

DAL TIRRENO AL MARE SARDO.  
STUDI PER MARCO RENDELI

Atti dell'Incontro Internazionale di Studi  
(Roma 10-11 novembre 2023)

a cura di STEFANO SANTOCCHINI GERG

*ESTRATTO*

---

Copyright © Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, Roma. 2025. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

COPIA RISERVATA ALL'AUTORE DEL CONTRIBUTO

L'Autore potrà disporre della presente copia per uso esclusivamente privato, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali, quale il deposito nel repository istituzionale ad accesso chiuso.

## THE GRASS ON THE OTHER SIDE IS NOT ALWAYS GREENER

ANNA DEPALMAS\*

With Marco, whom I had met in Rome during the years he worked in Campania, donning the role of a “mozzarella pusher”, a privileged relationship was immediately established in Sassari, perhaps also due to the numerous mutual friends we had. Almost immediately, with his enthralling enthusiasm, he involved me in the Sant’Imbenia project, providing an opportunity for us to get to know each other and share in part of that extraordinary adventure.

Those who have loved and continue to care for him know how painful his absence is in the corridors of our University in Sassari, where Marco nonetheless left an indelible mark with his personal way of interacting with students, always aiming to stimulate interest in a non-local and international dimension of their research, and with the relationships of fellowship and friendship with various colleagues with whom he shared instances, aspirations, and academic and scientific problems.

In his memory, I would like to revisit some reflections that began with our intervention at the 2009 scientific meeting of the Italian Institute of Prehistory and Protohistory, starting as follows, in his typical fashion, about which we discussed quite a bit:

«In un’eccellente pellicola del 1960, “The grass is greener” tratta da una pièce teatrale di Hugh e Margaret Williams, Cary Grant, Deborah Kerr, Robert Mitchum e Joan Simmons intessono un raffinato gioco delle parti che spiega il titolo: da esso traspare che apporti esterni (in quel caso rappresentati da Robert Mitchum) offrono prospettive migliori rispetto a quelle che si posseggono, salvo poi avere profondi ripensamenti. Saremmo tentati di collegare le figure del film con i protagonisti del nostro progetto ma, a ben vedere, quel che ci accomuna nel porre alla vostra attenzione queste riflessioni è la consapevolezza che, in questo come in molti altri casi, la risposta è certamente negativa»<sup>1</sup>.

---

\* Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche e Sociali - Università di Sassari.

<sup>1</sup> DEPALMAS - RENDELI 2012, p. 907.

At that time, our reflections began with the analysis of what had emerged from the first excavations at Sant'Imbenia and, above all, from the investigations that, thanks to Marco, restarted in 2008 and allowed us to define more precisely the organization of the settlement space<sup>2</sup>.

In particular, the focus was directed to the identification of an open space, No. 30 in the plan, characterised by several entrances or passage areas that put it in communication both with other open areas and with what were interpreted as covered rooms.

On the whole, the type of planting documented at Sant'Imbenia appears to be conceived according to unitary blocks characterised by centripetal development sectors whose delimitation, within a continuous wall, reflects an organic approach that does not involve pre-existing structures.

These essentially seem to be excluded from this design mode: this is the case for the large hut with a perimeter seat (room 1), i.e. the so-called "meeting hut", perhaps built in the Recent Bronze Age at the eastern end of the investigated area<sup>3</sup>, and for the "hoard hut" (room 23)<sup>4</sup>, which – although affected by substantial structural interventions – seems to act as a filler of a space between blocks.

Well integrated, however, in the dense composition of spaces are the two circular rooms with a basin, one on the west side of the main block next to the western section of the perimeter wall signed for the number 26, which occupies an area of 4.9 m<sup>2</sup> (*fig. 1*).

The other, marked with the number 4, located in the southern sector of the settlement is inserted in what appears to be a small block independent of the larger one around the open space 30, evidently structured in relation to the presence of the rectilinear western wall of the nuraghe.

In the case of room 4, where the lithic basin was removed and which has a surface area of 5 m<sup>2</sup>, a section of wall characterised at the top by a series of small niches is also preserved.

The circular rooms at Sant'Imbenia are representative of a category of buildings well known in Sardinian contexts dating back to the Final Bronze - Early Iron Age, such as those documented in block A at Seruci - Gonnese<sup>5</sup> and at Santa Barbara - Bauladu<sup>6</sup>, for which a function has been hypothesised in connection with a ritual of washing and purifica-

---

<sup>2</sup> GARAU - RENDELI 2012; RENDELI 2014, 2015, 2020; RENDELI *et al.* 2017.

<sup>3</sup> BAFICO 1998, pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> BAFICO 1986, 1991, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> SANTONI - BACCO 1987.

<sup>6</sup> GALLIN - SEBIS 1985, pp. 271-275.

