

The Concept of Collectivism and the Cult of the Dead in the Early Cultures of the Central Mediterranean Area

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This study attempts to analyse some architectonic aspects of funerary monuments in the Mediterranean area, especially Megalithic tombs and funerary caves, from the point of view of the cult of the Dead and the relationship between the space used for burial and for normal everyday life. Some of these architectonic elements might be interpreted as 'frontiers' between the world of the *Living* and the world of the *Dead* or as 'divisions' between the dead themselves, with interesting implications concerning the evolution of religion and society during the last phase of the Neolithic and the beginning of the Copper Age.

1. Spatial boundaries between the world of the Dead and the world of the Living

Dolmen

In the central Mediterranean Area, dolmens are mainly present in Sardinia (over 100 examples), Corsica (about 60 megalithic tombs) and Apulia (32 examples). They are also present in Malta (more than 16 dolmen) and nearby areas, like the Aosta Valley (Mezzena 1975 and 1992). On the whole, they are isolated: necropolis of dolmen are very rare. In Sardinia, one example of a necropolis was identified a few years ago in S. Maria - Berchidda by Paola Basoli (publication still pending) and a mixed necropolis (dolmen and caves) at Mesu Enas (Abbasanta) is known. An unexcavated and probably artificial hill with three dolmens, Sa Piricchedda near Galtelli, has been discovered recently (see d'Arragon 1994, Cicilloni 1999), while the necropolis of Padru (Sassari) - still awaiting excavation - may not be prehistoric (see Cicilloni 1999, p. 98). In all of these cases, the necropolis presents remains of megalithic walls around the sepulchral area. The funerary area of S. Martin de Corléans in Aosta (Mezzena 1992) is a Megalithic necropolis, too. Some groups of dolmens in Malta have been documented, like the three Ta Hammut dolmen (Evans 1956 p. 86ff, Evans 1971 p. 194, d'Arragon 1994), poorly conserved and apparently without enclosure walls around the funerary area. The nearly completely destroyed area of Ta Cenc (Ashby 1913, p. 5ff; Mayr 1901 p. 679; Evans 1971 p. 197f; d'Arragon 1994), with only one out of at least three dolmens still preserved is a necropolis which contains the remains of what seems to be a megalithic wall around the area towards the inner part of the Island of Gozo, while the part oriented towards the sea does not include the remains of possible enclosures. Another small necropolis, formed by the two dol-

mens of Wied Filep (see Ashby 1913 p.8,9; Zammit 1930 p. 61; Evans 1971 p. 196; d'Arragon 1994), does not have preserved boundaries.

The single dolmens often have external architectonic boundaries, too. In twenty-nine dolmen in Sardinia and six in Apulia such boundaries are still clearly identifiable. These limits are usually marked off by circular stone-walls around the tomb, the so-called '*Peristalite*,' (term borrowed from the *peristilio* of the classical temples). There are also some *tumuli* and *dromoi*.

Significant examples of this kind of structure can be found in Sardinia: the Sa Janna e su Lacu dolmen (fig. 1.A), the dolmen of Motorra (fig. 2.A), and the very interesting megalithic area of Montiju Coronas (Photo 1), partially delimited by natural barriers and partially by an artificial stone wall. The dolmen of Runala (fig. 1.B) presents traces of a very extended megalithic wall and a double megalithic structure around the tomb itself, similar to the *Allée couverte* of Malacarrucca (fig. 2.C) (for a description of this Sardinian monuments see d'Arragon 1994, with previous bibliography). Analogous structures have been found in Corsica, such as the dolmen of Settiva and the interesting *Allée non couverte* recently discovered by Lanfranchi (Lanfranchi/Weiss 1997 p. 243ff and *infra*), while the dolmen in Apulia have mostly *tumuli* and, in some cases, *dromoi* or other entrance-rooms (d'Arragon 1994).

Human Remains

Unfortunately, the Sardinian and Maltese dolmens mostly were completely empty at the moment of their discovery. During recent excavations (Lilliu 1966, Atzeni 1987, d'Arragon 1999a) only typical grave-goods, but nearly no human remains, were found. The few dolmens from Apulia which presented funerary layers that were still intact were not excavated with modern scientific methods (Gervasio 1913). Only the excavation of the dolmen Giovinazzo, excavated in recent times (Lo Porto 1967), provides reliable scientific data, with collective burials remains dating, at least in part, to the Ancient Bronze Age. The dolmens from the Aosta Valley, carefully excavated by Franco Mezzena (1975 and 1992), had been used for a long time and the area of Saint Martin de Corléans were disturbed in medieval times, so even these examples do not provide sure data about the deposition of corpses. Concerning the dolmenic phenomenon in the Central Mediterranean area, there is very little scientific informa-

