



***FOCUSING ON THE DICHOTOMIES SUPERNATURAL/HUMAN,
ANCESTORS/LIVING PEOPLE, NATURE/ARTIFICIALITY***

THE CASE STUDY OF THE PREHISTORIC STONE ARCHITECTURE IN THE LA MADDALENA ARCHIPELAGO (ITALY)

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ABSTRACT - British anthropologists have long discussed on the possibility to reach an emic interpretation (of the meanings as understood by the producing culture) of prehistoric buildings. It has been suggested that some particular and bizarre shapes of natural rocks might have given the idea to prehistoric architects to build similarly shaped monuments. Conversely, other scholars have suggested that after building some monuments such as dolmens and enclosures, ancient people may have interpreted some similar natural formation as buildings made by mythical ancestors and have considered them sacred, associating these rocks with the fabricated monuments. An investigation conducted especially on dolmens and other stone architectural structures in the islands of La Maddalena and Caprera seeks to test those hypotheses, recognizing a very strong emic correlation between natural and artificial shapes. The study also reveals the strengthening of a peculiar sense of history founded on the interpretation of natural shapes as products of human agency. In other words, natural shapes were read as archetypes for subsequent artificial buildings, which were intended as a continuation or completion of the work of the ancestors rather than new or different types of monuments. These acquisitions may also shed new light on the meaning and context of prehistoric art.

RIASSUNTO - In ambito anglosassone è stata avviata da tempo una riflessione sulla possibilità di pervenire al valore "emico" (cioè quello attribuito dalla mentalità dei costruttori) di una serie di strutture architettoniche preistoriche. E' stato così ipotizzato che alcune forme particolari e bizzarre di rocce naturali potrebbero aver suggerito agli uomini la costruzione di monumenti simili. Altri sostengono che gli uomini, dopo aver costruito una serie di monumenti (dolmen e recinti megalitici ad es.), potrebbero aver interpretato alcune forme naturali come costruzioni fatte da antenati mitici e quindi averle sacralizzate, associandole o collegandole in vari modi con i monumenti veri e propri. Un'indagine condotta soprattutto su strutture in pietra di tipo dolmenico e di altro tipo presenti nelle isole di La Maddalena e Caprera cerca di fornire una prima risposta a questi interrogativi, individuando un nesso emico strettissimo fra naturale e artificiale (cioè creato dall'uomo) e un peculiare senso della storia già presente in quelle comunità preistoriche, in quanto alcune forme naturali erano interpretate come opere dovute all'intervento umano. In altre parole da una parte le forme naturali erano lette come precise indicazioni per i successivi interventi umani, dall'altra questi ultimi si ponevano come continuazione/integrazione della natura stessa o di opere di antenati e non come rottura/contrapposizione. Tali acquisizioni possono gettare nuova luce anche sul senso e sul contesto dell'arte preistorica.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore how prehistoric populations may have developed symbolic discourses between past and present, natural and artificial as well as interrelations among them in the social and architectural contexts. It shall present a case study that focuses on the architectural record (e.g. construction of monuments incorporating natural outcrops) and symbolism (symbolic meanings of the monuments). Unfortunately, these aspects have been generally neglected by Italian archaeologists, so I shall discuss this mainly on the basis of my personal studies and a few comparative elements. The theoretical models are borrowed from works by Anglo-Saxon scholars.

EVIDENCE

In the islands of La Maddalena and Caprera (Sardinia, Province of Olbia-Tempio), in the last decade, a large number of stone constructions of possible prehistoric date have been discovered (Di Fraia, 2007, 2010, 2011). The discoveries are all the more significant since the territory of the two islands has been affected over the past two centuries by many works of civil and especially military nature (harbour installations, roads, fortifications, artillery batteries, barracks and housings for tanks, department stores, ammunition storages, etc.), scattered in

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many sites and occupying large areas. It is very likely that several sites chosen in the modern era for such construction works were strategic during prehistory as well (landfall places, hills, springs, etc.), and the modern works may have erased all traces of ancient structures or of other evidence of human presence. All the ancient constructions were made with dry boulders derived from natural processes of erosion and disintegration of the rock and not bearing any trace of working; the rare fractures in the direction of the thickness are obtained by breakage, or simply by impact of another boulder, or fall or even pressure on slabs already partially separated from the original rock.