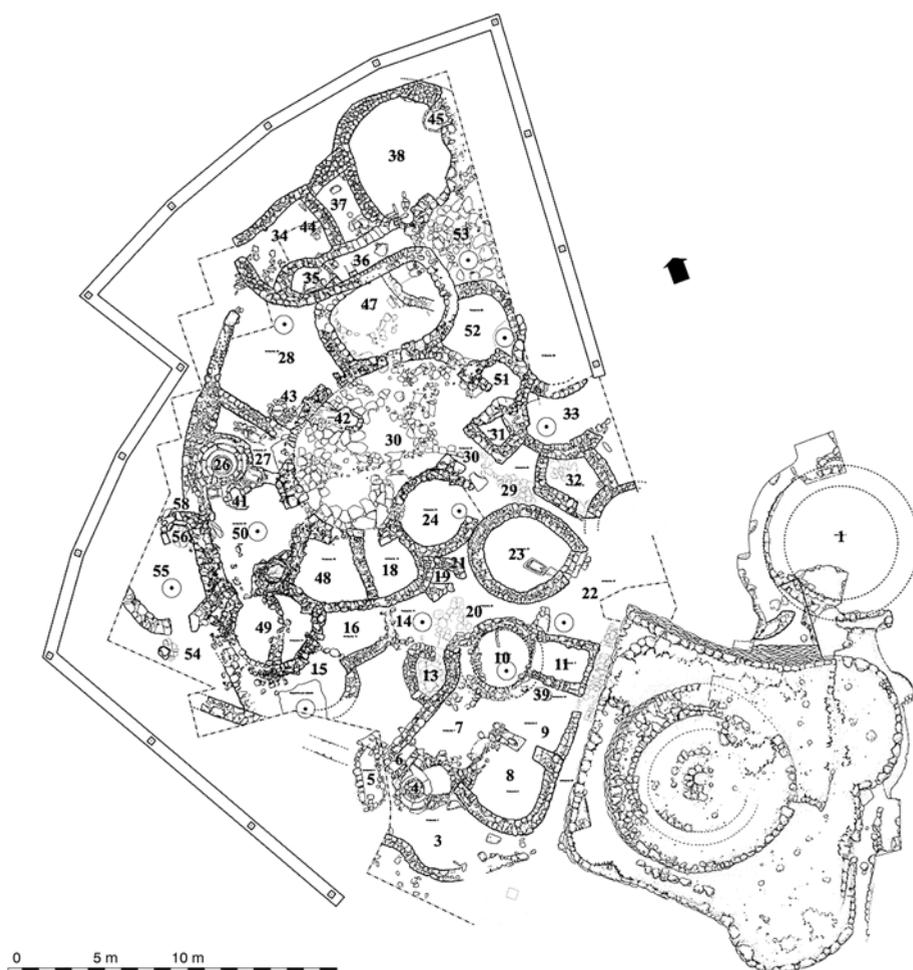


fig. 1 - Sant'Imbenia - Alghero: map of the settlement.

tion of the body that might have taken place in a private, family sphere<sup>7</sup>, but not necessarily conflicting with a religious use<sup>8</sup>.

In both cases mentioned, although no circular basin was found *in situ*, there is a small circular secluded room without a direct connection to the central court – 5 m<sup>2</sup> with a paved floor at Seruci and 4 m<sup>2</sup> with an isodomic structure and seat at Santa Barbara – which compares well with the dimensions of the circular spaces at Sant'Imbenia.

<sup>7</sup> PAGLIETTI 2009, pp. 349-352.

<sup>8</sup> RENDELI *et al.* 2017, p. 122.

In addition to these examples, particularly indicative in terms of chronological and structural comparison is the case of units 20, 42 and 11 from the village of Barumini<sup>9</sup>, in which the presence of the circular room with basin, with the canonical dimensions of 5 m<sup>2</sup>, is found within blocks with a centripetal development and a central courtyard of particularly small dimensions.

Another context that could be defined as private and that shows a similar organization of spaces in distinct blocks is Serra Orrios - Dorgali<sup>10</sup>, where the apparent absence of circular rooms with basins and large central spaces should be seen in the light of a chronological framework of the different units that is still far from being clarified.

These few examples, though more could be found, testify to how, in the Sardinian contexts, a transformation within the local dynamics took place in a rather widespread manner, leading the settlements to change profoundly, modifying their structure from circular one-room “huts” to structures with covered and open, rather articulated, multi-roomed, which even more than in previous epochs we must get used to defining as houses.

Marco's idea was that in Sant'Imbenia there was something different and even more complex.