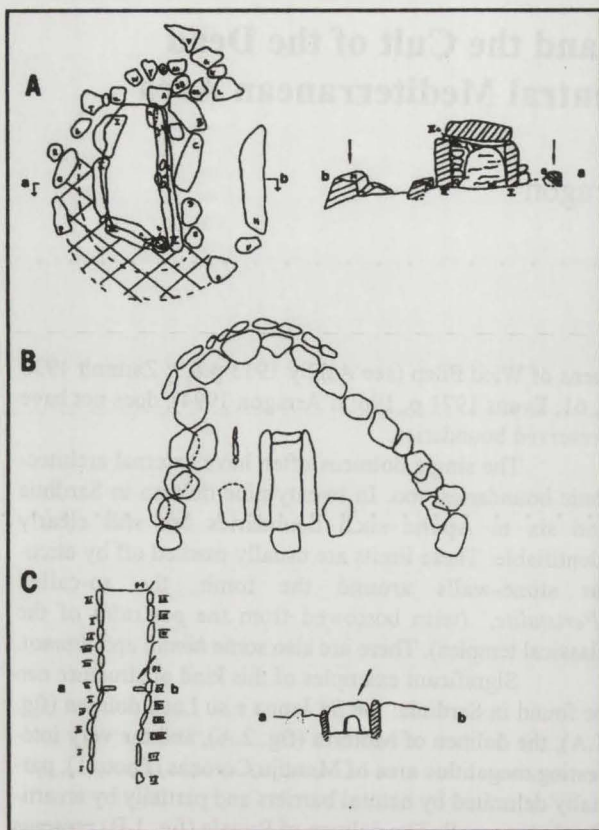


Figure 1. A. Dolmen Sa Janna e Su Lacu - Buddosò, Sardinia. Simple dolmen with outside boundaries: peristalite. Plan and section; B. Dolmen Runala - Ittiri, Sardinia. Dolmen with outside boundaries: double peristalite (perhaps remains of a tumulus?); C. Allée couverte of Corte Noa - Laconi, Sardinia. Allée with inside boundary: a division between two separate spaces inside the burial chamber. (from Atzeni 1987, p. 526).

tion about the number, sex and age of the dead and about the mortuary practices directly concerning the human remains. Hence, the data are difficult to interpret correctly and hypotheses concerning mortuary practices must be reconstructed by analysing other elements related to the cult and the architecture.

Funerary Caves

Artificial caves used as tombs are very frequent in Sardinia: over 2000 of the so called *Domus de Janas* have already been archived and hundreds of them are still awaiting scientific research - and many have yet to be discovered.

These funerary caves are often found in groups, forming huge necropolis, which are normally separated from the open landscape by natural boundaries, like the Necropolis of Montessu-Villaperucchi (Photo 2) or the famous Necropolis of Sant' Andrea in Priu - Bonorva (Solinas *et al.*, 1999). However, in some cases the ancient builders felt the need for still clearer demarcations, for example, using megalithic walls around the tomb entrances (Montessu, photo 3). In addition, in most *Domus de Janas* the area for the dead is accessible only through a long and narrow corridor, the *dromos*. In some cases,

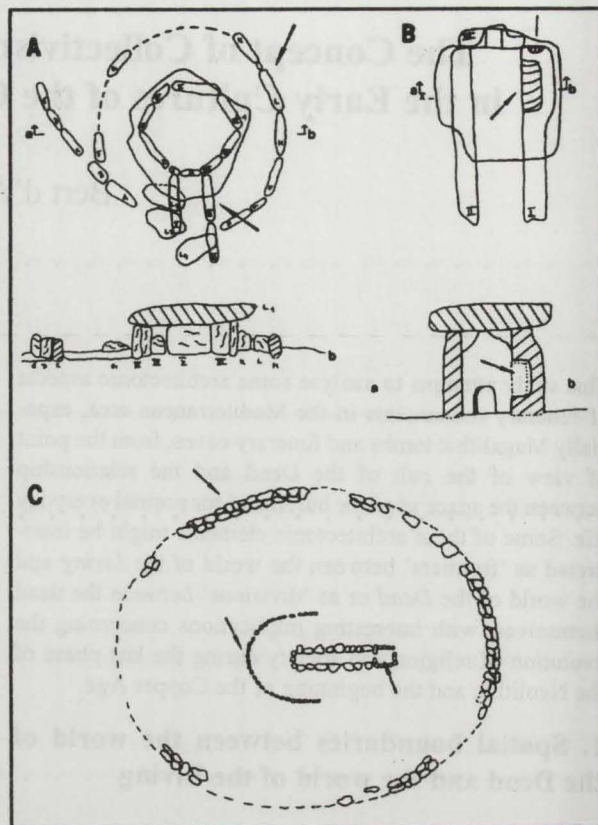


Figure 2. A. Dolmen Motorra - Dorgali, Sardinia. Dolmen with outside boundaries: dromos and peristalite. The stones C, D, E, might be the remains of a second and larger circle around the grave. Plan and section; B. Dolmen Sa Covecadda - Mores, Sardinia. Dolmen with inside boundaries: a niche carved in the standing stone I. A second, smaller niche is carved on the outside front of the same stone. Plan and section. (from Atzeni 1966, p. 128); C. Allée couverte of Malacaruca - Alà dei Sardi, Sardinia. Allée with inside and outside boundaries: a separate entrance chamber and a double stone circle. The second peristalite is very large. (from Boltolu 1971).

