Ozieri phase falls already into the neolithic period during which many monolithic menhirs were hewn and erected. These settlers were farmers living in unprotected villages. The number and size of villages increased and the ceramic production introduced many new forms such as the three footed pots. Their pantheon of gods included an important fertility goddess and a similar dominant bull god.

San Ciriaco Culture

Only in the last couple of years this period has been recognized as an independent culture. It was more a regional culture and lasted only for 200 years. It could be distinguished mainly via its special form of ceramic vases.

Abealzu-Filigosa Culture

This culture falls into the conversion period

from Neolithic to Bronze Age which was also called the Copper Stone Age or simply Copper Age. Again, its ceramics indicate the cultural difference. In the south it was the Abealzu and in the north the Filigosa culture which now produced its figurines with female attributes. Excavations produced various interesting artefacts such as a marble statue in the so-called adoring position or praying with raised arms. And copper daggers were now used as grave gifts. Also, the first gallery tombs could be allocated to this culture. Simple menhirs were still erected but the first skillfully hewn and decorated so-called statue menhirs appeared.

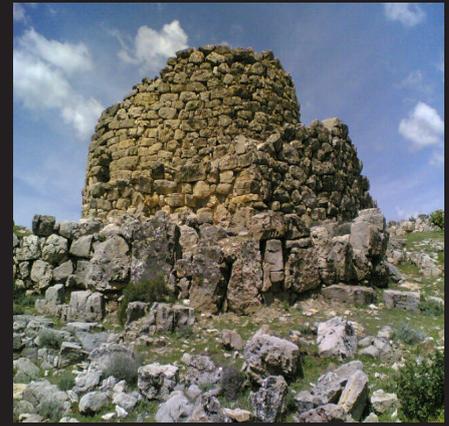
Monte Claro Culture

This Copper Age culture could be distinguished by its large flat ceramic bowls and dishes. This was new to Sardinia. The pottery vessels now have a wide neck and were decorated with stipes and points. These simple decorations are not really a further cultural development but the trademark for this culture.

Bonnano Culture

Now follows the step from the Copper into the Bronze Age. Surprisingly the ceramic ware became more simple, thicker walled and un-





decorated. An explanation for this cultural regress does not exist but can already be seen in the Monte Claro period. In this phase a change seems to have happened because many different burial forms were now used from dolmen, stone cist, simple rock chambers and gallery tombs. Typical examples for these funeral forms are S'Ena e Thomes, La Brandali and Seleni.

Famous Nuraghen Culture

For most visitors this is the best known recognition of Sardinian history. Because in this period the remarkable buildings such as the many striking conic towers, fortified villages and unique giant tombs were constructed. Experts assume that in the past over 10.000 towers were erected in Sardinia of which today still 3.000 survived destruction and decay.

Phoenicians in Sardinia

Based on the intensive long distance sea based trade the Nuraghen people had well established contacts into the eastern Mediterranean with Mycenae and Cyprus. When Mycenae went under about 3.000 years ago Phoenicians took over their position and

even increased the trading activities. Only hundred years later they established on Sardinia an own trading base and 300 years later even a Phoenician colony. Cartago took this over at a later stage.

Nuraghen Tombs

Impressive are the giant tombs especially through their extraordinary form and facade. A good example are the tombs of Madau and Muraguada as you can see on the pictures. The rock hewn tombs were created for the next social level. Examples are Mesu e' Montes, Molafa, Su Carrelzu and Sos Furrighesos. About 3.200 years ago large tomb complexes were erected such as Santu Antine and Sa Dome 'e s'Orcu.

Nuraghen Buildings

The typical villages were constructed around a tall tower like in Serre Orrios and Tiscali. Another speciality was the fact that Nuraghen people regarded their wells as holy sites and surrounded or even overbuilt them with complex structures. The reason for this is still unknown. The Megaron and Ante temples played an important role during this religious active period. Nevertheless, the many temple build-



ings in Malta could not be compared to Sardinia.

Nuraghen Artefacts

If we look at the rather primitive stone buildings compared to other contemporary cultures in the Mediterranean area it is surprising how many different and rather skillfully made bronze figurines the Nuraghen artisans produced. The pictures are a striking example of this sophistication and immense talent.

Is Paras Site

This Nuraghen settlement complex measuring close to 1.000 square meters is situated north of the town of Isili and was dated to be 4.000 years old. The village has two towers and with a height of twelve meters one belongs to the highest on Sardinia. The builders understood to erect these massive towers slightly conical with a wall width of five meters and an internal room diameter of seven meters at their base. Due to their heights their look gave a slim impression. At the top they were closed with a vaulted roof. The complex was used for over 2.000 years right into Roman times and was rebuilt and extended various times.