Here, in fact, the width of the elliptical open space, the nature of the accesses that connect it with other open areas, individual rooms or blocks mean that the function of this area changes:

«La natura degli ambienti che vi si affacciano può essere riconosciuta in almeno tre categorie:

1) attività commerciali connotate dalla presenza di manufatti parlanti e che per semplicità abbiamo sintetizzato con “botteghe”. Fra di esse, per quelle scavate nel corso della nuova fase delle ricerche, si può sottolineare la presenza di ripostigli, generalmente sistemati sotto battuti pavimentali. Essi si presentano pieni (panelle di rame e oggetti in bronzo o in un caso semi), vuoti con contenitore ceramico *in situ*, o la traccia della fossa nel terreno (A 24, 18, 48, 52).

2) spazi aperti che evidenziano per loro ricchezza strutturale una forte vocazione produttiva, generalmente dotati di forni destinati a usi diversi (A 50, 28).

3) una grande aula sub-quadrangolare la cui destinazione d'uso potrebbe essere stata di tipo istituzionale (A 47)»<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> SANTONI 2001, pp. 65-66.

<sup>10</sup> MORAVETTI 1988.

<sup>11</sup> RENDELI *et al.* 2017, p. 118.

The articulation of the spaces indeed seems to be the result of a broad and radical transformation of the organizational layout of the settlement, which also involved the “hoards’ hut” (room 23), where the succession of the two floors (under which two small transport containers filled with evidently hoarded copper panel ingots were found) seems to correspond to a transformation of the entrance to the hut itself: on the north-eastern side, in fact, a large curtain wall is evident that reaches up to the level of the oldest floor: on the north-eastern side, in fact, a large infill is evident that reaches up to the level of the oldest floor; while the entrance that has been preserved to date is inserted in a large area in which the partial rebuilding of the wall for the new entrance to the hut is evident.

This transformation may have occurred precisely in accordance with the phase of extensive restructuring and reorganization of this part of the village in which the “hoards’ hut” may have acquired a new function, as indicated by the structures inserted in it (channel and basin) and the two transport containers filled with copper panel ingots.

From this perspective, the transformation could also be explained by the intention to avoid an entrance directly facing the “small square” leading to the passageway to the “square”, in favor of a new “less binding” entrance towards the bastion of the Nuraghe. The new layout may coincide with the transition from the first to the second floor in a phase dating between the late 9th and the first quarter of the 8th century BCE, if we relate it to the upper cobblestone preparation layer from which the hanging semicircle, *chevrons* and *one-bird* cups were found<sup>12</sup>.

The restructuring and reorganization of settlements is a phenomenon that, through similar and recurring modalities, is widespread throughout Sardinia during Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages, when villages experienced their maximum numerical increase with the foundation of new agglomerates but above all with the expansion of pre-existing settlements, both independent and aggregated to a nuraghe, particularly to complex-type structures<sup>13</sup>.

It is therefore not at all random that the most significant examples of settlements from this phase develop around multi-tower structures, such as Palmavera, Santu Antine, Iloi, Losa, Barumini, just to name a few<sup>14</sup>.

The new settlements are characterised by the adaptation and reworking of the circular module according to new syntactic solutions, leading to the definitive affirmation of blocks with central courtyards (i.e. *insu-*

---

<sup>12</sup> BAFICO - D’ORIANO - LO SCHIAVO 1995; BAFICO 1998; DEPALMAS - RENDELI 2012, p. 910.

<sup>13</sup> DEPALMAS 2012, pp. 146-148.

<sup>14</sup> DEPALMAS 2023, p. 225.

*lae*). The rooms appear closely aggregated and seem to lose their circular plan in favor of a more adaptable square or elliptical shape, which better contributes to the overall rounded scheme.

The construction phase of the block generally appears organic and unified, with shared boundaries of the residential units<sup>15</sup>.

While the central courtyard acquires space, the dimensions of individual rooms decrease, although overall there is no reduction in useful space.

Additionally, complexes from the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age characterized by circular modules, perhaps older houses, have undergone limited modifications compared to the original layout, as seen in Palmavera, due to the greater involvement of pre-existing structures in the settlement restructuring, resulting in less enclosed layouts and open central spaces.

As can be observed in some complexes such as Iloi - Sedilo, the older huts fully participate in the phases of restructuring and redesigning settlement layouts during the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, according to modalities that do not seem to involve substantial changes, except for connection through wall arms to other similar circular structures or to newly designed rooms or groups of rooms<sup>16</sup>.

Sant'Imbenia presents a different case, where, as mentioned, the restructuring seems much more radical and substantial, possibly involving a transformation of the nature and functions of the rooms arranged around the large courtyard.

It is particularly significant that the architectural model of the central open space around which rooms of different plans and dimensions are articulated is also proposed in contexts purely of a cultic nature, such as Sa Sedda 'e Sos Carros - Oliena<sup>17</sup>, where rectangular and circular-shaped rooms – intended as spaces for worship, workshops and storage of metal products – open up within a circular wall structure around a central courtyard that also serves as a connection to spaces not perfectly integrated into the wall perimeter, such as the chamber/tub P (*fig. 2*).