Walls

Walls are mostly 60-80 cm wide, built with stones often arranged in two vertical rows, more rarely with single large blocks placed vertically or horizontally; the current height mostly does not exceed 1 m, and this appears to be similar to the original one. In wall sections located in areas scarcely frequented and covered by the Mediterranean shrub it is likely that almost all of the stones have remained in situ, even if partially collapsed. In such cases, the total amount of the stones suggest an original height barely higher than at the present.

On some rocky outcrops a simple row of stones, medium - or small sized, was laid on the rock to emphasize the continuity of the track (fig. 1). Such sections are located also in steep and uneven areas, where it is very unlikely that a part of the stones may have been removed, both for the difficulty of the work and because the territory is naturally rich in scattered stones. In some cases, natural outcrops were incorporated in the walls in such a way that it is difficult, especially at some distance, to distinguish between natural and artificial parts. Often the trajectory of the wall changes in order to incorporate natural rocks, as if they had to represent a reference point.

In La Maddalena, one of the main walls, mostly rectilinear (about 550 m long), runs near a megalithic fence and cuts all the headland to the NW of the Spalmatore Bay. A short distance away and at a higher altitude another wall runs with a more complex path (fig. 2) for at least 700 m. West of Guardia del Turco other two walls, partially destroyed by modern roads, perhaps joined squarely. In the Bassa Trinita Bay, a megalithic wall reaches the sea. Other sections were explored only partially in the area of the aqueduct and between Crocetta and Villa Webber. Long sections of similar walls are visible in Caprera, especially in inland areas, while smaller remains are present in various areas of La Maddalena and Caprera, to such an extent that we can assume that most of the two islands (and perhaps also the smaller islands, as yet mostly unexplored) was marked by these works.

The almost rectilinear and very long path as well as the modest height of these walls do not seem to satisfy either the need to protect particular sites, or to fence areas with particular resources. The collapse and sometimes removal of parts of the original structures and the fact that they are cut by old roads and trails also seems to rule out that they may be modern artefacts. In this regard, I recall that La Maddalena has been permanently inhabited only from the second half of the 18th century and we do not know any remains of previous settlements of historical age. Finally, there is a strong correlation between several walls running near megalithic fences and surviving rooms in rough masonry or rock shelters, some of which were certainly inhabited in prehistoric times.

This type of walls is not found in any other site, nor in Sardinia or Corsica. About their function, one could hypothesize the intention to mark some divisions of the territory, perhaps to distinguish competence areas of different groups (e.g. indigenous shepherds / indigenous anglers, indigenous sailors / foreign navigators), or areas for the exploitation of different resources (e.g. grazing and agriculture) within the same group. These walls however, seem to manifest a strong desire to mark most of the territory, showing off an extensive and durable possession of the islands against people coming from the sea or from the facing coast of Sardinia. They were probably manufactured by human communities with great knowledge of the local territory and able to support a considerable workforce. This aim, however, does not contradict the intention to connect these buildings to particular natural features believed the work of “superior” beings or mythical ancestors, as we shall discuss later.

Special rooms

In la Maddalena at Guardia del Turco there are two small rooms formed by three sides only, only a few metres away from each other. These structures also incorporate natural rocks; a stone found between the two rooms has a *cuppella* with a groove outside (fig. 3) and this could suggest a ritual utilization. Also at Marginetto a similar construction was discovered. Unusually, in Caprera there is a small room formed by massive masonry on one side and natural rock on the remaining two sides. Access to the structure only preserves a few natural stones placed on two outcrops (fig. 4).

Fences

They number at least nine so far, six in La Maddalena and three in Caprera. They are formed by a single row of stones, often quite large and placed obliquely, and in some cases placed as true orthostats (fig. 5). The shape may be irregular, sub-circular or horseshoe-shaped, with axes ranging from 7 to 13 m.

Some fences incorporate natural outcrops, while two have a side formed by large rocks.

