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On colonial grounds: a comparative study of colonialism and rural settlement in first millennium BC west central Sardinia

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1 Introduction: Sardinia and the sea

Sardinia, which has no history, no date, no race, no offering. They say neither Romans, nor Phoenicians, Greeks nor Arabs ever subdued Sardinia. It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilization.

D.H. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), 3

1.1 An Island on a Crossroads?

As an island situated almost centrally in the western Mediterranean basin but also most remotely from the mainland coasts (fig. 1-1), Sardinia represents an extreme example of the ambiguous character of many Mediterranean islands. On the one hand, these constitute distinct or even secluded regions separated from the Mediterranean mainlands by considerable stretches of sea. On the other hand, they may be located along important shipping routes or offer convenient anchoring sites that enable them to participate in maritime traffic across the Mediterranean. In terms of the classification proposed by the French geographer Lucien Febvre, such islands may be regarded respectively as either an *île conservatoire* or an *île carrefour*. The latter are islands where historical currents meet and give rise to new developments, while the former are defined as islands where history seems to have been stored and where all development seems to have come to an end (Brigaglia 1987, 33). As the second largest island in the Mediterranean (24,090 km², after Sicily) and perhaps the most isolated one — the nearest mainland coast is that of North Africa (Tunisia) at a distance of some 200 km — Sardinia has usually been regarded as a typical *île conservatoire*. The nearest shores of the Italian peninsula are those of the Maremma in southern Etruria and Latium, which are ca 250 km away across open sea.¹ An alternative route to the central Italian coast which avoids open sea leads via Corsica and the islands of the Tuscan archipelago (Elba and Montecristo) but this presents a considerable detour. What is more important than the distance between various coasts, however, is that the major urban centres of the central and western Mediterranean such as Rome, Naples, Marseille, Cádiz, Tunis or Barcelona are located at considerable distances from the principal settlements of Sardinia (fig. 1-1). In the case of the western and southern parts of Sardinia, it is obvious that the nearest mainland is that of modern Algeria and Tunisia.

A central feature in the classification of Sardinia is the reputed archaic character of the island, as if — as D.H. Lawrence imagined — it had no history and were ‘outside civilization’. Fernand Braudel, too, refers to a ‘strange capacity of preserving for centuries antique forms of civilization’ when he discusses Sardinia and supposes that it still remains ‘as Rome must have found it long ago’ (Braudel 1972, 150). The isolated position of the island in the Mediterranean is usually indicated as the main reason for its peculiar character, which has made it appear to many visitors as an almost ‘pre-historical’ world somehow miraculously preserved into the present (Mattone 1984, 22).

Whilst a classification of Sardinia as an *île conservatoire* might seem quite straightforward at first sight, the situation appears to be rather more equivocal on second thoughts: the location of the island in the middle of the western Mediterranean does not only make it the most isolated one of this basin but also the most centrally situated one. Neither can it be maintained that Sardinia remained ‘outside the currents of history’, as its inhabitants have lived through the presence in one form or another of numerous foreign invaders, occupants and overlords. The first known of these were the Phoenicians, who were followed by Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, the Byzantine Empire, North African Muslims, the Italian maritime republics (in particular Pisa and Genoa), the Spanish kingdom of Aragon, the Duchy of Savoy and Piemonte and last but not least the unified Italian state in the early 19th century. And before these, Sardinia engaged in exchange networks as early as the Neolithic, as shows the distribution of Sardinian obsidian from the Monte Arci in northern and central Italy and southern France (Tykot 1992) and as far-reaching as the eastern Mediterranean according to various finds of Cypriot copper ingots and bronze objects as well as of imported Mycenaean pottery on the island (Ridgway 1992, 27). In most, if not all, cases, the rich and abundant mineral and agricultural resources of the island appear to have played a major part in these relationships. The impact of insularity has been put into perspective by Braudel, who labelled it as a ‘relative phenomenon’ that is entirely dependent on shipping routes which may or may not call at an island and which accordingly may either integrate it into or isolate it from the outside world (Braudel 1972,