Also in the sanctuary of S'Arcu 'e is Forros - Villagrande Strisaili<sup>18</sup>, block 1 consists of 12 rooms facing a small circular courtyard where some of the rooms were used as warehouses, while others served as smelting workshops around which processing slag and fragmented bronze objects were found. At a short distance, there is a cultic structure, the *megaron*

---

<sup>15</sup> DEPALMAS 2017, p. 105.

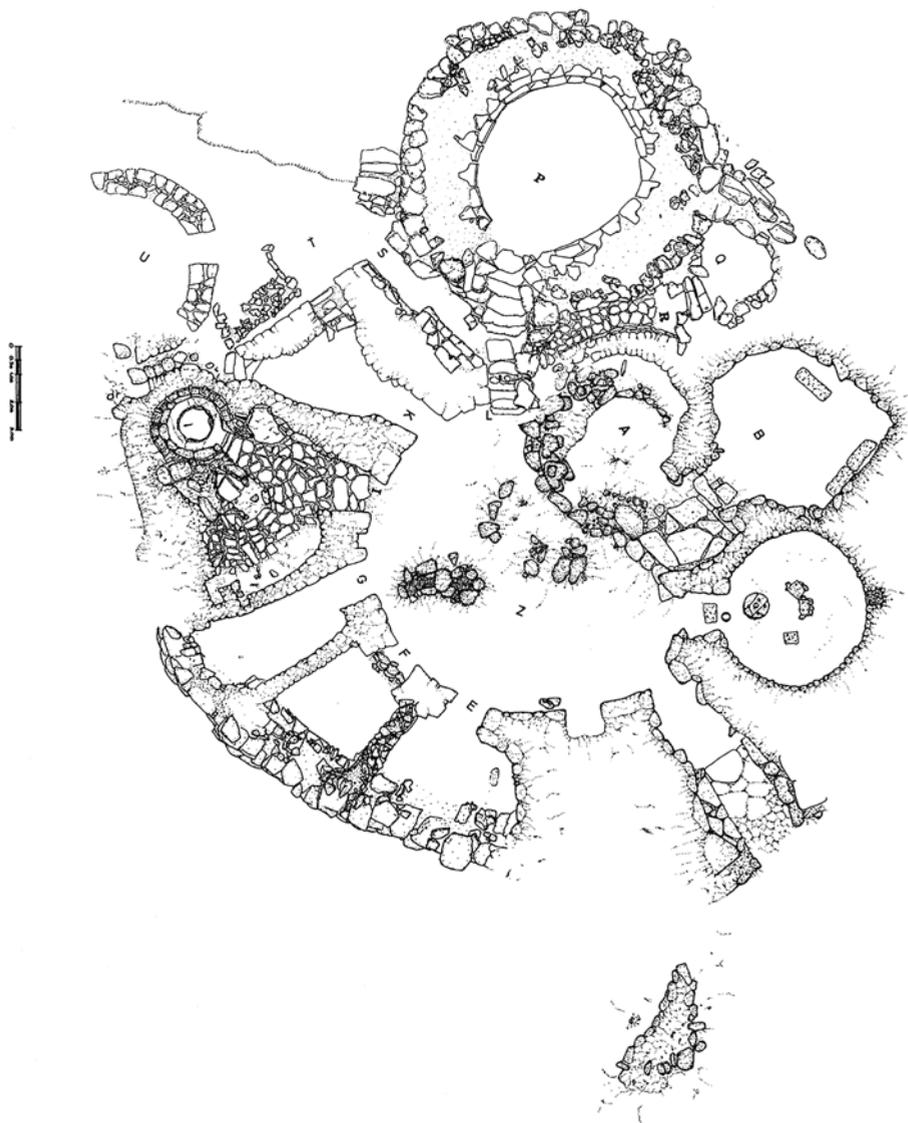
<sup>16</sup> DEPALMAS 2012, p. 147.

<sup>17</sup> FADDA 2007.

<sup>18</sup> FADDA 2012.

temple 3, which in the last building phase housed a chimney furnace that yielded several layers of metalworking around the central opening, alternating with layers of clay.

In the settlement of Iloi - Sedilo (*fig. 3*), there are both circular houses united by short stretches of straight walls aggregated into unclustered ensembles and a block developed around a large central elliptical courtyard of about 80 m<sup>2</sup> in area, approximately 13.20 m long (thus lon-



*fig. 2* - Sa Sedda 'e Sos Carros - Oliena: plan of the *insula*.