Megalithic *dromoi* leading to the entrance of the excavated tomb (i.e. the *Domus* from the mixed necropolis of Mesu Enas - Abbasanta - photo 5 - or the *Domus dell'Ariete*, fig. 5) has been added outside the tomb and in the necropolis of Su Crocifissu Mannu - Porto Torres (Sardinia) (Demartis 1998b), additional *dromoi* has been excavated in a second phase in tombs which originally presented entrance pits.

The *Domus de Janas* normally consist of one or more chambers of varying size, containing collective burial sites without any boundaries or delimitations within the single burial chambers. These tombs range from simple man-made caves with one or two kidney-shaped rooms to huge hypogea for both funereal and cult functions. A few more sophisticated *Domus de Janas* have characteristics similar to a temple, with large rooms clearly designed for cult use, such as tomb I of Santu Pedru - Porto Torres (fig. 4.A) and tomb XX bis of the Necropoli of Anghelu Ruju (fig. 4.D), the painted tomb of Puttifigari (Demartis 1991) and tomb II of Mesu 'e Montes (Demartis/Canalis

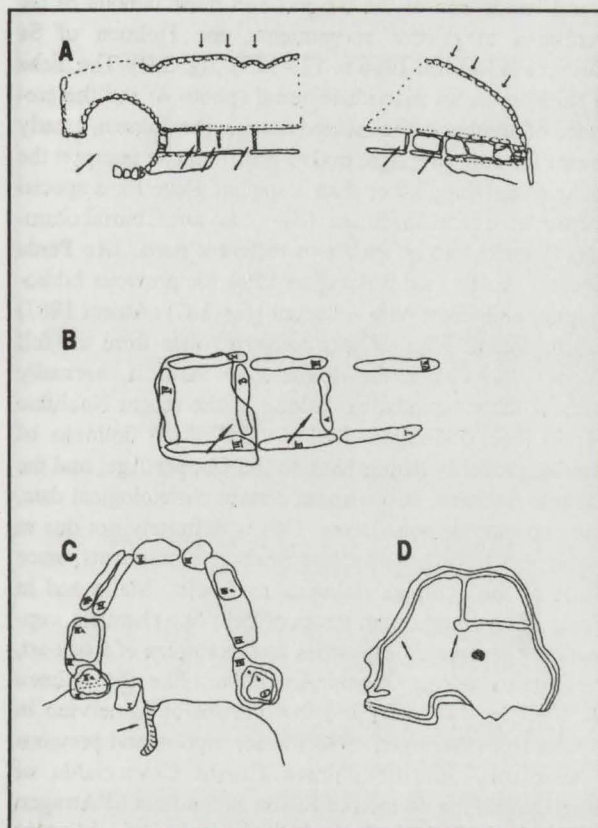


Figure 3. A. Dolmen of Giovinazzo - Giovinazzo, Apulia. Allée couverte with outside and inside boundaries: an enormous tumulus and a circular chamber (for cult?) and inside divisions between separated spaces inside the burial corridor. (from Lo Porto 1967, p. 137); B. Dolmen Tavola dei Paladini - Corato, Apulia. Allée couverte (?) with inside boundaries: two inside divisions between separated spaces; C, D. Dolmen Stabile - Giurdignano, Apulia. A simple dolmen with traces of cult: channels and cupmarks are carved in the capstone (D) and a channel is carved in the rock (C), but the burial chamber presents no spatial divisions.

1985).

Interesting funerary caves are known also from Malta. Of particular interest are the collective burials inside the hypogeum of Hal Tarxien (with the human remains unfortunately destroyed during excavation) and the recently discovered and excavated hypogeum at the Brockdorff-circle, at Gozo. This last site, still under study, is probably a collective sepulchre with spaces dedicated to cult and rituals (for first results see Malone/Stoddart 1996 and Malone *et. al.*, 1997)

Human Remains

The archeological finds in the Sardinian *Domus de Janas* have rarely remained undisturbed and provide significant data on very few occasions. The chemical composition of the soil, which can rapidly destroy bone remains, and the numerous profanations, both ancient and recent, make it difficult to determine the precise number of burial deposits and their place in time. In the tombs containing human bones, the number of dead ranges from a few dozen (like Filigosa and Anghelu Ruju) to a few hundred. In the so-

