



## UNDERWORLD AND NEOLITHIC RITUALITY: THE ROCK ART OF THE SU LONGU FRESU CAVE IN CENTRAL SARDINIA

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**Abstract** - Underworld and Neolithic Rituality: the 'Su Longu Fresu' Cave's Rock Art, Central Sardinia

The cave of 'Su Longu Fresu' is one of a group of 9 ritual caves in the same inner mountain region of the Barbagia di Seulo in Central Sardinia, recently discovered for the first time. Four of them are under excavation at the moment.

Its name in the Sardinian language, even now, identifies a type of plant locally said to be the 'tree of the dead'. It is 15 m long, 2-3 m wide and 1 m high: all the 8 natural niches produced by falling waters, contain animal and human ritual deposits. In its central part, opposite the entrance, a human skull, radiocarbon-dated to the final part of the fifth millennium BC, was found in the proximity of a rock-art black painted panel depicting an anthropomorphic horned figure holding a bow aimed towards a horned animal. It reminds us of the famous ones found at the Grotta di Porto Badisco, and it is arguably the earliest painted parietal art known in a natural cave in Sardinia. The highly symbolic and restricted space, the presence of natural holes filled with human and animal bones together with 'objects of prestige' like obsidian arrowheads and a small greenstone axe, suggest a secret cult area linked to rites of passage and of initiation into male secret societies in which the society power would be reinforced by re-entering into the underworld under the authority of the ancestors.

**Riassunto** - Oltretomba e ritualità neolitica: l'arte rupestre della grotta di "Su Longu Fresu", in Sardegna centrale

La grotta di 'Su Longu Fresu' è parte di un gruppo di nove grotte rituali recentemente identificate tra i monti della Barbagia di Seulo, nella Sardegna centrale. Quattro di esse sono, al momento, interessate da scavi archeologici. Il suo nome, nella lingua locale indica l'albero dei morti, che cresce in prossimità dei corsi d'acqua. È lunga circa 15 metri, larghezza variabile tra i 2-3 metri e altezza di circa un metro. Sono presenti 8 nicchie naturali, formate dallo scorrimento di acque sotterranee, che contengono depositi rituali di ossa umane ed animali. All'estremità finale è presente, saldato alla parete, un cranio umano, datato dai Laboratori di Oxford alla parte finale del V millennio BC. Lateralmente ad esso, su una parete verticale è stata dipinta, in colore nero, una scena di caccia rappresentante una figura antropomorfa con corna che punta l'arco verso un animale, anch'esso munito di alte corna. È analoga alle note pitture della Grotta di Porto Badisco e, rappresenta un esempio unico in Sardegna. La piccola cavità dall'alto valore simbolico, come evidenziato dalla presenza di aperture contenenti ossa umane ed animali e di 'oggetti di prestigio' quali punte di freccia in ossidiana and una piccola ascia in pietra verde, rappresenta un luogo di culto segreto, legato a riti di passaggio e d'iniziazione destinati ai maschi nei quali la struttura sociale del potere verrebbe rinforzata dal rientrare nel Regno dei Morti sotto l'autorità degli Antenati.

**Résumé** - Les enfers et la ritualité néolithique : l'art rupestre de la grotte de « su longu fresu », dans le centre de la Sardaigne

La grotte de « Su Longu Fresu » est l'une des neuf grottes rituelles découvertes récemment situées dans la région montagneuse de la Barbagia di Seulo, dans le centre de la Sardaigne. Actuellement, quatre de ces grottes font l'objet de fouilles archéologiques. Aujourd'hui encore, son nom en sarde identifie un type de plante que les locaux appellent « l'arbre des morts » et qui pousse à proximité des cours d'eau. La grotte mesure 15 mètres de long, 2 à 3 mètres de large et environ 1 mètre de hauteur. Les huit niches naturelles, produites par l'écoulement d'eaux souterraines, contiennent des dépôts rituels d'os humains et animaux. À son extrémité, on peut observer un crâne humain attaché à la paroi. Les laboratoires d'Oxford l'ont fait remonter à la fin du Ve millénaire av. J.-C. À côté, sur une paroi verticale, une scène de chasse a été peinte dans une couleur noire. Elle représente une figure anthropomorphe cornue qui pointe son arc vers un animal, qui a lui aussi de grandes cornes. Elle rappelle les célèbres peintures de la grotte de Porto Badisco et représente un exemple unique en Sardaigne. La petite cavité a une très grande valeur symbolique, comme nous le montre la présence de trous naturels contenant des os humains et animaux et des « objets de prestige » tels que des pointes de flèches en obsidienne et une petite hache en roche verte. Elle suggère un lieu de culte secret, lié aux rites de passage et d'initiation masculins au cours desquels le pouvoir de la société serait renforcé par le retour dans le règne des morts sous l'autorité des ancêtres.