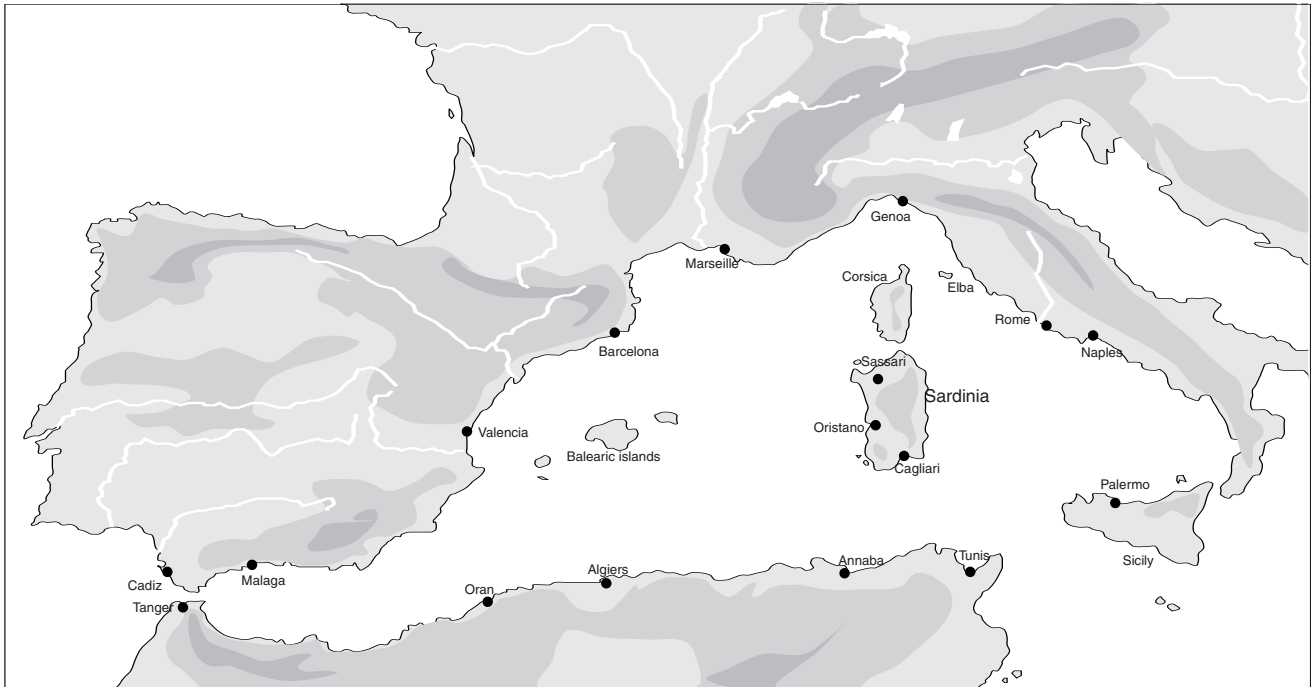


Fig. 1-1. Map of the western Mediterranean showing the principal settlements on Sardinia and on the surrounding coasts of the western Mediterranean.

150). For Sardinia, Braudel has also pointed out the significance of the other major physical characteristic of the island, which are its mountains and the consequences of it for its inhabitants: the insularity of Sardinia, he claimed,

has been a permanent and decisive force in Sardinian history. But the mountains are an equally important factor, just as responsible for the isolation of the people as the sea, if not more so; ... if social archaisms persisted, it was above all for the simple reason that the mountains are the mountains.

Braudel 1972, 39

In a similar vein, the French geographer Le Lannou, who studied the island extensively in the 1930s, tellingly portrayed the mountains of the island as the 'bristly custodians of the isolation of the various regions' (Le Lannou 1979, 15). They take a central place in the island in two ways: within the island, the fragmented landscape of deeply dissected plateaus and tablelands poses serious obstacles to internal communication and circulation which has until recently resulted in a pattern of secluded communities shattered across the island (Le Lannou 1979, 15). Equally important is the coastal relief, which rises steeply and inaccessibly from the sea as a continuous impenetrable wall and effectively blocks easy access from the sea into the interior. The eastern shore, facing the Italian mainland, was tellingly defined by

Silius Italicus in the 1st century AD as *saxoso torrida dorso*, i.e. 'blistered and with a rocky ridge' (*Punic Histories* XII.372). It is admittedly the least accessible shore with a limited number of possible anchoring sites, but the three other sides of the island are hardly any easier to approach (Le Lannou 1979, 21).