Cysts

Stone cysts, rectangular and uncovered, exploit natural rocks for one or two sides; dimensions (internal length of less than 2 m) and features suggest some funerary use only. I have identified the remains of five cysts in La Maddalena and Caprera. In the most interesting case, two slabs of granite were arranged vertically to close the short sides, while the long sides are built using outcrops; some stones fill the remaining gaps. The big outcrop on the W side includes three spikes that, although part of the same bedrock, have the appearance of three artificial orthostats (fig. 6). It is a perfect example of how difficult it is to distinguish what is the result of natural processes from what is artificial. At the same time, the artificial works seem inspired by particular natural forms, which are here just next to the built part.

Mounds and heaps

At Boccalta (La Maddalena), I found six rectangular mounds of medium-sized stones, 160-400 cm long and 20-50 cm high; their interpretation is difficult. In the best-preserved ones, the external sides are inclined and constructed with some care and the upper part is irregular, but originally it was supposed to be flat. A similar mound was identified in Caprera a short distance from the sea.

The middle strip of the Abbatoggia peninsula running South to North is dotted with heaps of artificial stones, that in better preserved cases show a quadrangular, truncated conical or irregular shape (figs. 7, 8); sometimes are similar to short walls and often fill or cover a few small outcrops. The surface of the peninsula is formed by about half by bare rock, and only a little more than a third contains a scarce quantity of humus. In an area so barren, windswept and devoid of any natural resource, these heaps cannot be the result of stones deposition or accumulation for agricultural or other economic activities.

Their high number (over 40) in a small area, with a density that in some cases corresponds to a distance of a few meters from a heap to another, seems to suggest the desire to mark the territory with manufactured artefacts, without excluding any particular symbolic values. What may have been the guiding principle of these buildings originally? We can think that some concentrations of natural stones, more or less scattered or overlapping, could be interpreted as works of ancestors, perhaps altered by natural processes or other factors. This interpretation may have motivated the decision to restore or improve these presumed works. One can also imagine that this type of intervention may have been institutionalized, becoming, over time, an act to be repeated at certain occasions, perhaps along with other ritual gestures that cannot be read in the archaeological record.

Today it is generally difficult to distinguish natural from artificial stone accumulations more or less degraded, and this difficulty had to be certainly heavier for a prehistoric population and this could explain precisely the desire to reconstruct the presumed oldest structures. The expression “ruined stones” used by Bradley (1998) fits perfectly this case.

Pseudodolmens

On the island of La Maddalena we have identified a significant number (30 so far) of dolmen structures (fig. 9), most of which (18) concentrated in a small basin at Vena Longa, 1 to 2 m wide and 1.8 to 3 m long, while the height generally slightly exceeds the metre, except some specimens covered with slanting slabs.

Other three dolmens are located about 300 m away, while at Sasso Rosso there are six very rudimentary structures and four isolated specimens have been identified at so many sites. Despite the obvious funerary destination, no skeletal remains have been found so far, but it should be noted that we have not found any closing stone, that in many cases the inside bottom is bare rock and, finally, that no excavations have been yet carried out.

They are not true dolmens (we may call them “pseudo-dolmens”), because:

- at least one side is formed by an outcrop or a rocky ridge;
- they never have monoliths as uprights, but at most superimposed stones, and this is all the more strange, since we know orthostats, even large (1 to 2 m), put in place in the walls, in the enclosures and in some *cysts*.
- the hedge is always formed by multiple slabs, though sometimes of considerable size, but in some cases among them there are many wedges and small stones to fill the gaps (fig. 10).



The natural “dolmen” at Poggio Rasu (Caprera)

In a small valley with a stream that flows into the sea in Cala Brigantina, in October 2012 I discovered a singular monument, which, to my knowledge, is without parallels. At the eastern end of a rock formation about 10 m long, a large sub-triangular slab, 35 to 80 thick and about 220 cm wide, lies horizontal on two large outcrops. At the entrance, the gap between the two outcrops has a height of 100-105 cm from the rocky bottom and a width of 1 m, but immediately diminishes becoming a narrow gash, closed at the back with small to medium sized stones. To each side of the entrance a rather rudimentary wall (about 2 m long) was added, starting from a maximum height of 140 cm and descending to the ground in correspondence with a small step (fig. 11). A test pit in a thin layer of humus and stones yielded no findings.

