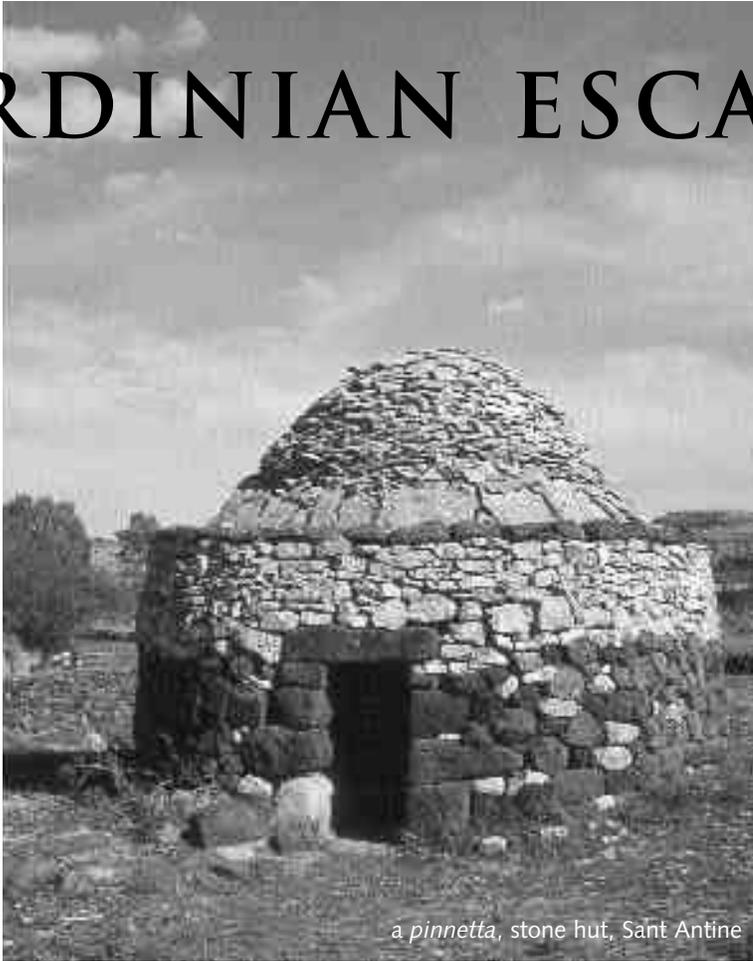


SARDINIAN ESCAPE



a pinnetta, stone hut, Sant Antine

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by James Crawford

three and a half thousand years ago in the Bronze Age. Simple singular towers at the outset, they were to evolve into complex royal palaces surrounded by settlements. "Truly spectacular," raved an archaeologist friend of mine. The agents of this development were the Bronze Age people who invaded Sardinia, conquered Corsica and then the Balearics, taking the tower culture with them.

The trip in a rental car from the airport to the rented villa that awaited us in the north of the island was made interesting by the intricacies of the instructions provided to us by somebody who obviously had great difficulty in telling the difference between left and right. And where were all these Nuraghi that were supposed to abound in the areas that we traversed? There was nothing to be seen of them until, just as we were passing the town of Castlesardo, an hour and a half from Alghero, one appeared in splendid isolation on the brow of a small hill as if posing for its portrait. It seemed a not-so-distant cousin of the Talayotic towers of Menorca, which of course the Nuraghi culture shares with Menorca. Nor was it all that different proportionately from the *brochs*, the stone towers of our Scottish homeland.

Carrying on, we reached Costa Paradiso and our destination, a villa nestling amongst a dramatic backdrop of spectacular granite rocks. Our pleasure in the setting was tempered somewhat by the fact that we were in a quite isolated area and just about everything was closed in the off-season. Still, we weren't here for a holiday—there were corbelled stone huts waiting to be seen and studied, and my wife, a first-rate cook, could make do with a scarcity of supplies.

Preparatory research indicated that a

Sardinia, stoney isle,

so many times I had planned to go there, and so many times been thwarted by events, people, and things seeming to conspire to keep me from going. Finally, however, there I was, strapped into the seat of a plane, airbourne and actually en route to Alghero, its capital.

