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ORUNE

The Nuraghic cult of springs

by Maria Ausilia Fadda



 GIUNTI

SU TEMPIESU OF ORUNE AND THE NURAGHIC CULT OF SPRINGS

One of the most fascinating manifestations of the religion and architecture of the ancient Sards was undoubtedly that of the underground world of springs in an island where an adequate water supply has always been a problem

by Maria Ausilia Fadda

This page below and facing page at right
INLAND SARDINIA
Panorama of Barbagia from the heights of Orune. In the background the Mount Albo chain. In the foreground, the valley where the sacred Nuraghic spring of Su Tempiesu is located.
Facing page: The statuette "of the singer", one of the bronze votive statuettes found in the Santa Lulla nuraghe, near the Nuraghic well to which it was closely linked.



During the more evolved stages of the Nuraghic civilization – so called from its typical monument, the nuraghe, which spread all over Sardinia from the 17th to the 7th century B.C. – temples dedicated to the water gods were constructed all over the island. The Latin geographer Solinus (3rd century B.C.) drawing on earlier historians, reports that the Nuraghic peoples cured diseases of the bones and eyes with water from the sacred springs. They attributed miraculous properties to this spring water, believing that it could reveal crimes of theft, which were judged by invoking the underground divinity who appeared to man through water. The water had the power of striking the guilty man blind. The religiosity which the proto-Sards* expressed through the cult of water has been reconstructed more precisely through the archaeological excavations conducted in well temples, springs and megaron temples* (for the latter see: AV, n° 57 and 63).

FUNCTIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN STONE. Well temples are circular buildings with a *tholos* (false dome) roof, built in hypogeal form to reach the water vein. The depth, more or less accentuated, of the vein led to the construction of ramps of straight or trapezoidal stairways splayed at the mouth, which allowed water to be collected even in times of draught. The ceiling of the stairwell consisted of scaled architrave elements, placed in correspondence to the steps.

An element always present at the top of the stairway is an atrium, of predominantly rectangular or trapezoidal shape, with benches at the sides on which votive objects and offerings may have been placed. In the floor of the atrium was a drainage trench, into which the well water flowed when it rose above the level of the top of the stairway.

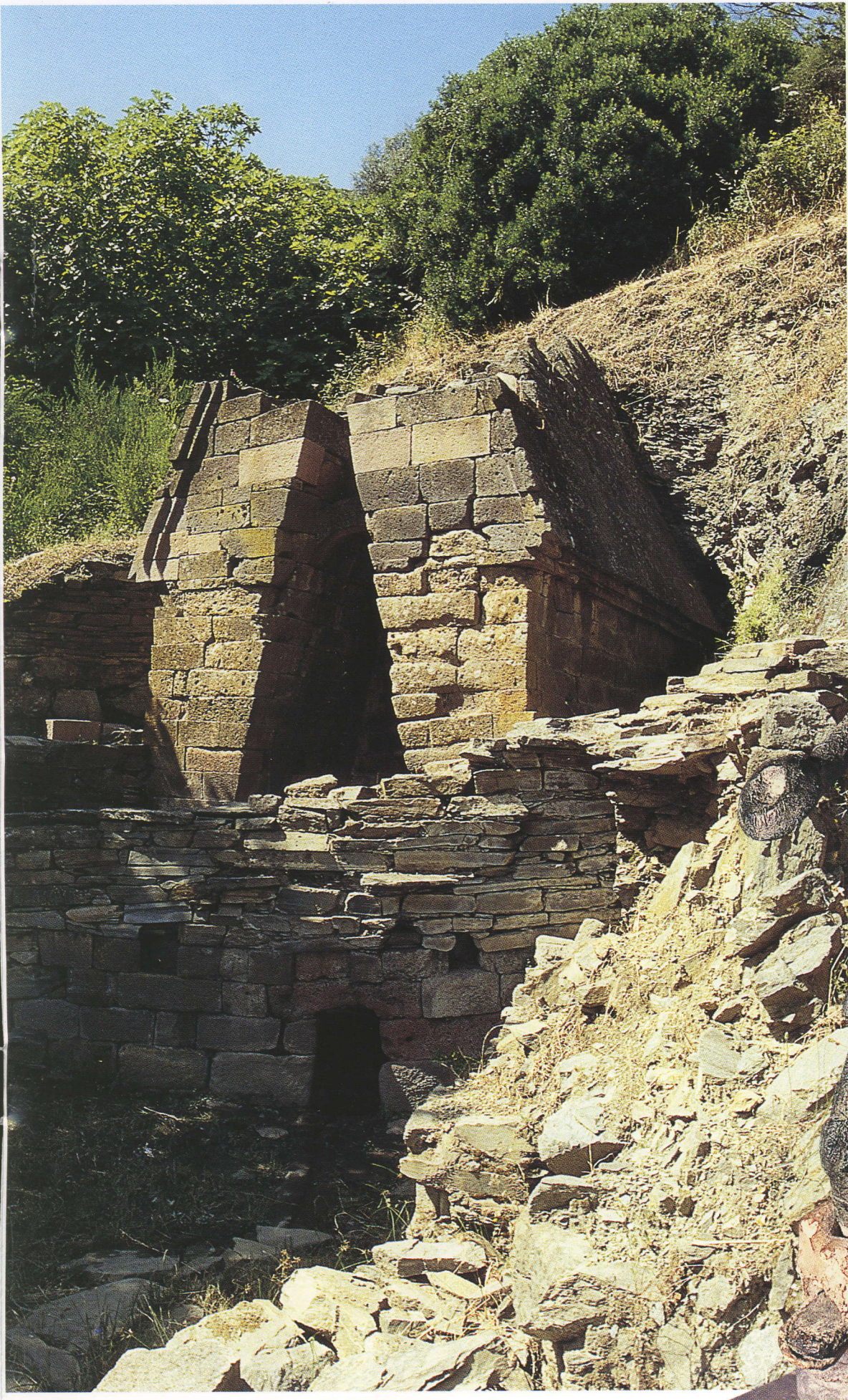
For the construction of well temples, rough-hewn stone materials present on site were used, or volcanic rocks, easier to work and more