Pranu Muttedu Site

This special site also is known as the Sardinian Stonehenge. It falls into the Ozieri culture and lies on a plateau near the town of Goni. Around sixty menhirs were erected here some standing alone others in pairs or long rows. Twenty monoliths here were hewn and are regarded as first statue menhirs on the island. In addition, the site has two large and three small tumuli or round tombs. Unfortunately, only the foundations are still visible today.

Neolithic Menhirs

Menhirs are not found everywhere across the island. But in the region of Barbagia and Mernilla they are more common. They were erected during the Bono-Ighinu, Ozieri, Abealuzu-Filigosa and Monte Claro periods. In total there are 850 monoliths still to be seen today including hundred statue menhirs. Their height differs between one to seven meters.

Menhir aficionados we recommend to visit Biru e' Concas where 200 monoliths can be



seen many in rows. At Baracca Su Entu twenty five have been erected and at Corte Noa a menhir row still exists. Further close to Cuili Piras we counted fifty three monoliths and at Is Calas another forty two. Another stone row with twenty two examples can be seen close to Piscina Rei.

Dolmen Tombs

These up to 5.000 years old megalithic tombs are also part of the Sardinian funeral practices. They can be divided into various forms. The simple dolmen also known as antas were erected with vertical standing large stone slabs covered by a flat top stone. They look like an over sized stone slab table. Have a look at the pictures. The corridor type has a small tunnel like entrance and others are called gallery dolmens. Various mixed types exist as well. Dolmens were used also for multiple burials.

European Comparision

It is surprising that across Europe very few differences exist in dolmen structures. The architecture is more or less the same and most look very much alike. Good dolmen examples in Sardinia can be seen at Monte d'Accoddi and near Luras. There the dolmens of Alzoleda, Bilello, Ciuledda and Ladas are situated. Worth a visit are also the dolmens of Monte Longu near Dorgali and Sa Coveccada near Mores.

Unique Giant Tombs

Next to the fortified Nuraghen villages the so-called giant tombs are unique to Sardinia. They



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are situated near those villages and were used as clan burial places. Experts counted in one over 200 skeletons. Most of these extraordinary megalithic tombs fall into the Bonnanaro period around 4.200 years ago. Good examples can be seen in the northern region around Logudoro. But most of them were erected in the center of the island as well as in the western part.

Extraordinary Form

There are two fitting descriptions of their form. The one explains it as a hull of a ship lying upside down. The other recognizes it seen from above as a bull with horns. If you look at the pictures one understands these comparisons better. Today 320 of these unique tombs still exist. Some are in rather good shape. Experts established that over 800 giant tombs were built in the past.



Construction Details

Giant tombs can be distinguished by three components. The burial chamber could be as long as twenty meters and also have various side chambers. In front a crescent shaped gallery was added which could be even longer than the tomb structure. This gallery section was also used for burials. The third component was a significant portal front with a small creeping size entrance. This sickle shaped element led to the bull horn comparison. Funeral ceremonies took place in front of the portal. Stone benches, holes for liquid sacrifices and fire places are well proof of outside burial practices.

Divine Connection

Not only the bull like form of the giant tombs indicate a divine importance. Next to the mother and fertility goddess a bull god was worshiped. During the Stone Age gods have been often depicted on monolith and played an important role in ancestor cults worshipping the deceased clan members. This explains well the common practice to erect menhirs in holy places. These divine stelae were also called *baityloi* or *betyle*. Still 2.500 years ago the Nabataean people in Petra Jordan prayed to simple stelae which they believed to be gods. They were the last culture to follow this practice.

Special Giant Tombs

Most giant tombs are spread around Arzachena such as Coddu 'Ecchju, Vecchiu, Li Lolghi and Li Muri. Close to the town of Maddau are situated another four giant tombs of which two are still well preserved. The Osonno tomb lies near Triei and features a ten meters long chamber plus a twenty meters wide gallery. Special to this tomb is that the portal has been built as a trilith entrance. The biggest tomb on the island is Su Monte de s'Ape near Olbia with a length of thirty meters but it is missing a portal construction.

Summary

All Mediterranean islands did develop differently with regards to its megalithic structures and architecture. Despite Sardinia and Corsica being previously connected by a land bridge due to the lower sea levels in antiquity they developed differently. The active sea based trade and cultural exchange did not really changed that.



The small island of Malta is a special case because of its numerous temples. Because there were much more temples than the small number of inhabitants needed experts believe that Malta might have been a pilgrimage island for seafarers. Please read the articles on this website about Malta and as well the Balears. Another article about Sicily is in preparation to complete the paleolithic history of the western Mediterranean area. If you visit Sardinia, please plan time to visit some of these highly interesting archaeological sites in the interior of the island.

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