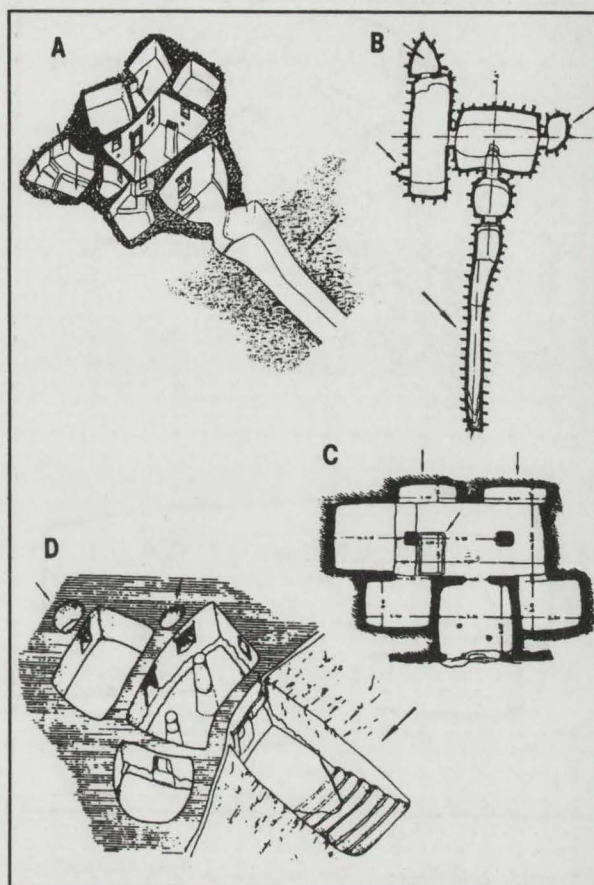


Figure 4. A. Tomb I of Santu Pedru - Alghero, Sardinia. A complex Domus de Janas with dromos and separated burial spaces in some of the chambers. The central chamber might have had functions of cult. (from Demartis 1998a); B. Tomb XIII of Su Crucifissu Mannu - Porto Torres, Sardinia. A t-shaped domus de Janas with a long dromos and small separated niches in the burial chambers. (from Demartis 1998b); C. Domus VIII of Sant'Andrea Priu - Bonorva, Sardinia. Complex Domus de Janas with niches. (from Taramelli 1919, in: Solinas 1999); D. Tomb XXbis of Anghelu Ruju - Alghero, Sardinia. Domus de Janas with dromos and small burial niches. The central chamber might have had functions of cult. (from Demartis 1998c).

called "*domus dei guerrieri*", G. Ugas identified at least 182 body remains which were deposited over a period of time that spans more than one century (Ugas 1992). In all of the intact burial layers known to date, both sexes and all age groups were represented, including *infans* I and II. The numerous human remains were placed without any apparent order. The remains from earlier burials were simply shifted in order to create space for new ones: the ancestors' skeletons were no longer anatomically connected and were just a mass of bones belonging to those who had lived before, impossible to identify individually.

The division of many *Domus de Janas* into different chambers might be mistaken for chambers destined for different social groups. But Alberto Moravetti's research on the *Domus* of Littoslongos (Moravetti 1988), confirmed by other excavations (i.e. Mario Demartis and Vanna Canalis - 1985 - at Mesu e Montes), clearly demonstrates that new chambers were dug when the old

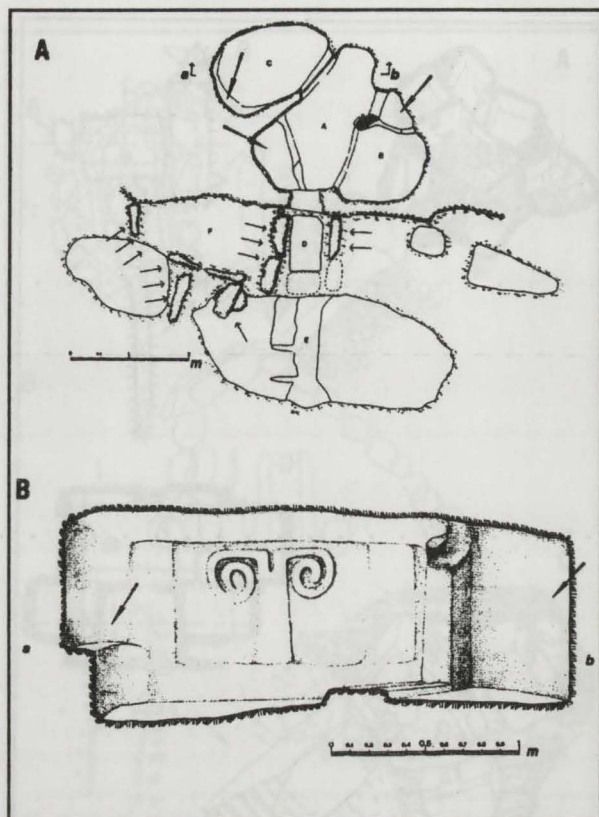


Figure 5. A, B. Tomba dell'Ariete, Sardinia. *Domus de Janas* with inside boundaries (small divisions and separated spaces) and remains of megalithic outside boundaries (dromos and a separated space). The tomb presents a beautiful relieve in the shape of rams horns, which gave the name to the tomb. (from Lo Schiavo 1982).

ones were full. A point of interest mentioned above is the presence of special rooms dedicated to cult practices. These temple-chambers or 'chapels' are located near the entrance of the tombs (see fig. 4.A + D), perhaps a space where the different worlds of the Dead and the Living could make contact?