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### INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPT OF SACRED LANDSCAPES

The cave of Su Longu Fresu is one of a group of nine ritual caves in the same inner mountain region of the Barbagia di Seulo in Central Sardinia, discovered by the writers during the years 2005-07. Four of the caves are under excavation at the moment and two of them present carvings and painted rock art.

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The present work focuses only on the Su Longu Fresu parietal art and its function because it represents a unique example of a cave-shrine for both Sardinia and the Italian mainland.

The concept of sacred landscapes deserves some thought because it embraces factors to do with religion and culture: landscapes were more than just geographic and habitable /inhabitable zones with land for hunting and planting. This is because prehistoric landscapes were progressively allocated sectors and sites that were held to be sacred, in which specific locations served to store a community's wisdom, myths and histories for the purpose of expressing moral tales for human conduct, tribal-origin stories and cosmologies. We know this through anthropological studies of native communities worldwide (e.g. Basso 1996 for the native-Indian Western Apache of Nevada), and it is as inferable for Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe and later periods, using folklore and studies like those initiated by Frazer (1911), Eliade (1957) and Campbell (1959).

Caves partake in such myths or legends, as do landscape areas and sites like mountains, outcropping rocks, springs, cascades, water courses, swamps and even trees whose lives can span many human generations. All can serve, sometimes through supposed occupation by spirits, as story-telling links with ancestors. Such geographical features were held to be liminal places, or meeting-points in which humans could get in touch with the underworld (Bradley 1991, 2000).

Moreover, a sacred landscape carries with it a whole range of rules and regulations regarding people's behaviour in relation to it. This implies a set of beliefs often in relation to the spirits of the ancestors, as well as more remote or powerful gods or spirits' (Carmichael et al. 1994). In this way natural places in the landscape can become vested with supernatural beliefs and spiritual symbolism which renders them sacred (Ucko 1994; Bradley 1997; Taçon 1999), perhaps all the more appreciated and venerated because they have been named by the ancestors.

Many rituals and ceremonies have been related to: fertility cults, including those taking place at pilgrimage centres or shrines and caves; initiation rites and ceremonies; and ancestor cults, with rituals providing access to the deceased in the afterworld for descendants wanting to legitimize social, political and economic relationships among the living. Similarly, many natural places were deemed suitable for fertility rites via Earth Mother or Goddess supplication and adoration (Gimbutas 1989). Prime among natural sites are those to do with water (springs, streams, waterfalls, lakes, swamps) and rocky regions or cliffs presenting holes, fissures or cracks of vulva-like character.

#### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SU LONGU FRESU CAVE

This nearly horizontal and straight limestone cave lies close to the Riu Su Longu Fresu whose name in the Sardinian language, even now, identifies a type of plant locally said to be the tree of the dead. The cave is about 15 metres long, 2–3 metres wide and 1 metre high, and has eight natural niches or alcoves along its sides that were naturally formed long ago by the movement of falling water (Figure 1). At the far end of the cave, and facing the cave entrance, a heap of human skulls' pieces with half a human skull at the base (Figures 2 and 3), now anchored in calcite flowstone, had been positioned near a small, horizontal hollow which, once cleared of the small stones that closed it, also revealed more pieces of a human cranium and a long bone (Figure 4). Analysis of a fragment of the basal skull by the Oxford University AMS Radiocarbon Unit gives a date-range of 4259–4042 cal BC (95.1% probability, OxA-X-2236-5315±36 BP). This is Middle–Late Neolithic. Within 1 metre of this position, set in the northern wall of the cave, is a natural vertical niche extending from ground level to ceiling, which is suggestive of feminine symbolism. Its height is almost 1.2 metres and width 0.3–0.5 m. At its base is a 0.7-metre artificially deepened pit possibly intended to allow falling water to drain away and prevent any flooding of the shrine in the cave. To the left of this niche is a rock-art painted panel 0.3 metres by 0.3 metres (Figure 5). The several marks were drawn by an adult finger using black natural paint (Robert Bednarik, personal communication). Its remarkable preservation is due to being thinly covered with calcite flowstone that thickly but transparently covers it. To aid interpretation and explanation of the prehistoric markings, as shown in Figure 6, grey tones and white tonality have been added to the photograph. One image appears to be an anthropomorphic horned-head figure (perhaps bearing a wooden carved mask which is even now typical of surviving Sardinian village-pastoral and folklore traditions), holding a bow aimed at a horned animal. It reminds us of the famous ones found at the Grotta di Porto Badisco studied by Ruth Whitehouse in 1992 who, on a visit to Su Longu Fresu in 2010, confirmed our interpretation (Whitehouse, personal communication). It is arguably the earliest painted parietal art known in a natural cave in Sardinia. Its style fits well within the corpus of Central Mediterranean Late Neolithic cave art (Robin Skeates, personal communication) and was sampled for uranium-series dating.