suitable for building architecture with perfectly squared blocks (isodoma work). But, in addition to aesthetic requisites, the frequent use of rocks of volcanic origin, even in parts of Sardinia where they are totally absent, was due mainly to the fact that they undergo no alteration due to water absorption. The temple was surrounded by a fence or wall (*temenos*), enclosing a sacred precinct reserved to the worshippers who presented votive offerings during the religious rites (see box: "Nuraghic offerings").

The architectural characteristics of the well temples described above are documented throughout the whole Sardinian territory, and are particularly recognizable in the cult areas of Santa Cristina di Paulilatino (Province of Oristano), Santa Vittoria di Serri (Province of Nuoro), Sant'Anastasia di Sardara (Province of Cagliari), Predio Canopoli di Pèrfugas (Province of Sassari), Funatana Coberta di Ballào (Province of Cagliari), and Sa Testu di Olbia (Province of Sassari).



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TRACHYTE AND BASALT
Two views of the Nuraghic
spring at Su Tempiesu.
The monument's
architectural solutions are
unique among well
temples. The entire
cultural complex has been
conserved "thanks" to a
landslide that struck the
bottom of the valley in the
Iron Age. The temple was
built of volcanic stones
transported from afar.





A UNIQUE MONUMENT. In the interior of the island, especially at Barbagia and Ogliastra, the Nuraghic monuments present variants due to the extremely harsh nature of the territory, with high mountains and plateaus covered by dense forests (which now conceal the remains of numerous prehistoric* and proto-historic* settlements).

A totally unique example is the well temple of Su Tempiesu ("the tempietto") di Orune (Province of Nuoro). The monument was discovered in 1953 by the owners of the land, while terracing it in the intention of planting a vegetable garden near the spring, which at the time emerged over the temple's roof. The first investigation was made by a young student in the town, Godeval Davoli, pupil of the then forty-year-old Giovanni Lilliu, "father of Nuraghic archaeology" and master of many Sardinian archaeologists, who published the results of the excavation in 1958. The progressive deterioration of the monument and the need to complete research on it led the Archaeology Department of Sassari and Nuoro to resume the work of excavating and restoring, which lasted from 1981 to 1986, under my own direction.

The tempietto is located in a little valley between two steep walls of metamorphic rock, where the vein of water that feeds the sacred well was channeled. It is constructed in isodoma* work using volcanic rocks (trachyte and basalt) transported from far away, since only granites and schists are present locally.