2. Spatial Boundaries inside the World of the Dead

Exceptions to the general rule of collective burials exist in the dolmens and in artificial caves between the last phase of the Neolithic and the first metal-ages in the central Mediterranean area. In some cases, amidst collective burial rites, individual burials can be found. In the case of burial caves, it was possible to excavate some of these individual sepulchres and some architectonic elements of the dolmen indicate the same phenomenon.

Dolmen

In Sardinia, the dolmen rarely present internal boundaries. Unlike the examples described by Masset (1993), the presence of wooden boundaries in Sardinia is improbable. Only one, though important, example of a niche exists,

found inside one of the biggest and most famous of the Sardinian megalithic monuments, the Dolmen of Sa Coveccada (Atzeni 1966 p. 128-129) (fig. 2.B). The niche is suitable for an individual burial (photo 4) and the presence of another niche located outside the dolmen, clearly meant for cult offerings, makes it difficult to interpret the niche as anything other than a special place for a special corpse. In several Sardinian *Allées couvertes*, burial chambers divided into at least two different parts, like Perda Longa - Austis (see d'Arragon 1994 for previous bibliography) and Corte Noa - Laconi (fig. 1.C) (Atzeni 1987) can be found. These *Allées couvertes* date from the full Copper Age, while the dolmens in Sardinia, normally without inner boundaries, belong to the recent Neolithic period (see d'Arragon 1999a). The small dolmens of Apulia, probably dating back to the Copper Age, and the Maltese dolmens, still without certain chronological data, have no interior boundaries. This is definitely not due to the generally simple structure of these monuments, since some of the complex dolmens in Apulia, Malta and in Sardinia, with important traces of cult, like channels, cup-marks or perforated capstones and examples of Rock-art, present no interior boundaries either, like the dolmen Stabile (fig. 3.C + D) and the dolmen of Minervino in Apulia (see d'Arragon 1994 for description and previous bibliography) or the dolmen Crastu Coveccaddu of Torralba and the dolmen of Sindia in Sardinia (d'Arragon 1996 149ff). Therefore, I would presume, the undivided inner room was a conscious choice for collective burial.

On the other hand, internal boundaries are a normal feature in the *Allées couvertes* of Apulia (i.e. "Tavola dei Paladini" - Corato, fig. 3.B). These monuments belong to the late Copper Age/Ancient Bronze Age. The most complex of the Apulian dolmens is that of Giovinazzo (fig. 3.A). It is composed of a *tholos*-shaped circular chamber, probably used for rituals, and a long corridor divided by stone-boundaries (photo 6), covered by a *tumulus* (see Lo Porto 1967).

Similar boundaries can also be found elsewhere. Earlier, I cited the wooden boundaries found by Masset (1993), but other interesting examples of dolmens with boundaries inside the burial chambers are known. At Ruegen, for instance, in the necropolis of Lanken-Granitz, some dolmens have spatial subdivisions (photo 7). In addition, these have well defined exterior boundaries, like huge *tumuli*.

Funerary Caves

Traces of individual burials inside a collective sepulchre were first described by Antonio Taramelli in 1904/9 in the necropolis of Anghelu Ruju. Inside tombs XV, XXbis (fig. 4.D) and XXVI, some niches and a recess closed with a wooden cover were found. These contained individual burials, in one case with very rich grave goods, indicating a high-ranking person or, perhaps, a priest (Taramelli 1909, l. 477/478). In 1936, Doro Levi found two individual burial sites inside a collective sepulchre (tomb D, Levi 1936, p. 15f) in the same necropolis. One of the individual burials found by Taramelli was a cremation, amidst inhu-