This sort of natural dolmen is inserted in a context that, in the light of the scarce investigations conducted so far in a land thickly covered by Mediterranean vegetation, includes some walls, probably built in connection with this monument. Two walls run longitudinally on the two sides of the valley, at a distance of 12-15 m from each other (fig. 12), beginning a little upstream of this rock formation, incorporated in the right wall, and seem to finish about 40 m downstream. Immediately upstream of the rock complex the two walls are joined by a perpendicular wall.

This “dolmen” is the most significant monument among those examined. The two lateral uprights and the cover are entirely natural; perhaps the only artificial feature is a small cavity subcylindrical, 4 cm wide and 3 cm deep, near the centre of the cover slab. Perhaps, rather than a *cuppella*, it could be the seat to insert some object.

What hypotheses can be put forward about the way in which this unique complex of rocks was considered by the prehistoric people who took care of it and enriched it? The first and most reasonable one is that it could be interpreted as a tomb of ancestors; in this scenario, the fact that it was found of course empty could have supported, in the ideological-religious sphere, some belief (e.g. Reincarnation), while on the practical level could have determined the decision not to destine it to receive other remains.

Discussion

Christopher Tilley has supposed that some special and bizarre forms of natural rock may have suggested to prehistoric people the construction of similar monuments (Tilley 1996). Richard Bradley (1998) does not exclude in absolute this hypothesis, but suggests that some groups, having built a number of monuments (e.g. dolmens, megalithic enclosures and fences), may have interpreted some natural forms (which resembled those monuments) as constructions made by ancestors, and then kept them in the highest regard by associating or connecting them in various ways with the monuments themselves. Tilley and Bennett (2001), however, have replied to Bradley that, for example, the dolmens of West Penwith have special features and are all in relationship with rocky prominences (“tors”); none of these dolmens incorporates natural outcrops, but the stones that compose them come from the tors.

In the case of the La Maddalena pseudodolmens the construction principle is different: all the dolmens are built incorporating some outcrop. It is if the builders wanted (or perhaps rather were obliged, according to their conception) to imitate as much as possible the natural “constructions”, that were deemed essential model. In this context, the interpretation of Tilley seems more convincing than the proposed by Bradley.

At Poggio Rasu, since the natural dolmen was already almost complete, prehistoric people only needed to wall it up on the back and they built a small corridor at the entrance. Among other things, interpretations of Tilley and Bradley could explain very well: 1) why the space inside the dolmen is too small: in fact, if the monument is attributed to ancestors, this anomaly could be justified by imagining that the mythical ancestors were different from normal humans. Alternatively, some extraordinary event could still explain it (in this regard the popular legends abound in tales of prodigious shifts of large boulders or even of whole mountains). 2) why we have found inside neither skeletal remains nor artefacts: it could be a form of total respect of a sacred place by the generations after its consecration. The two walls that run along the stream could define a particular area, made sacred by the presence both of the dolmen and of the stream water near its source, which in this scenario would have taken on particular importance.

However, it is important to remark that a prehistoric community, with a simple act of supplementing, could appropriate, materially and spiritually, some natural rock complex and assert continuity and consistency with respect to its (albeit presumed) past. In the case of Poggio Rasu, it would be even possible to suggest (through the presumed work of presumed ancestors) the title of builders of a megalithic monument of large proportions.

In short, we can say that certain natural forms particularly suggestive could be interpreted in at least two ways:

1 - attributed to ancestors, which in turn could be designed or as purely human beings or as mythical ancestors, with higher faculties;

2 - attributed to other entities, different and superior to the human dimension.

In this regard, it was noted that those people were not always able to distinguish the product of human work from the natural elements, but we must also add that this difficulty stemmed perhaps not so much from the obvious ignorance of the geology as from the fact that the natural landscape was probably seen as the result of intelligent choices and actions and not of the pure randomness of natural processes (Tilley 1994, Bradley 2000). In other words, it is likely that unlike our conceptual framework, that contemplates a human, a natural and (according to religious beliefs) a supernatural world, for many prehistoric populations there were only two fundamental dimensions: the human one and the other super-human.

Even our concept of time cannot be extended automatically and simplistically to prehistoric populations. This issue has long been present in cultural anthropology and history of cultures, but only in the last 10-15 years the archaeologists have begun to deal with it in a systematic way (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003).