The well temple of Su Tempiesu has a rectangular vestibule* with a gently sloping floor built of great slabs of trachyte. At the sides remain two benches, while in the walls, two niches have been carved out of thickness of the piers*. In the interior, the bearing walls present an overhang*, accentuated near the top and emphasized by the oblique cut of the

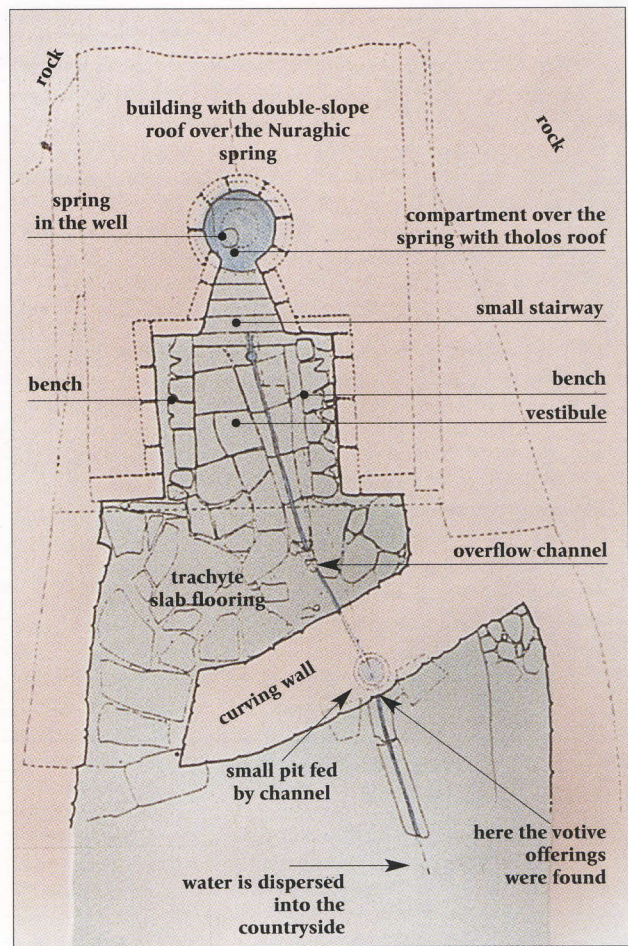
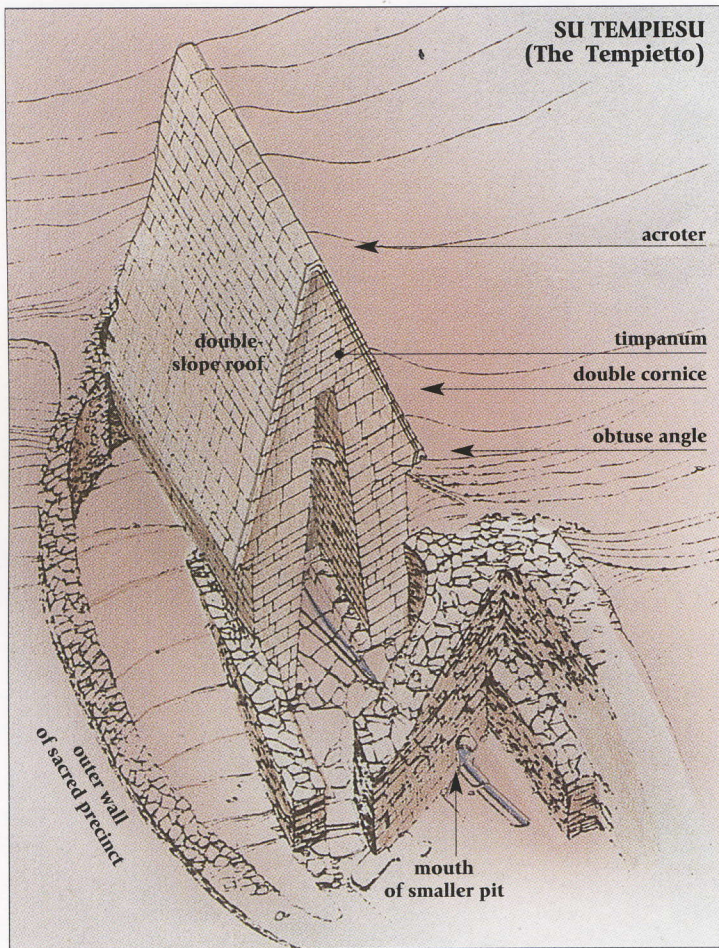
On both pages

IN THE MONUMENT
The covered vestibule with its overhanging walls, monolithic arcades, side benches and the channel in the floor that collected the water gushing from the well to convey it to a smaller pit below. In the details, note the miniaturist trapezoidal stairway and the decantation pit on the lower level as well as the overflow threshold of the water at the drain channel.