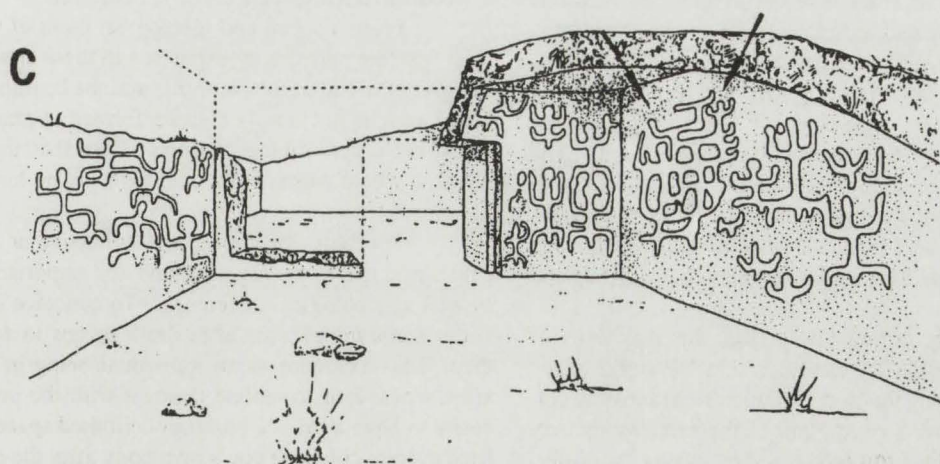
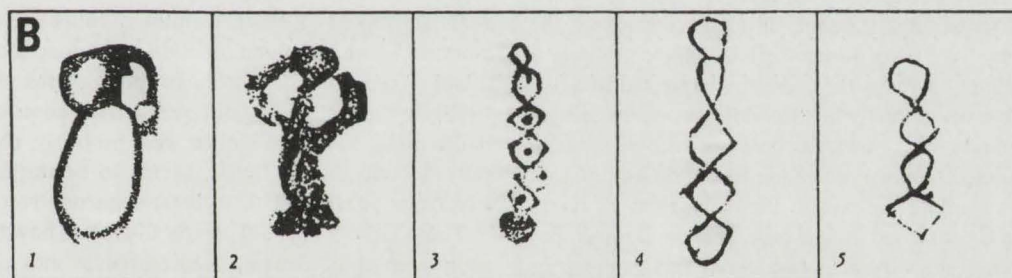
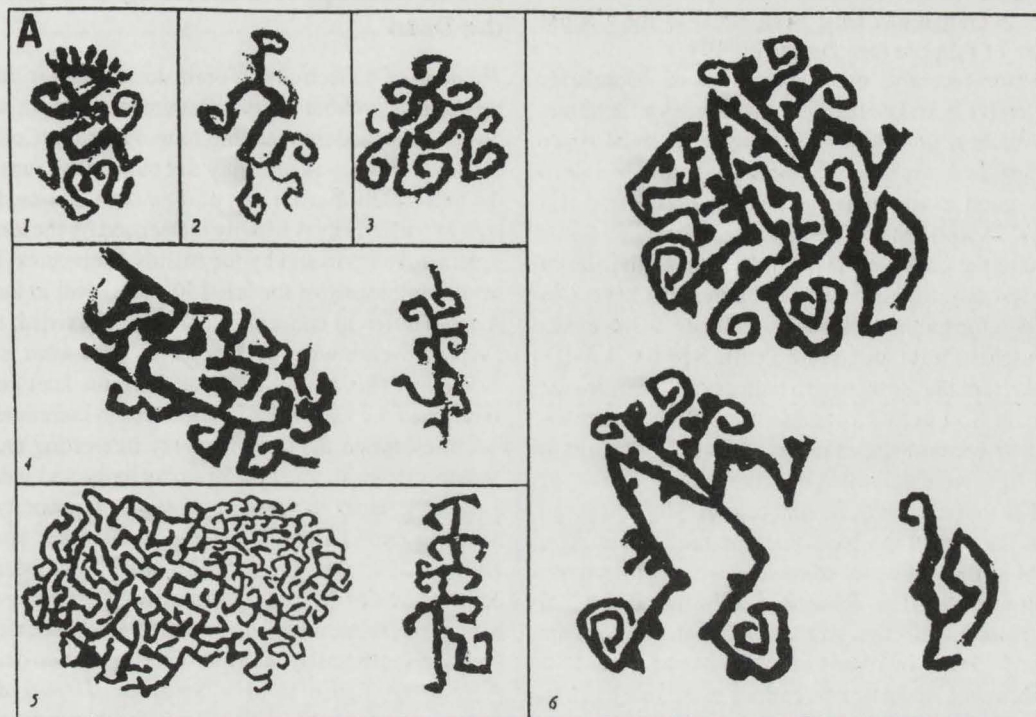


Figure 6. A. Grotta dei Cervi - Porto Badisco (Apulia). Painted antropomorphs. The single dancing figures evolves to a collective antropomorph figure where the single dancers are not any more identifiable (A.5). (from Graziosi 1980); B. Grotta dei Cervi - Porto Badisco (Apulia). Painted female antropomorphs, dancing with their arms over the head. These figures evolves to an abstract line of dancing figures without individual traits. (from Graziosi 1980); C. Tomba Branca - Moseddu, Sardinia. Incision of dancing antropomorphs. The figures, touching each other during the dancing scene, evolves to a collective figure where the single individuals are not any more identifiable. (from Contu 1966).

mations. Later, other cremations in individual niches were found. These cremations have been dated to the Copper Age culture of Filigosa (see Demartis 1998c).

More recently, other examples of boundaries inside collective burial caves were discovered in Sardinia, especially niches, low walls delimiting a reserved space and a kind of 'bed' capable of holding the corpse of a dead person. A good example is the *Domus dell'Ariete* (Lo Schiavo 1982) with outside boundaries (a megalithic *dromos* added to the cave) and inside boundaries (division of delimited spaces). Significant inside structures have also been found in the tombs of the necropolis of Su Crocefissu Mannu, Anghelu Ruju and Santu Pedru (see fig. 4.A-D). The burials from the Bonnannaro culture (Ancient Bronze Age) in tomb XVI in Su Crocefissu Mannu are particularly interesting because the cadavers, deposited later on in the Metal Age, were delimited by stone-circles.

The burial forms in the central Mediterranean Area from the end of the Neolithic and the Copper Age, indicate the strong influence of the concept of collectivity on the cult of death. The dolmens and the artificial burial caves are mainly collective sepulchres, separated from the external environment by means of spatial boundaries.