For instance, Yannis Hamilakis (2010, p. 193) suggests a different form of relationship with the past:

The reuse, reworking and reincorporation of these past fragments into the present, have the ability to materialise time as co-existence rather than succession and linearity, in other words as multi-temporality. The material fragments of another time enact the past as immanent vis-à-vis the present, not something separate from it, nor as a mere presentist construction ... [but with] their continuous existence and life, and their ability to enact multiple times simultaneously.

Of course, this is not the place to discuss this complex issue, but the case of the natural dolmen of Poggio Rasu seems to fit perfectly within this possibility, according to which the past time (for us geological eras, for the prehistoric people, time of the ancestors) is incorporated into the present and probably what we consider supernatural was conceived as immanent in nature and in human activity, provided that the people were able to recognize and to respect its signs then.

The prehistoric art as production of a multi-temporal world and as strengthening of the relationship between human and superhuman?

The rock art can also be served to mark the landscape. It may have been one of the ways in which men entered into a deep relationship with the landscape and particularly with certain features (such as some presumed megalithic constructions) that could be considered manifestations of the power of particular deities or produced by mythical ancestors (Tilley 1996, Bradley 1998, Tilley and Bennett 2001). But even less striking features, such as the presence of smooth and compact rocks, especially suitable for paintings or engravings (see Valcamonica), or an unusual stone of ergonomic shape, used as a bed for the ritual *incubatio* (Di Fraia 2012) could fall within this phenomenology.

However, what constitutes the founding element of these processes of interpretation, appropriation and transformation of the landscape is the conscious decision to mark clearly the landscape. This intervention in some cases may also not depend on any extraordinary natural forms. A biblical example may clarify the concept: Jacob, stopped off to spend the night outdoors, dreamed that God told him among other things: "The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your seed." Thus, "Jacob got up in the morning, took the stone he had put down as a pillow of his head and set it up as a pillar sacred and poured oil on the summit" (*Gen.* 28).

It is possible that, in this context, the rock art has perhaps anticipated or in any case accompanied and / or replaced other types of monuments (the Latin root of *monumentum*, the same of the verb *moneo*, "to remember, to make someone think", is suggestive) to periodically confirm and strengthen this relationship, handing down to posterity some genealogy of the generations of architects, perhaps an early form of "historiography", albeit in a very particular sense. The advantages of the production of the immovable art compared to other types of intervention on the landscape or to forms of "memory storage" through mobile artefacts (e.g. fragmentation and conservation of ceramic objects) may have been the following:

a greater guarantee of long conservation (albeit under certain conditions: suitable places, supports and techniques of execution) and of anchoring to certain sites;

a better semantic quality, i.e. the possibility to build messages with a meaning more understandable, possibly unambiguous and therefore more binding for the community;

the possibility of creating chronological continuity, which could be both cultural and religious, at the same site and on the same support, because it was always possible to add new figures, or even delete the old ones, thus creating real archives or palimpsests, unlike the majority of architectural works, on which it is generally difficult to add significant interventions.



These are just some lines of research that I would recommend to scholars who study prehistoric art, especially in an area such as the Valcamonica, where the long period of time embraced and the density and overlapping of images can offer particularly favourable conditions for this kind of investigation.

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Fig. 1 La Maddalena: a single row of stones continuing a wall.



Fig. 2 La Maddalena: wall incorporating outcrops.



Fig. 3 La Maddalena: stone with a cuppella.



Fig. 4 Caprera: small room formed by natural rocks on two sides and by massive masonry on one side only.



Fig. 5 La Maddalena: megalithic fence incorporating outcrops.



Fig. 6 La Maddalena: cyst; the outcrop on the left includes three spikes that have the appearance of artificial orthostats.



Fig. 7 La Maddalena: artificial stone heap.



Fig. 8 La Maddalena: artificial stone heaps.



Fig. 9 La Maddalena: pseudodolmen.



Fig. 10 La Maddalena: pseudodolmen.



Fig. 11 Caprera: natural "dolmen" with a little rudimentary dromos.



Fig. 12 Caprera: rock formation with natural "dolmen" (on the left) and some remains of two parallel walls.