On facing page:

Su Tempiesu after and during restoration.





blocks, laid in rows to create a dentillated line. The vestibule is covered by two monolithic arcades, inserted as decorative elements in an acute-angle triangular scaffolding formed by the narrowing of the inner walls of the two wall abutments which in ancient times concluded in a slab serving as platband.

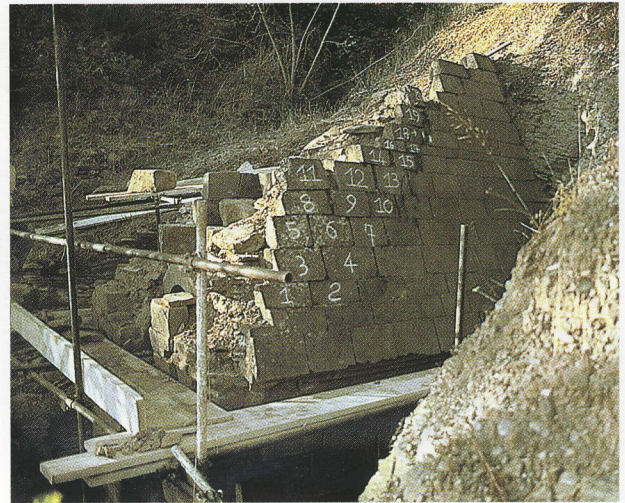
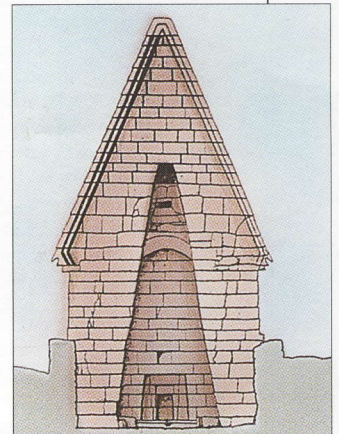
Opening off the atrium is a small trapezoidal stairway, splayed outwards, composed of four little steps anchored together with embedded ashlar*, while narrow strips of molten lead at the joints prevent dispersion of the water. At the base of the stairs is the small *tholos* (dome-

shaped compartment) which collects and holds the spring water. The base of the well has a flagstone floor with a decantation trench in which impurities settle, so that the water is always very clear. The water gushing from the well flows through a trench running through the center of the moulded threshold, up to a small basin below, which in turn conveys it to a channel traced in the flagstone floor of the vestibule.

The monument is covered by a singular double-slope roof which terminates in a double gutter sculpted with masterly skill in the blocks of volcanic rock. The facade, which

originally rose to a height of nearly seven meters, presents a tympanum in the shape of an acute-angle triangle, emphasized by a double cornice which terminates at the base, forming an obtuse angle.

The tympanum was originally topped with an acroter* consisting of an ashlar in truncated pyramid shape, which completed on the front the apex angle of the tympanum's cornice and originally bore twenty bronze votive swords fixed in holes with little streams of molten lead.



*NOT EVERYONE KNOWS THAT...

Acroter. Decorative element which crowns the top and corners of a pediment.

Ashlar. Block of hewn stone for use in wall structures.

Isòdomo. Wall built of regular rows of parallelepiped ashlar of the same size, in which the joints of the ashlar are staggered between one row and another.

Mègaron temple. Contrary to the Nuraghic custom of building in a curved line, this type of construction has an elongated rectangular shape and interior rooms.

Overhang. The part of a wall projecting out of the vertical.

Pier. Vertical architectural structure serving the function of support.

Prehistory. The cultural stages of Paleolithic man from the end of the Bronze Age (10th-9th century B.C.) for which no written documents exist. In Sardinia the pre-Nuraghic and Nuraghic cultures are of the pre-historic type. The first written documents on the island coincide with the arrival of the Phoenicians and Carthaginians.

Protohistory. Starting from the first half of the Iron Age (9th century B.C.) down to the Roman conquest of Sardinia (238 B.C.)

Pròtome. Decorative element formed of the head, or even parts of the bust, of a human or animal figure.