My primary objective in travelling to this island was to see what it had that might contribute to the research of the corbelled stone huts in quest of which I've travelled all over Europe. The use of these humble structures was widespread throughout Europe, particularly in the Mediterranean basin. The most basic of shelters, they were assembled mainly by pastoral peoples for use when their flocks were taken to pasture and forage away from the villages. Built without mortar, using whatever stone there was at hand, these simple stone huts were known variously as the *both* in Scotland, *clochain* in Ireland, *cabanne* and *borie* in France, *barracca* in Spain, *trulli* in Italy, *penetta* in Sardinia, *gima* in Malta, *kuzan* in

Croatia, *kuja* in Slovenia and *kummoi* in Greece. Some have been built by men still living, many have stood for centuries; one *both* in Scotland that I am at present studying was lived in until quite recently, yet may date originally back to the Neolithic period!

Some express the simplest spatial arrangement, like an inverted bird's nest, whilst others are quite complex; yet even the most basic of these structures demonstrates a sensitivity to the nature of the material and an innate respect for the law of gravity. One wonders if these forms evolved by cultural borrowing (they were commonly used for monastic shelters, particularly in the Celtic Church which had a very close connection with the Mediterranean and the Coptic Church) or, more simply, were they indigenous developments arising here and there in response to local needs using the material available with native ingenuity? Well, we would see what Sardinia had to offer.

Also there are the Nuraghi. These massive stone towers came into being some



good area to explore was in the nearby northeast of the island. *Li Muri*, the oldest megalithic site in Sardinia is located there, so this seemed a good place to begin our exploration. We found a substantial information centre staffed by not one, not two, but three very bored female attendants who were more interested in their appearance than in providing information! The site was underwhelming; ruins they were, but hardly

Megalithic. We could understand why mainstream archaeologists do not rate them as highly as the Sardinian Tourist Board does—evidently they contribute more to the economy than to archaeology. Nor did the neighbouring Megalithic sites live up to expectations, which left both of us feeling rather deflated. Several of the Nuraghi sites we sought thereafter were, despite sign posts in plenty, impossible to find and the

ones we did find turned out to be closed.

To break out of this cycle of disappointment, we fled the beaten track and meandered cross country and up into the hills to *Nuraghi Maiori* near the town of Tempio. Here we got our first taste of the cyclopean magnificence of the Nuraghi, a single tower surrounded by trees, but well worth the effort to get to. The awesome immensity of the stones corbelled over the passageways impressed one with the construction skills of those ancient builders.

So, stimulated and refreshed, off we went on to Nuoro, the most mountainous area of Sardinia. Two days later, in the town of Dargalli, situated in a really spectacular setting in the mountains, I spotted my first huts, the 'Cuilles' variety, not corbelled with stone but roofed in a very artistic manner with timber.

In Dargalli, we had a authentic Sardinian experience. Until quite recently, Dargalli and the Nuoro region suffered from serious banditry. Kidnapping tourists for ransom was a quaint local custom. But not to worry, we were assured, all that was at an end. According to the notice board, the museum was closed for lunch and would reopen at three and so, with two hours to kill, we wandered around the deserted town until about two thirty when it started to come to life again—everything, that is, but the museum! There was a stream of officials coming and going to and from the municipal building next door and, with everyone staring at us, we began to feel like aliens from outer space, from the distant planet Scotia. Three-thirty came and went and we were wondering why museum officials needed a much longer siesta than everyone else. Then a passerby enlightened us. Masking his eyes with his hands and imitated gunplay, he managed to communicate that just one week earlier, the museum had been broken into and robbed of every single valuable artefact. Kidnapping and ransom were no longer on the agenda, but banditry was not yet dead.

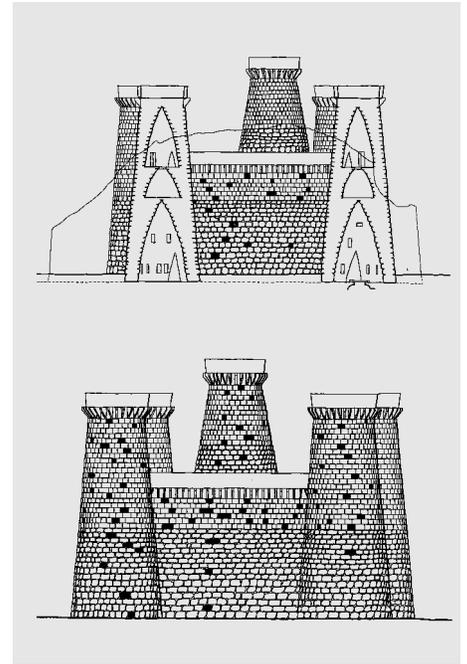
Well, the museum was closed, but the entire island was virtually a museum. We set again across-country to visit the first of the Royal Nuraghi sites on our agenda, St. Antine. Here my appreciation for tectonic vision and the masonry skills of the ancient builders was consummated. The multi-towered Royal Palace architecture had developed from solitary towers built of large

