History

For much of its messy history, Sardinia has been little more than an afterthought in the tactical and territorial battles of the Mediterranean’s great powers. Its mineral reserves and strategic position ensured a constant stream of unwanted visitors. But foreign colonialists never had it easy. Endemic malaria and the island’s granite core made Sardinia a tough deployment for outsiders. In more recent times, banditry and tourism have kept the island in the limelight.

THE MYSTERY OF PREHISTORIC SARDINIA

Sardinia as Atlantis? In his 2002 book Le Colonne d’Ercole. Un’ inchiesta (The Pillars of Hercules. An investigation), Italian journalist Sergio Frau stakes a claim for Sardinia as the lost civilisation of Atlantis. As theories go, it’s a tough one to prove, but the fact that it’s up for debate is symptomatic of an island whose origins lie well beyond the reach of traditional history.

When the first islanders arrived and where they came from are questions that have been puzzling researchers for centuries. The most likely hypothesis is that they landed on Sardinia’s northern shores in the lower Palaeolithic period (Old Stone Age). When flint tools were found at Perfugas in 1979, archaeologists muttered excitedly about primitive humans crossing from mainland Italy as far back as 350,000 BC. It’s thought they came from Tuscany, although it’s possible other waves arrived from North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula via the Balearic Islands. Geneticists have attempted to solve the riddle by researching the island’s curious genetic make-up – in certain parts of the interior a particular gene mutation is found in concentrations only otherwise present in Scandinavia, Bosnia & Hercegovina and Croatia. However, they seem just as puzzled as the rest of us.

Neolithic Paradise

Wherever the early settlers came from, they were apparently happy with what they found, for by the neolithic period (8000 BC to 3000 BC), Sardinia was home to several thriving tribal communities. The island would have been perfect for the average neolithic family – it was covered with dense forests full of animals, there were caves for shelter and land for grazing and cultivation. Underlying everything were rich veins of obsidian, a volcanic black stone that was used for making tools and arrow tips. This black gold became the Mediterranean’s most coveted commodity, and was traded across the area – shards of Sardinian obsidian have been found as far away as France.

Most of what we know of this period, known as the Ozieri (or San Michele) culture, comes from findings unearthed in caves around Ozieri. Fragments of basic flint tools indicate the first traces of human culture on the island. No one knows where the early islanders came from, although theories point to Tuscany or the Iberian Peninsula.

Thriving Copper Age communities formed around the town of Ozieri. Copper was smelted into ingots and traded, and the first domus de janas (rock tombs) appear. Archaeologists use the term ‘Ozieri culture’ to describe this lifestyle.

The nuraghic period: most of the stone ruins that litter Sardinia date back to this time. Some 30,000 fortified stone towers were built, most to serve as military watchtowers.

Check out www.sarnow.com for a good introduction to Sardinia’s prehistory, with fascinating features explaining the historical context of local arts, crafts and culture.
ceramics, tools and copper ingots attest to knowledge of smelting techniques and artistic awareness, while early *domus de janas* (literally ‘fairy houses’; tombs cut into rock) tell of complex funerary rituals.

**It’s All in the Rocks**

To the untrained eye, the strange stone circles that litter much of Sardinia’s interior are mysterious and incomprehensible. But to archaeologists, they are a veritable encyclopaedia of ancient life. And in the absence of any written records – a fact that has led scholars to assume that the early Sards never had a written language – they provide one of the few windows into the dark world of the nuraghic society.

There are said to be up to 7000 *nuraghi* (stone towers) across the island, most built between 1800 and 500 BC. No one is quite sure what they were used for, or indeed how they were built, but suspicion falls on the usual suspect: the military. By the 2nd millennium BC, metal weapons were widespread and violent contact between settlements was becoming more frequent.

Early *nuraghi* were simple free-standing structures with internal chambers. Over time, they became bigger – the Nuraghe Santu Antine (p132) is the tallest remaining *nuraghe*, at 25m – and increasingly complex with elaborate rooms and labyrinthine passages. Walls were raised around the grand watchtowers and villagers began to cluster within the walls’ protective embrace. The most spectacular example of this is the beehive complex of the Nuraghe Su Nuraxi (p100), near Barumini.

The discovery of Mycenaean ceramics in Sardinia and nuraghic pottery in Crete suggest an early trade in tableware and contact with other cultures. Evidence of pagan religious practices are provided by *pozzi sacri* (well temples). Built from around 1000 BC, these were often constructed so as to capture light at the yearly equinoxes, hinting at a naturalistic religion as well as sophisticated building techniques. The well temple at Santa Cristina (p114) is a prime example.

But perhaps the most revealing insights into nuraghic culture come from the *bronzetti* (bronze figurines) which populate many of Sardinia’s archaeological museums, most notably those in Cagliari (p59) and Sassari (p126). Scholars reckon that these primitive depictions of shepherd kings, warriors, farmers and sailors were used as decorative offerings in nuraghic temples.

**A PAWN IN OTHER PEOPLE’S GAMES**

Sardinia’s strategic position and its rich natural resources (silver and lead reserves) and fertile arable land have long made the island a victim of the Mediterranean’s big powers.

The first foreigners on the scene were the Phoenicians (from modern-day Lebanon). The master mariners of their day, they were primarily interested in Sardinia as a staging post – they had colonies on Sicily, Malta, Cyprus,