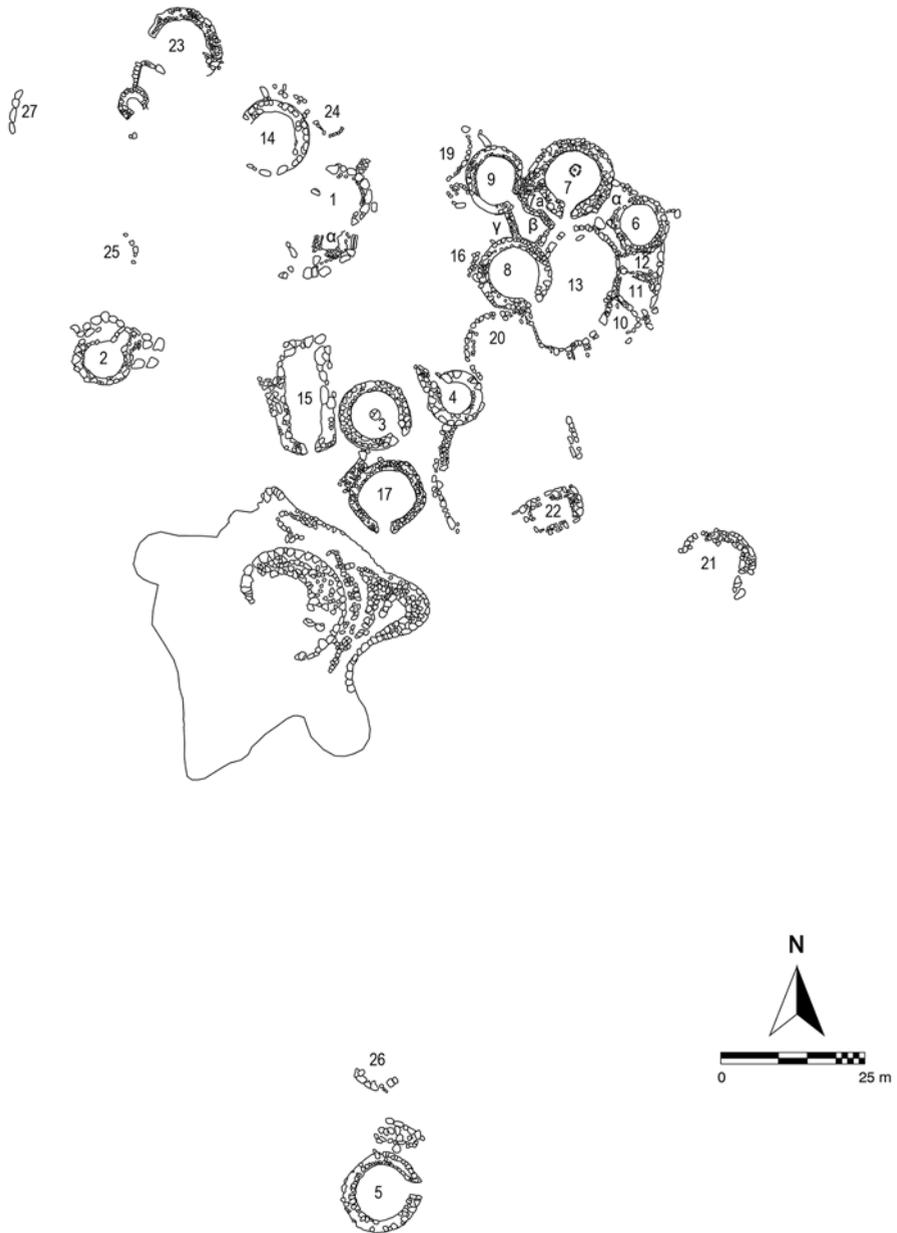


fig. 3 - Iloi - Sedilo: map of the settlement.

ger than the square of Sant'Imbenia, which is just over 12 m and about 6.5-7.4 m wide. Besides the notable dimensions of the open space, in the block – still awaiting complete excavation – there is a circular room (named structure 7), interpreted as a place of worship due to the presence of a large stone hearth with cupules and vessels for ritual use; structure 7 communicates with a small circular room, originally containing a trachyte basin, preceded by a rectangular chamber, giving the ensemble the appearance of a sacred spring in plan (fig. 4). A fragment of an oxide ingot comes from the round room with the basin, while traces of metallurgical activity have been found a short distance from the block<sup>19</sup>.

Returning to Sant'Imbenia, we note that within the settlement there are at least three points indicative of water presence (two corresponding to rooms with basins and one to the well in the “square” itself). Moreover, several fire points, including furnaces, have been identified, and from previous excavations, at least eight *tuyeres* fragments have been recovered<sup>20</sup>.

The coexistence of these two factors – water management structures and evidence of metallurgical activity – suggests that the architectural complex of Sant'Imbenia may fall within the category of Sardinian sanctuaries (see below)<sup>21</sup>.