Alcove no. 1 too, shows features resulting from an ancient long-lasting waterfall and a pit was dug at its base in the floor where two human skulls were deposited beneath the stones (Figure 7): its shape again strongly evokes the idea of female symbolism. Another human skull completely calcified was identified in the middle part of its right wall, while niche no. 2 shows a possible red deer antler coated with flowstone. Niche no. 4, after the small stones which closed it were removed, revealed some animal bones, a few obsidian arrowheads and a small greenstone axe-blade. No pottery was recovered during the cave excavation.

#### ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TRENDS DURING SARDINIAN MIDDLE AND FINAL NEOLITHIC

The most important site for defining the Sardinian Neolithic is the Filiestru Cave in the Bonu Ighinu Valley, south of Sassari where the British archaeologist David Trump documented continuity of occupation from the Early Neolithic (5700 BC) through the Nuragic period (1600 BC), reconstructing thousands of indigenous developments on the island (Dyson and Rowland 2007). Trump in 1983 identified four Neolithic sub-phases related to the different decorated pottery he found: Cardial (5700–300 BC), Filiestru (5300–4700 BC), Bonu Ighinu (4700–4000 BC) and Ozieri (4000–3200 BC).

The external surface of the Cardial pottery was impressed with the shell of a marine mollusc, *Cardium edulis*, and has been found at coastal and internal sites, both caves and villages.

At the Filiestru cave, pottery was dominated by undecorated round-bottomed vessels with red ochre slips or washes and small vertical or horizontal handles. The size of the Early Neolithic sites suggests small bands whose economies were based on hunting, herding and foraging, supplemented by the cultivation of small plots of grain and legumes. Wild animals such as deer, boar, mouflon and *Prologus sardus* (Sardinian pika) were commoner than domesticated sheep, goat and cattle. The fauna and the poor flora remains suggest a cyclical movement from the coast to the interior in order to exploit all aspects of the natural environment.

The Bonu Ighinu pottery introduced punched and incised decorative elements on carinated bowls and represented a major improvement in Sardinian ceramic technology and quality. Caves such as Sa Ucca de su Tintirriolu and Grutta Filiestru at Mara (Sassari) were used as ritual places.

The decorated ceramics of the Ozieri culture show a variety of open and closed forms including tripod vessels with zigzag motifs, triangles, festoons, spirals, circles and representations of human figures. Lithic tools were also of high quality: obsidian arrowheads indicated that hunting was still important (as reflected by the faunal records too), but other kind of stones were used to make blades and polished greenstone axes. Rituality appears clearly during this culture, with three important type of structures: ritual caves; b the rock-cut tombs necropolis often decorated with red and black paintings, carved bulls' horns, grave goods and stone and clay female figurines associated with the afterlife; and the striking cult structure of Monte d' Accoddi (near Sassari) consisting of a trapezoidal platform (37.5 x 30.5 metres with a height of 5.5 metres) accessed by a 41.5 metre-long ramp leading to a rectangular shrine on top of it (Dyson and Rowland 2007).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The cave of Su Longu Fresu, one of a group of nine ritual caves in the same inner mountain region of Central Sardinia, with its parietal art and peculiar features represents a unique example of a cave-shrine for both Sardinia and the Italian mainland and preserves the earliest painted parietal art known in a natural cave in Sardinia.

The narrow access to the cave implies that one has to crawl and then roll up inside it, passing through 'the liminal threshold' that brings one to the 'womb' of the earth where human skulls, animal bones and objects of prestige were intentionally deposited near the rock art panel. The presence of water is a dominant theme: a stream flows outside about 15 metres from the cave entrance while the internal natural features, strongly evoking female symbolism, were produced by the falling waters and must have been wet during part of the year.