polygonal basaltic stones. In form, these are truncated cones with three separate corbelled chambers, a rooftop terrace and basement entrance. In the second phase, four more towers would be added and connected by corridors five meters high and higher, leading from tower to tower. These open into the tapering, corbel-domed, main chambers of the towers, some of them ten meters high. The massive basalt blocks of the lower courses become progressively more carefully shaped as they approach the apex. The corbelled battlements of the towers inspired the anachronistic vision of a medieval castle built some two and a half thousand years before the medieval castle period. We were so attracted to St. Antine that we returned on several subsequent occasions in our travels around the island. Over winding mountain roads we logged some three and a half thousand kilometres, stopping here and there to photograph and record huts.

My wife's boredom was relieved during one of these interludes. "Ceit," I told her, "I just spotted an extremely interesting hut back there. Won't be long." "Right, okay then," she replied. A few minutes later, having negotiated a ramshackle gate,

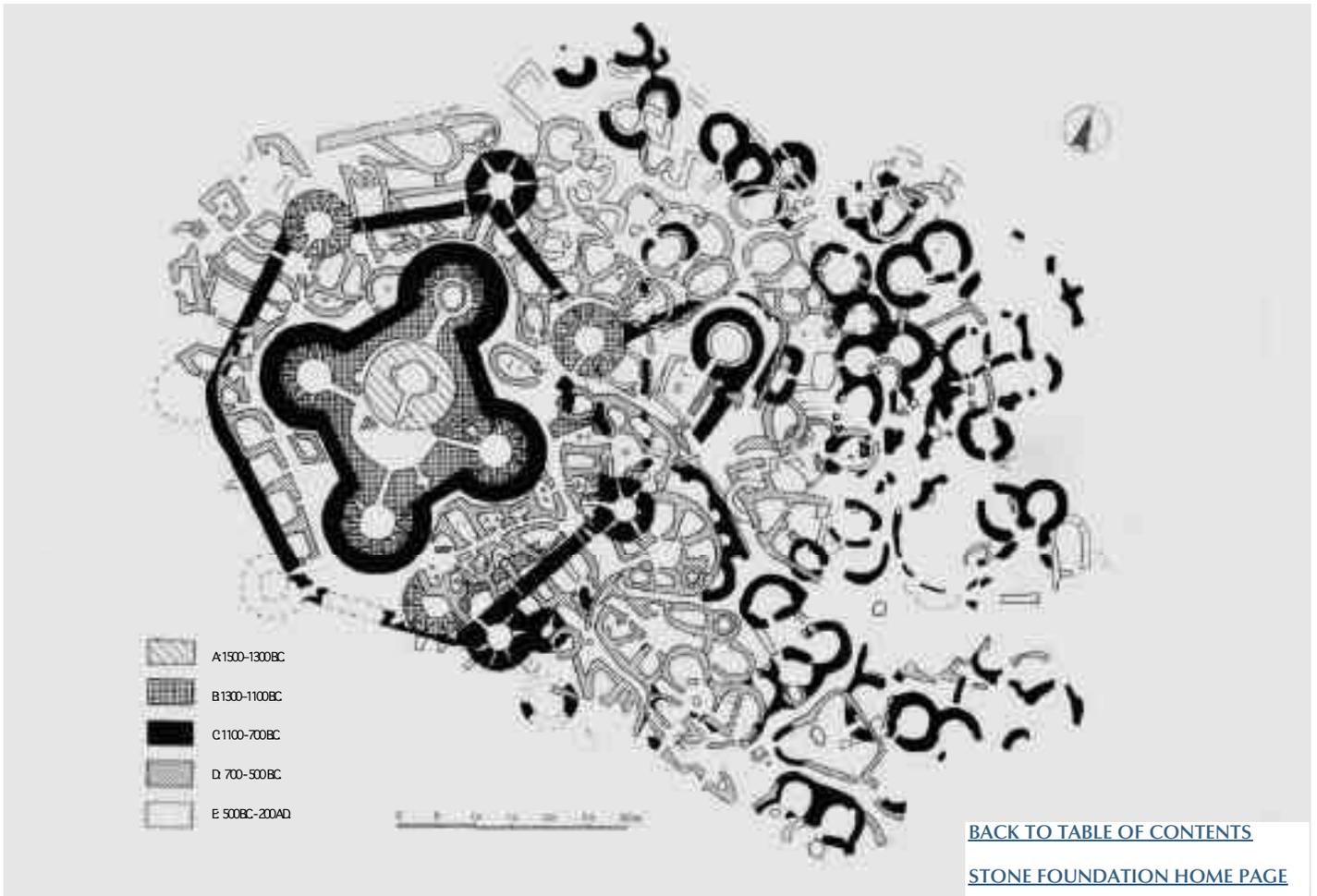
I was wandering up a mountain pathway feeling rather content with life when I rounded a bend to be confronted with three rather large dogs and a pup about a hundred meters away. Well, as they say, discretion is the better (or wiser) part of valour—or, more appropriately, get the hell out of it and quick!! Who knows when those dogs were last fed! The return journey to the car became one of the world's fastest four hundred meter runs, culminating with a high hurdle leap over the gate. The clatter of my rapid approach startled Ceit, who turned round to see me panting, the small pup, which had managed to squeeze through the gate, snapping at my heels. She dissolved with laughter, totally disbelieving my protests that there were huge man-eating mongrel monsters behind the gate!!