We must also not forget the presence of the nuraghe, probably originally with only two towers added to a central tower and then restructured to form a quadrilobate, which, with the regular rows of the north-western wall, provides a dramatic backdrop to this sector of the village (fig. 1).

However, the lack of investigations inside the nuraghe does not allow us to know if it was reused for cultic purposes, as might be expected given its advantageous position near a natural harbor and the intense commercial relations documented by numerous allogenic materials, as well as the restyling of the structure through reshaping with a notably effective curtain wall of carefully shaped stones used.

In Sant'Imbenia, the presence of the large open central space, defined by Marco as the «sistema piazza»<sup>22</sup> surrounded by «botteghe»<sup>23</sup> represented by the various rooms gravitating around this space, has led to the hypothesis that the settlement had a different layout from the other known settlements. If the size of the “square” (approximately 12/12.5 × 9.00 m for a surface area of approximately 88 m<sup>2</sup>) does not seem to be such a distinguishing feature given that there are similar examples elsewhere on

---

<sup>19</sup> TANDA - MULÈ - ZEDDA 2012.

<sup>20</sup> LO SCHIAVO - GIARDINO 2007, p. 30, fig. 19.

<sup>21</sup> DEPALMAS 2023, p. 227.

<sup>22</sup> RENDELI *et al.* 2017, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> RENDELI *et al.* 2017, p. 118.

the island, its singularity lies not only in the complexity of the composition of the rooms around the central courtyard but also, and above all, in its privileged position coinciding with one of the best landing points on the entire west coast.

I would like to draw attention to the fact that the constructional model represented by a large central courtyard with rooms of different plans and sizes is the one adopted within the context of cultic complexes, well represented by the aforementioned cases of Iloi (80 m<sup>2</sup>), Sa Sedda 'e Sos Carros (81.5 m<sup>2</sup>), Santa Barbara di Bauladu (84 m<sup>2</sup>), S'Arcu 'e is Forros (46 m<sup>2</sup>), even though it is evidently attested in settlements pri-

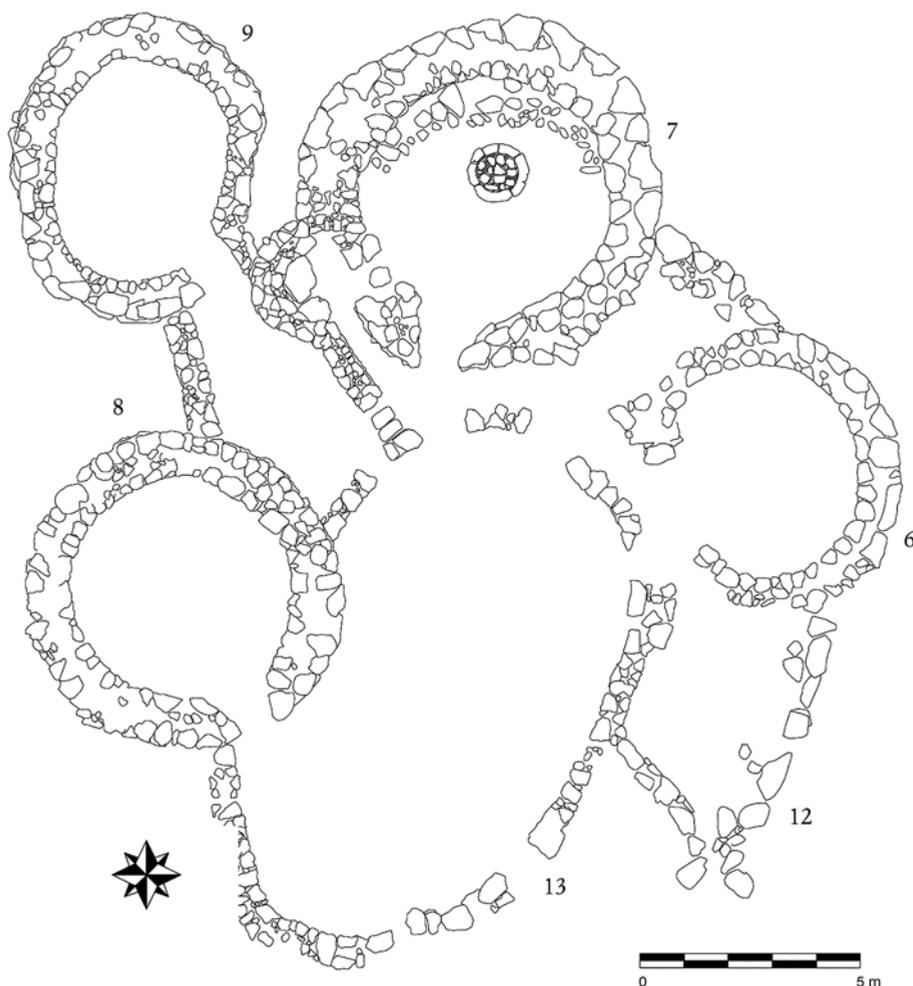


fig. 4 - Iloi - Sedilo: detail of the central courtyard block.

marily residential in nature, such as Seruci (120 m<sup>2</sup>), Palmavera (55 m<sup>2</sup>), La Prisgiona (20 m<sup>2</sup>).