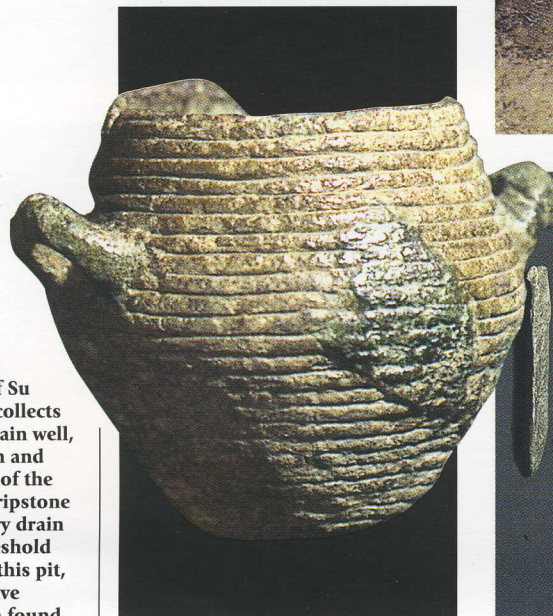
Proto-Sards. The populations of Sardinia in the pre-Nuraghic and Nuraghic ages.

Vestibule. Covered space which precedes a dedicated area.



VOTIVE OFFERINGS MADE BY THE NURAGHIC POPULATIONS

The votive offerings, placed by the worshippers in the Nuraghic temples during religious rites, consisted for the most part of bronze objects portraying personages cloaked in mantles and bearing a commander's staff, archers, warriors with headdress surmounted by long horns, dressed in short tunics, breastplates and fringed bands. The warriors usually bore large shields with ornamental bosses, bows, quivers filled with arrows, daggers and stiletos of various types. The bronze figurines also represent numerous offerers, worshippers, women wearing fringed skirts and mantles, carrying children or bearing baskets and other containers on their heads. Important elements in the production of the bronzes consisted of the very long votive swords, stiletos and small quivers, used as apotropaic amulets, and innumerable animals such as bulls, deer, mountain goats, wild boars, foxes, birds, monkeys and lions. The offerings were placed in special stone bases containing holes in which the bronzes were fixed with thin streams of molten lead. The bases, mainly of rectangular shape, have in some examples, the form of a small nuraghe with the holes for the bronzes appearing near the top.



Above at right
A SMALLER PIT
The smaller pit of Su Tempiesu which collects water from the main well, during excavation and upon conclusion of the work. Note the dripstone and the customary drain trench at the threshold of the mouth. In this pit, many bronze votive objects have been found.





A SMALLER PIT WITH VOTIVE STATUES.

The area in front of the well temple is bounded by a highly irregular curving wall, built of blocks of trachyte and integrated, at subsequent stages, by rows of schist slabs. In the wall are two niches, while near the top some slabs of schist placed as corbels are still in place. At the base of this outdoor enclosure, the most recent excavations have brought to light a pit that receives water from the larger well, whose shape and technique it reproduces on a smaller scale. This second pit collects the water that flows from the well above it through a steatite channel, which has a finely worked dripstone, and is surmounted by a monolithic arcade now badly deteriorated. At the bottom is a small trench similar to the one found in the larger well, which served for decantation.

During excavations of the pit, amid a mass of disintegrating schist, numerous bronze votive objects were found: broaches, votive stiletos used as apotropaic amulets (to ward off the evil eye), bracelets, rings, necklace elements, horsehair needles

(used as hairpins), and a miniature basket. But the most significant offerings are the various statuettes portraying offerers, warriors, personages wearing mantles and holding commander's staffs. Some other elements precious for dating have been found: pendants similar to those found in Etruscan areas, bronze buttons with animal protomés*, amber necklace beads datable to the time of the recent and final Bronze Age (12th-11th century B.C.). More daggers, a long votive sword, bracelets and ex votos were found in some side rooms used for storage, formed of natural recesses in the rock and bounded by walls of schist blocks that have served the function of containment in a zone subject to landslides. In fact, a landslide which occurred in the Iron Age (around the 9th century B.C.) was the cause of the definitive abandoning of this sacred site by the Nuragic populations.

Excavation has revealed three distinct building stages in the cult complex of Su Tempiesu, starting in the final stages of the Bronze Age and lasting until the early Iron Age, from the 13th to the 9th century B.C.