But there was more excitement to come that day. Rounding a corner some kilometres along, we were startled to see a helicopter parked in the middle of the road and some rough and ready policemen with machine guns commanding us to pull over! A surly Sardinian policeman waving his machine gun at the car window with his finger on the trigger though amusing to recall



was quite distasteful at the time. Communication was complicated by mutual misunderstanding, but finally we overcame any suspicions they had that we were the museum bandits, and were deemed to be harmless and allowed to go on our way. Our journey through the Sardinian country-





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side was certainly proving to be very interesting. Italians have always, in my experience, been a very hospitable and friendly people but Sardinia is a totally different kettle of fish. To get all my grumbling out of the way, I must say also that the standards of food—and wine—were well below those of mainland Italy.

The next Royal Nuraghi site we visited, *Su Nuraxi* at Barumini, was an excellent example of a later stage of the development of these tower structures. The massive central tower built about 1500 BC was surrounded by four smaller towers dated at 1200 BC and this was followed by the development in 700 BC of the village which in itself shows an extremely interesting developmental pattern (see schematic plan view above). The masonry skills of the ancient builders are exemplified in the projecting corbelling pieces which once sat at the top of the towers but are now displayed at ground level. Here one can appreciate at close quarters the quality of workmanship with which the extremely obdurate basalt

was shaped. A group of young women guides who were very knowledgeable about their subject made our visit even more pleasurable by bringing to life the structures' past.

Travelling back up the motorway, I had plenty to muse over. It seemed remarkable that northern Europe, for reasons that can only be guessed, would have to wait some further fifteen hundred years before the advent of the medieval castles comparative in scale and sophistication to the Royal Nuraghi. Pondering this while whipping round an intersection almost made me lose out on what was the highlight of the Sardinian trip—*Nuraghi Losa*. By this time, we had found out that the Nuraghi abound everywhere from simple tower examples to the Royal Palace complexes. At *Su Nuraxi*, some 25 other Nuraghi exist within the vicinity of the palace complex as they do at St. Antine, but here at Losa the scale of the walls is quite magnificent. Gigantic stone blocks, some of which weigh in excess of ten tons, were manoeuvred into place.

Course after course mount skywards for some twenty meters, creating what is the most impressive unmortared structure I have ever seen. Though it has been somewhat clumsily restored, Palmavera, outside Alghero, is reputed to be the most advanced of its type, but Losa is the most impressive expression of the Tower Cultures of Sardinia, and of Menorca.

It is an interesting historical coincidence that around 500 BC, as the Sardinian Tower Culture was winding down, a tower culture was just commencing in Scotland, and the tower structures of the two cultures bear an extremely similar profile. The outer walls of the brochs of Scotland are double, however, as those in Sardinia might have been had the Nuraghi builders continued to develop tectonically. Not that there is any evidence of a connection. Still . . . □

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