The dimensional variety of the central courtyard space does not allow for the identification of an exclusive measure adopted in cultic settings, although surfaces around 80 m<sup>2</sup> show a significant frequency precisely in such contexts.

Regarding Sardinian sanctuaries, it has been observed that characteristic elements, not necessarily present together, include<sup>24</sup>:

- the association of several monumental buildings functional to worship, also of different types;
- the presence of water sources (springs or wells) and/or circular temples (with or without atrium) and/or other buildings often equipped with basins;
- the presence of circular or elliptical rooms and of blocks with central courtyards;
- the presence of structures with perimeter seats;
- the evidence of metallurgical activity together with the concentration of specialized craftsmanship products, such as vases, figurative bronzes, tools, and weapons, and the presence of hoards.

Although some recurring associations of buildings are known – with structures that almost always reflect known categories – rigid and constant patterns in the composition of the topography of the sanctuary area are not documented.

In such spaces, in addition to ceremonies and ritual practices, public and social events were to take place, through meetings, agreements and exchanges, while productive activities and the residential function were to contribute to defining sanctuaries as catalyzing centers for the meeting of communities settled in the territory.

One of the traits that best characterizes the settlement of Sant'Imbenia and sets it apart distinctly from many others not only in the Alghero area but also in more distant zones is the significant number of objects, even valuable ones, imported from central-eastern Mediterranean areas and the acquisition of techniques and models specific to productions external to the local Sardinian realities, which occurred thanks to the presumably temporary presence of foreigners on site.

One of the questions that has been raised, and to which Marco, first and foremost, has sought to answer, is what connotation the communi-

---

<sup>24</sup> LO SCHIAVO 1992; DEPALMAS 2014, 2016.

ty settled in Sant'Imbenia had, a group that «attraverso la costituzione di un “network” statale, crea eccedenze da inserire nei circuiti di scambio mediterranei»<sup>25</sup>.

Surely, it is a question that leads us to reflect on the socio-political structures in which Sardinian communities of the Early Iron Age are organized and to which one can attempt to respond based on existing archaeological documentation.

The only multi-centric political entity of which we have knowledge is, in fact, the one that manages the sanctuary or temple and holds control over it, thus overseeing centers of importance not only religious but also political, economic, and social for the communities that gathered there, revealing their power and wealth through the elaborateness of the architectures, offerings, and gifts.

The frequency of valuable objects, even imported ones, including fibulae, amber, ornaments and bronze and much more, reinforces the idea that the power group managing the temple constitutes – at least in the Early Iron Age – the privileged, one and only, interlocutor, with whom extra-insular communities established contacts and exchanges.

And here it seems to me that the case of Sant'Imbenia could fit in perfectly.

I would have liked to talk to Marco about this idea and it would have been a good debate.

These pages are dedicated to him with affection and regret.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- BAFICO S. 1986, *Materiale d'importazione dal villaggio nuragico di Sant'Imbenia*, in G. UGAS - G. LAI (a cura di), *Società e Cultura in Sardegna nei periodi orientalizzante e arcaico*, Atti del I Convegno di studi (Selargius - Cagliari 1985), Cagliari, pp. 91-93.
- 1991, *Alghero (Sassari). Loc. S. Imbenia. Villaggio nuragico*, in BA 10, pp. 97-100.
- 1998, *Nuraghe e villaggio S. Imbenia, Alghero*, Viterbo.
- BAFICO S. - D'ORIANO R. - LO SCHIAVO F. 1995, *Il villaggio nuragico di S. Imbenia ad Alghero (SS). Nota preliminare*, in M. H. FANTAR - M. GHAKI (eds.), *Actes du III<sup>e</sup> Congrès International des Études Phéniciennes et Puniquees*, Tunis.

<sup>25</sup> RENDELI et al. 2017, p. 124.