UNDER THE LANDSLIDE THAT HAS "PROTECTED" THE TEMPLE.

Last year further excavation was conducted to explore a section of the little channel that conveyed the water through the valley in which the Nuragic well of Su Tempiesu is located. At the same time, maintenance work was carried out in the area upstream of the well temple, which had been overrun by a landslide caused by very heavy spring rains. It is interesting to note that this new landslide descended in the same direction as the one that obliterated the whole site of the temple in the Bronze Age, causing it to be definitively abandoned.

The removal of the materials transported by the ancient landslide has brought to light a channel which conveyed the water to a basin dug out in the schist, protected in ancient time by a wall that served to prevent the unrestricted access of the worshippers. Other findings included blocks coming from the double-slope roof of the well temple, fragments of bases for offerings with the remains of bronze votive swords, a dagger decorated with engraved patterns, a votive sword reutilized as dagger and various fragments of earthenware pots and dishes dating from the late Bronze Age (11th-9th century B.C.).

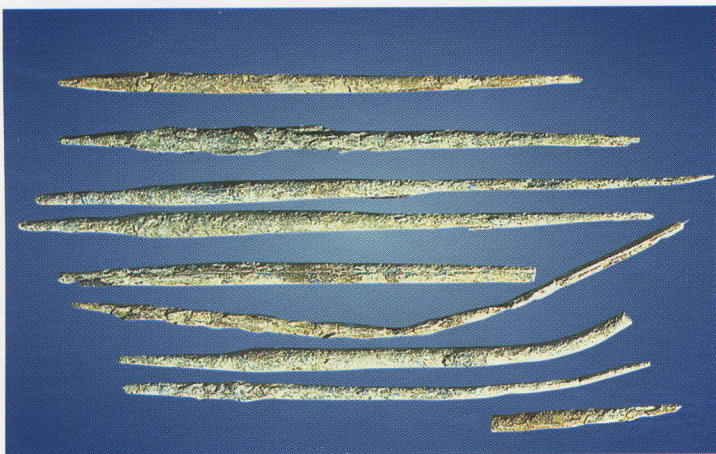
The work of excavation having been completed, that of restoration has begun, including channeling the water from the spring upstream of the temple, which had infiltrated the wall, favoring the formation of incrustations and the growth of plants. The upper part of the monument has been disassembled and reconstructed utilizing all of the blocks salvaged in the surrounding area and in the underlying channel. As some blocks from the tympanum were missing, it was indispensable to insert nine new ones made of the same volcanic rock but of different color, to facilitate a reading of the recent integration, as required by the Restoration Charter.

As conclusion of this new experience in the cult complex of Su Tempiesu I would like, however, to state that nothing is more futile than attempting to formulate a definitive evaluation of the architecture linked to the water cult of the proto-Sards. They have, in fact, left testimony of extraordinary and multifold architectural solutions which call for further study and research to allow a full comprehension of this fascinating world of religion.

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On both pages
NURAGIC OFFERINGS
Some of the objects found in the sediment and the landslide materials which had filled the smaller pit of Su Tempiesu, offered to the water gods by the Nuragic populations of the recent and final Bronze Age: miniaturist interwoven basket, stiletos with hilt used as amulets, necklace elements, a personage with a mantle and commander's staff (perhaps a tribal chieftain), a pair of offerers, bearded warriors, long hairpins.



How to get there:

From Cagliari-Sassari-Olbia, along the 131 SS bis in the direction of Nuoro, there are two possibilities:

1. Exit for Nuoro, then turn onto SS 389 Bitti - Orune (km 25).
2. Exit directly for Orune on SP 51 (km 12).

At Orune, indications for "Fonte sacra Su Tempiesu".

Opening hours: every day from 9am to sunset

Information: 0784.276716 - 328.7565148 - cooplarco@tiscali.it

Cooperativa L.A.R.Co.

Operates in the archaeological sector with excavation, restoration and maintenance of archaeological sites. Manages the "Su Tempiesu" site providing guides to the monument and has a reception facility for information and a coffee bar. Organizes excursions in the territory with sampling of typical products.



Panorama of Orune

With the sponsorship of the Comunità Montana del Nuorese and the scientific contribution of the Archaeology Department of Sassari and Nuoro

Abstract from *Archeologia Viva* n. 74

Director: Piero Pruneti

www.archeologiaviva.it

Cover: Detail of the sacred spring of "Su Tempiesu"