The area, never studied before from an archeological and anthropological viewpoint, seems to be included in a natural environment where mountains and plateaux, deeply incised by the long Flumendosa River, waterfalls, streams, springs and pools of water, could have been easily considered sacred by their Neolithic inhabitants who used the great variety of caves present in the area to bury the dead and perform fertility, ancestor and initiation-type rites there. The highly symbolic and restricted space inside the Su Longu Fresu Cave suggests a secret cult area in which the power of the tribe-chiefs would be reinforced by re-entering the underworld under the authority of the ancestors.

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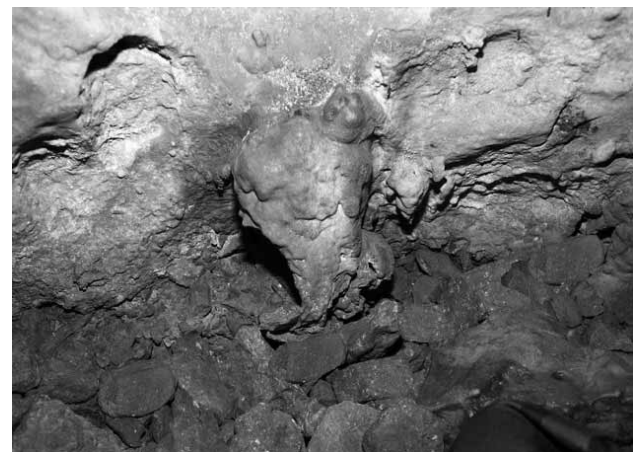
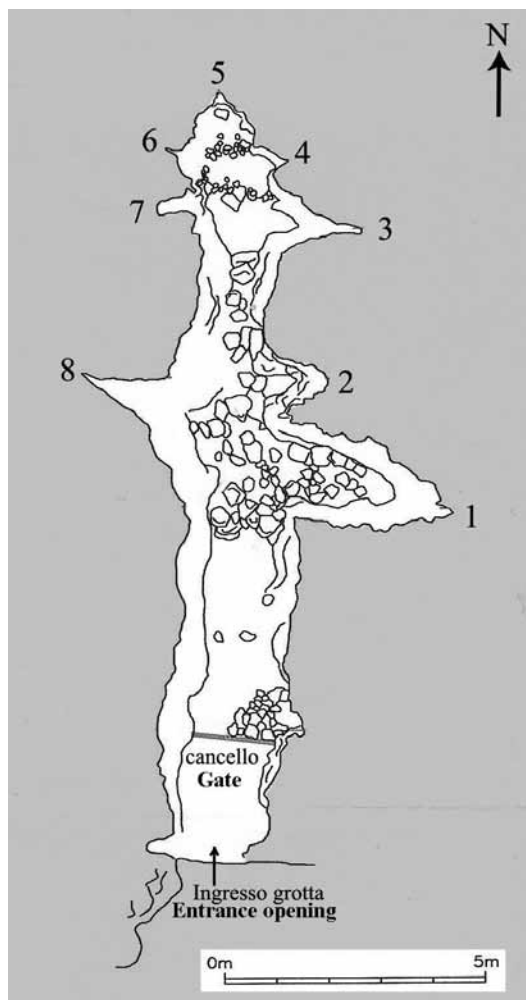


Figure 1: Laser Scanner plan of the Su Longu Fresu Cave showing the position of the eight natural niches. M. G. Gradoli

Figure 2: Heap of human skull pieces intentionally deposited at the end of the cave and now anchored in calcite flowstone. At the base, the fifth millennium BC radiocarbon dated half skull. Photo Giuseppe Farci for M. G. Gradoli



Figure 3: Detail of the human half skull. Photo Giuseppe Farci for M. G. Gradoli



Figure 4: Niche n. 5 where pieces of human skulls and a long bone were found. Photo Giuseppe Farci for M. G. Gradoli



Figure 5: Rock-art painted panel 0.3 m by 0.3 m on the left wall of niche n. 3. Photo Giuseppe Farci for M. G. Gradoli



Figure 6: Detail of figure 5. Grey tones and white tonality were added to the photograph to aid interpretation. The anthropomorphic horned-head figure holding a bow aimed towards a horned animal is visible. M. G. Gradoli



Figure 7: Niche n. 1 showing features resulting from an ancient long-lasting waterfall evoking feminine symbolism. A pit was dug at its base in the floor where two human skulls were deposited beneath the stones. Photo Giuseppe Farci for M. G. Gradoli