- DEPALMAS A. 2012, *Tendenze di sviluppo delle strutture di insediamento nuragiche*, in C. DEL VAIS (a cura di), *Epi Oinopa Ponton. Studi sul Mediterraneo antico in ricordo di Giovanni Tore*, Oristano, pp. 143-154.
- 2014, *Il paesaggio del sacro nella Sardegna nuragica. Architetture celebrative e spazi cerimoniali nei luoghi di culto e nei santuari*, in *Atti IIPP XI*, pp. 481-496.
- 2016, *Il culto dell'acqua nella Sardegna protostorica: complessi monumentali e territorialità*, in A. PELLETTIERI (a cura di), *Παντα ρει. La Memoria dell'Acqua*, Lagonegro, pp. 25-39.
- 2017, *I villaggi*, in A. MORAVETTI - P. MELIS - L. FODDAI - E. ALBA (a cura di), *La Sardegna nuragica. Storia e monumenti*, Firenze, pp. 101-113.
- 2023, *L'organizzazione del villaggio attraverso le fasi protostoriche sarde*, in P. MIRANDA (a cura di), *Studi di Protostoria in memoria di Renato Peroni*, Bonn, pp. 219-235.
- DEPALMAS A. - RENDELI M. 2012, *L'erba del vicino è sempre più verde?*, in *Atti IIPP XLIV*, pp. 907-912.
- FADDA M. A. 2007, *Oliena (Nuoro). Il complesso nuragico Sa Sedda 'e Sos Carros di Oliena. Le nuove scoperte. Riflessioni sull'architettura religiosa del periodo nuragico*, in *Sardinia, Corsica et Baleares Antiquae IV*, pp. 77-88.
- 2012, *Villagrande Strisaili. Il villaggio santuario di S'Arcu 'e is Forros*, Sassari.
- GALLIN L. - SEBIS S. 1985, *Bauladu (Oristano). Villaggio nuragico di S. Barbara*, in *BA-Sard 2*, pp. 271-275.
- GARAU E. - RENDELI M. 2012, *From Huts to Houses? "Urbanistica" a Sant'Imbenia*, in *Atti IIPP XLIV*, pp. 893-898.
- LO SCHIAVO F. 1992, *Per uno studio sulle offerte nei santuari della Sardegna nuragica*, in *ScAnt 3-4*, pp. 535-549.
- LO SCHIAVO F. - GIARDINO C. 2007, *Ripostigli sardi algheresi della tarda età nuragica. Nuove ricerche archeometallurgiche*, Roma.
- MORAVETTI A. 1998, *Serra Orrios e i monumenti archeologici di Dorgali*, Sassari.
- PAGLIETTI G. 2009, *Le rotonde con bacile di età nuragica*, in *RScPreist LIX*, pp. 335-354.
- RENDELI M. 2014, *Sant'Imbenia (Alghero, Sardegna)*, in A. LEMAIRE - B. DUFOUR - F. PFITZMANN (ed.), *Phéniciens d'Orient et d'Occident*, Paris, pp. 533-548.
- 2015, *L'abitato di Sant'Imbenia di Alghero*, in M. E. MINOJA - G. SALIS - L. USAI (a cura di), *L'isola delle torri. Giovanni Lilliu e la Sardegna nuragica*, Catalogo della mostra (Cagliari 2014 - Roma 2015; Milano 2016), Sassari, pp. 359-365.
- 2020, *Sant'Imbenia, la Sardegna nuragica e il Mediterraneo*, in J. L. LOPEZ CASTRO (ed.), *Entre Utica y Gadir. Navegación y colonización fenicia en el Mediterraneo Occidental a comienzos del I milenio AC*, Granada, pp. 117-128.
- RENDELI et al. 2017, M. RENDELI - L. SANNA - B. DE ROSA - E. GARAU 2017, *Sant'Imbenia*, in A. MORAVETTI - P. MELIS - L. FODDAI - E. ALBA (a cura di), *La Sardegna nuragica. Storia e monumenti*, Firenze, pp. 115-145.
- SALIS G. 2007, *Nuovi scavi nel villaggio nuragico di Sa Sedda 'e Sos Carros (Oliena, Nuoro)*, in *Sardinia, Corsica et Baleares Antiquae IV*, pp. 89-108.
- SANTONI V. 2001, *Il nuraghe Su Nuraxi di Barumini*, Quartu Sant'Elena.

SANTONI V. - BACCO G. 1987, *L'isolato A del villaggio nuragico di Serucci-Gonnesa. Lo scavo della capanna n. 5*, in *La Sardegna nel Mediterraneo tra il secondo e il primo millennio a.C.*, Atti del II Convegno di Studi (Selargius - Cagliari 1986), Cagliari, pp. 313-336.

TANDA G. - MULÈ P. - ZEDDA M. 2012, *Le strutture 6 e 7 del villaggio nuragico di Iloi (Sedilo)*, in *Atti IIPP XLIV*, pp. 877-884.

#### IMAGE REFERENCES

*Fig. 1:* after Rendeli 2015; *Fig. 2:* after Salis 2007; *Fig. 3:* revised by M. Pais, G. Barra, V. Ortu; *Fig. 4:* drawing A. Gallo.