Because of the rarity of anchoring sites with easy access to the interior, the few low-lying coastal areas of Sardinia represent places of key importance. Although these areas are often only implicitly referred to in descriptions of Sardinia, they actually represent a distinct type of landscape that is of particular significance to the entire island: because of their location, the coastal areas constitute a critical zone which either allows the interior of the island to communicate with other parts of the Mediterranean through various 'windows' (Braudel 1972, 151) or which cuts it off from any external contacts, forcing Sardinia into isolation. The unhealthy conditions of extensive marshes which until recently dominated most of the accessible coastal lowlands have usually prevented the development of large-scale settlement in these areas and have accordingly affected perceptions of the coastal areas in general. Easy access into the interior of the island is dependent on a further category of landscapes, which are the plains. Apart from the vast *Campidano* plain that spans the island from the central west coast to the southern

east coast, these are generally of limited dimensions. Since all plains are at least partially surrounded by hills and mountains, they often constitute an intermediate area between the coast and the uplands which in some cases may be regarded as an extension of the coastal area (Mattone 1984, 32); more frequently, however, the plains represent a distinct landscape. The third major landscape of Sardinia is made up of the hills and mountains of the interior and large tracts of the coasts. Consisting of mountain ridges, highland plateaus and tablelands, 'uplands' might be a more appropriate term for this varied landscape, which is habitually referred to as the 'mountains'. The portrayal of Sardinia as an island which in D.H. Lawrence's words was merely one 'of mountains without history or civilization' (1921, 3), can thus be seen as actually based on only one of the three major landscapes of the island (see chapter 3). It moreover obscures precisely those landscapes that do provide opportunities for overcoming its insularity and for breaking out of isolation. Not all of the history of Sardinia, however, can or must be attributed to the physical geography of the island. Although Sardinians have frequently turned their backs to the sea, as they have done in recent centuries, engaging only sporadically in maritime trade or fishing or having fled inland for pirate incursions (Braudel 1972, 866; Le Lannou 1979, 5), at other times contacts did exist across most of the Mediterranean and in many periods intensive relationships were maintained with North Africa in particular (cf. Mastino 1995). The general absence of wide-spread coastal settlement and the introverted concentration of population inland in certain periods can in fact equally be attributed to the course of history that more than once touched upon Sardinia through the few accessible anchoring sites of the island with often far-reaching consequences (Le Lannou 1979, 100). Because of their crucial role in the history of Sardinia as a key link between landscape and history, both the coastal areas and the plains have been termed 'representative places', that are exemplary or symptomatic of processes that affect the entire island (Brigaglia 1987, 30). Taking stock of these considerations and regarding Sardinia as an island made up of mountains in the broadest sense of the word but also provided with a number of 'windows' in Braudel's terms (1972, 151) as well, the pressing and interesting question is in which ways, with which strategies, to what extent and for which reasons or motives Sardinia has coped with and reacted to external influences that have linked the island to other parts of the Mediterranean with varying degrees of intensity throughout its history; or, in short, to examine to what extent Sardinia effectively represented an *île conservatoire* and whether it might ever have been situated at one of the *carrefours* of the (western) Mediterranean (cf. Brigaglia 1987, 34; Mattone 1984, 24).

As this question calls for a broad overview both chronologically and geographically, archaeological survey data offer an eminently suited perspective for tackling at least some aspects of this theme. For practical reasons, however, I have limited the present study to one specific region and to one particular period: geographically, I shall examine the region of west central Sardinia, which comprises part of the landscapes discussed above and which represents one of the Braudelian 'windows' of Sardinia; chronologically, I have confined this study to roughly the first millennium BC, in which the island is known to have undergone three major external 'influences', which are conventionally known as Phoenician colonization, Carthaginian domination and Romanization. It are these three moments of external interference in the region which are the principal concern of this study: through a comparison of these three instances I intend to explore the notion of colonialism from an archaeological point of view and to gain insight in the colonial impact on local developments of settlement and regional organization.