However, important exceptions to the rule exist. In some cases, in addition to the external boundaries, there are also spatial boundaries inside both caves and dolmens. In the case of the cremation in a *Domus de Janas* cited above, the deceased may have been from a different ethnic group or a different religion: perhaps the cadaver was treated in a different way because actually he was 'different' to the indigenous community. The other examples of niches, separate rooms, delimited sections of the tomb, etc. do not indicate differences regarding the rest of the depositions as far as funereal use is concerned. In one case, again in the necropolis of Anghelu Ruju, very rich grave goods and the presence of a flint dagger, interpreted as a ritual knife, may indicate an important personality or a priest (Taramelli 1909).

Based on an analysis of the architectonic elements that divide interior and exterior spaces of the tombs discussed here, two hypotheses may be proposed:

- 1) during late Prehistory (the end of the Neolithic, beginning of the Metal Ages) the world of the living and the world of the dead were considered two distinct worlds. The difference was sometimes emphasized by well-defined spatial delimitations, such as natural barriers (rocks, rock walls, etc.) and artificial ones (walls, *dromoi*, *tumuli*) which made contact between the two worlds possible, but difficult and regulated.

- 2) already during this period, the first signs of delimited space inside the tombs, within the world of the dead, exist, indicating the slow evolution from a mainly collective society (with a conception of the hereafter entirely void of individuality) towards a society where the differences between ethnic origins, status within a group and social worth, already existing at the end of the Neolithic in the world of the living, cross over into the world of the dead, signalling the consolidation of hierarchical structures and social differences.

3. The Concept of Collectivity and the Cult of the Dead

The idea of collectivity in prehistoric times is difficult to reconstruct without written documents and, in any case, difficult for modern mankind to understand. 'Collectivity' during prehistory is probably not simply the sum of all of the individuals that are part of it equally. Our modern concept of collectivity is heavily influenced by the ideas of the French revolution and by the mainly economical hypotheses of philosophy of the last 150 years. Still in the Middle Ages, a different concept of collectivity existed: the *sum cuique* 'to each what each deserves' and what is best for the group. This is very different from the later concept of equity and the ideology of collectives in communism with its 'to everyone the same' (a very interesting analysis of certain medieval concepts of collectivity and individuals, especially under the aspects of law and property, can be found in Grossi 1995 p. 75f and p. 195f, see also Grossi 1985 p. 235f and Grossi 1968 *infra*). Considering evidence provided by prehistoric art might be helpful for a better understanding of the concept of collectivity during prehistory, especially in the absence of written documents. A rock art figure from a Sardinian *Domus de Janas* (Tomba Branca – Moseddu, fig. 6.C), shows dance scenes with single figures (Contu 1965). In one scene the individuals are mixed together, forming a collective anthropomorphic figure, in which the individual is no longer identifiable (see for the sardinian petroglyphs d'Arragon 199b). In the completely different artistic context of Porto Badisco (fig. 6.A+B) a similar and, probably, chronologically not too distant figure, seems to be inspired by an analogous concept. The stylistic sequence reconstructed by Paolo Graziosi (1980) clearly illustrates how one single anthropomorphic dancing figure evolves into a tangle of dancing figures where single human figures are no longer recognizable. Instead, an inseparable collectivity united in a probably religious-cult dance is perceived.

From a social and ideological point of view, it is clear that the collectivity expressed in these artworks, dating from the end of the Neolithic and the beginning of the Metal ages, is not simply a group formed of many individuals, but a new subject, different from the singular elements, a whole whose individual parts are no longer identifiable.

Similarly, the choice of a collective or an individual burial is due to very profound and important cultural as well as ideological differences. To conceive of oneself without individual traits after death means to accept that there is no existence as an individual being in the hereafter, which is in complete contrast with the present-day desire to have a private burial in delimited spaces, or perhaps even to conserve one's own body after the end of natural life. This conception, in my opinion, might be the ideological base for collective burials where the single corpses are mixed up with those of the ancestors and the other members of the same clan, family or group. The presence of individual burial spaces inside the collective

space indicates, on the contrary, the beginning of an evolution towards a personal 'Ego', which continues to exist even after death.

I believe that the successive individualisation of collective graves, as is indicated by the above-mentioned architectonic boundaries, is due to a social and ideological process that finally led to the individual mortuary practices of the later periods. This process might be based on changes in economy: a collective based on agriculture and the raising of animals owes its material existence to collective working with collective dangers (drought, flood, famine) and the individual can exist only within the collective group. In a group based on metal-searching and working and on trade (also in groups of hunters of the Palaeolithic period) more space for the personal abilities of the single members of the group exists: single individuals can have a greater influence on the economic success and risks are not shared equally (danger during travel, war with the indigenous population of areas rich in metal minerals etc.).

The analysis of the grave-structure considered in this paper indicates an evolution from a strongly collective concept of burial during the Neolithic age to an individualisation of death during the early metal ages, with architectonic structures expressing this concept, such as limited areas inside collective tombs or individual burials. The lack of written documentation and the still very fragmentary archaeological evidence makes discussion highly hypothetical, but increased attention to the question of spatial division in funerary contexts might produce new data able to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

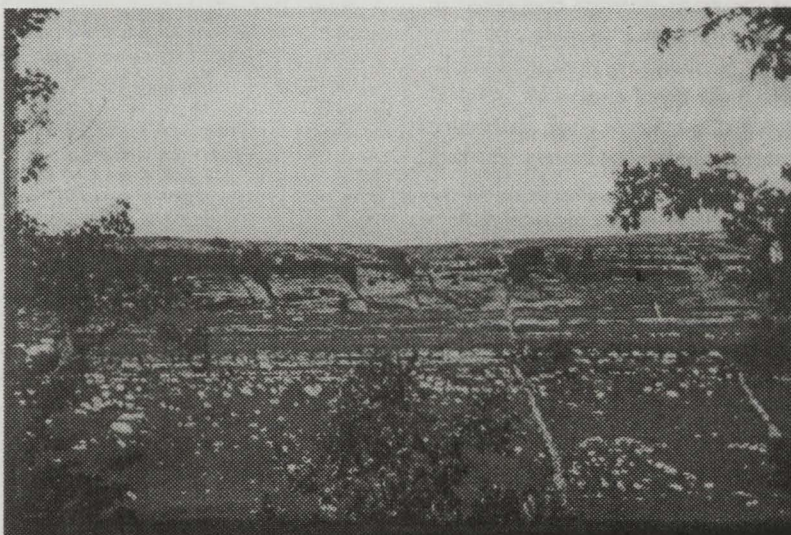
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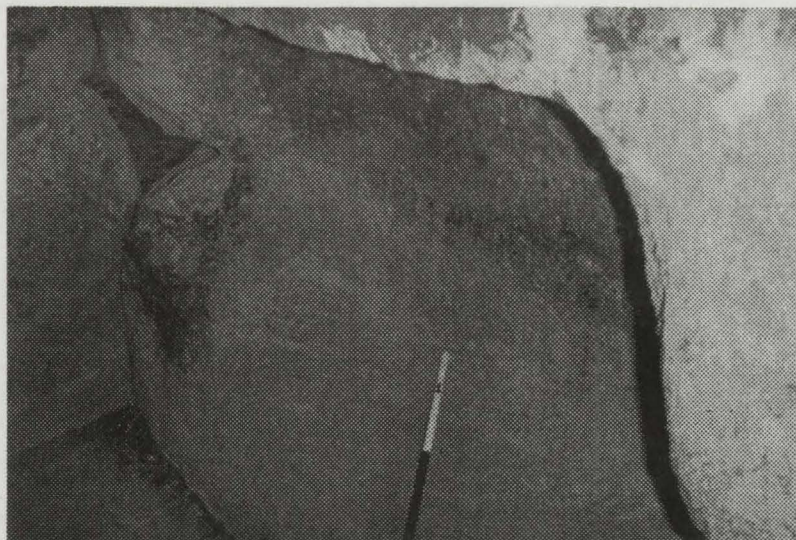


3.



Photos 1 à 3. 1. Dolmen of Montiju Coronas - Ozieri, Sardinia: megalithic structure for spatial division; 2. Necropolis of Montessu - Villaperuciu, Sardinia: the naturally protected and separated area of the necropolis; 3. Necropolis of Montessu - Villaperuciu, Sardinia: megalithic wall around the entrance of a Domus de Janas.

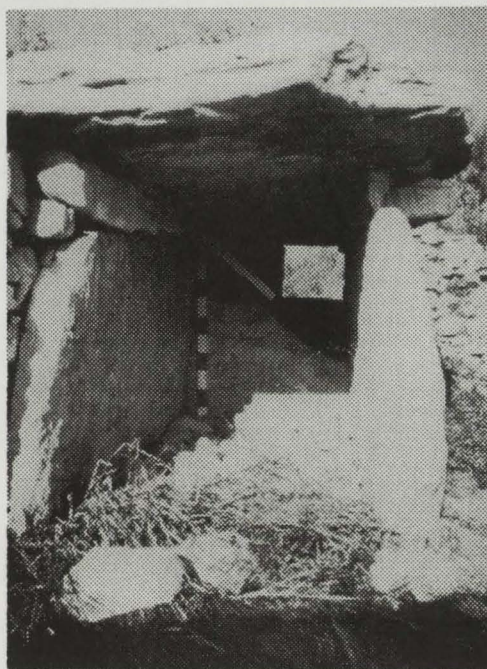
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Photos 4 à 6. 4. Dolmen Sa Covecadda - Mores, Sardinia: Niche inside the dolmen; 5. Necropolis of Mesu Enas - Abbasanta, Sardinia: megalithic dromos of the Domus de Janas; 6. Dolmen of Giovinazzo - Giovinazzo, Apulia: Inside Bondaries.

7.



Photo 7. Necropolis of Lanken-Granitz - Rügen, Germany: Dolmen with the - poorly conserved - small "bussola", a (symbolic?) entrance-space.