1.2 Colonialism and Sardinia

As outlined in the previous section, the basic aim of this study concerns colonialism, which I intend to examine in the context of the region of west central Sardinia during roughly the first millennium BC. Explicitly spelled out in the heading of this section, the terms 'colonialism' and 'Sardinia' denote the two aspects which I wish to elaborate upon in this study, viz. a theoretical and an archaeological or historical one. The first one regards the issue of colonialism as a sociological category, whereas the second concerns the specific developments related to the colonial situations of west central Sardinia in the first millennium BC; that is during the successive periods of Phoenician, Carthaginian or Punic and Roman Republican colonial presence. The following five chapters present and discuss the relevant evidence and arguments in order to arrive at the general conclusions outlined in the final chapter seven. In the remainder of this section, I shall briefly describe how these chapters have been structured.

Leaving aside for the moment this introductory chapter (1) and the concluding remarks (chapter 7), the five central chapters of this study roughly make up two parts. The first one, constituted by chapters two and three, is largely introductory, as it presents the terms of the theoretical discussion on colonialism (chapter 2) and traces the specific physical and archaeological backgrounds of the region and periods under discussion (chapter 3). The second part comprises the chapters four, five and six which make up the core of this study, since they contain the detailed discussions of the three colonial situations under scrutiny. In contrast to the first part, in which the theoretical and concrete archaeological

aspects remain more or less separate, the second part integrates both aspects.

The starting point for the theoretical discussion in chapter two follows from the representation of Sardinia as a backward island of mountains: most, if not all, descriptions of the island in terms of backwardness and isolation are by dominant outsiders and are part of a wider colonial discourse on the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East. It has therefore seemed appropriate to include a survey of archaeological approaches to and representations of ancient colonialism in the Mediterranean. It is complemented by three other sections: the first one of these briefly discusses the terms of the debate by exploring the notion of colonialism itself. The third section, following the above-mentioned survey of archaeological approaches, offers an overview of current approaches to colonialism in the social sciences at large, which leads to a fourth and final section containing a proposal for studying colonialism from an archaeological point of view.

The next chapter of the first part (chapter 3) offers a detailed introduction to the specific region and contexts under discussion. It consists of three sections which successively present a detailed description of the physical landscape of west central Sardinia, a discussion of archaeological research in Sardinia and a survey of the available archaeological data in west central Sardinia. The first section includes an outline of the geological history of the entire island and a detailed examination of the available evidence for geomorphological change in the geologically recent past. The second section sketches the history of archaeological research in Sardinia which serves as a basis for assessing the contemporary state of research and knowledge. In the final section, the insights from the preceding sections are brought together in order to estimate and evaluate the current state of archaeological affairs in west central Sardinia.

Covering separately the three colonial periods under discussion, all three chapters of the second part of this book (4, 5 and 6) have been structured along the same lines: besides an introductory section (1) and a final one (section 5) offering the conclusions to each chapter, they consist of three major sections. The first of these (section 2) outlines the relevant historical evidence for both the western Mediterranean at large and Sardinia in particular, while a further one (section 3) presents and critically evaluates the available archaeological evidence in west central Sardinia for the period at stake. The next one (section 4) examines these data from the perspective outlined at the end of chapter two and leads to an interpretation of the colonial situation of west central Sardinia in the period concerned.

Of these three chapters, chapter four regards the period conventionally known as the 'Recent Bronze Age' and 'Iron Age', of which the last one roughly coincides with the Phoenician period. The colonial period properly speaking is thus confined to the Iron Age (8th-6th centuries BC). Chapter five covers the so-called Punic period, when the city of Carthage dominated Sardinia (6th-3rd centuries BC), while the final centuries of the millennium (3rd-1st centuries BC) which were defined by the occupation of the island by the Roman Republic are discussed in chapter six. The concluding chapter (7) finally takes up the principal questions asked in the second chapter and examines these by juxtaposing the evidence and interpretations expounded in the foregoing chapters four, five and six.

note

1 From the north-eastern coast, where the Punic-Roman town of *Olbia* is located; from *Cagliari*, ancient *Karales*, in the South-East the distance is over 400 km.