The protohistoric phase in Sardinia is noteworthy for the archaeological phenomenon that is usually called the ‘nuragic civilization’. As is well known, this civilization was characterized by significant architectural structures, such as the Nuraghi, collective tombs and cult buildings. When one considers that, at present, there are estimated to have been some 7,500 Nuraghi (Contu 1997, 476) (although other researchers believe that there may have been more than 8,000, Le Lannou 1941, 85; Contu 1994, 113), one can well understand why these structures have given their name to an epoch and a culture.

From the Middle Bronze Age, there was a single type of social and political organization in the whole of Sardinia, with a consequent homogeneity both in the principal architecture and in the production of cultural artefacts. Local variations from the norm only occurred for certain limited periods (Depalmas 2009a–c; Depalmas & Melis 2010).

Until a few decades ago, reconstruction of the development of the cultural phases of the Bronze and Iron Ages suffered from the lack of chronology. This was not only because of the scarcity of definite dates, but also because of the absence of greater knowledge about elements of the cultural material. Thus, it appeared for a long time that there was not enough cultural material available to help us to understand the development over time of the nuragic culture and the changes which must naturally have occurred over an arc of about a thousand years. It is, however, surprising that even in this century some of the international literature on the topic still cites out-of-date information, such as that Nuraghi continued to be built until the third century BC (Boardman 2008, 12)! The archaeological data show that beginning in the Middle Bronze Age, in about the seventeenth century BC, truncated conical towers of various complexity, or, in other words, Nuraghi, began to be constructed, as well as collective tombs – the so-called ‘Giant’s Tomb’ (Depalmas 2009a, 127–30) (Figs. 13.1, 13.3). During the long period of development of the nuragic age, or ‘La bella età dei Nuraghi’ as Giovanni Lilliu loved to define it (Lilliu 1988, 356), a large number of constructions of different classes, types and functions were built, using different techniques. Common denominators were the use of drystone and the prevalent monumental nature of the buildings, which can be seen both from their use of large stones and their remarkable height.

At a relatively early stage, in the Middle Bronze Age, there was widespread use of refined techniques for squaring off and smoothing the stone blocks (Depalmas 2009a, 129) (Fig. 13.3b, c). This helped to characterize the refined majestic aspects of first the funerary monuments and then later, in the Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages, the cult buildings. Though the oldest Nuraghe are the corridor Nuraghe (of which there are about 350), the most common type is the tholos Nuraghe, whose construction began towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age and continued into the Recent Bronze Age.

Villages with circular huts also began to be constructed in the Middle Bronze Age. These usually had wooden roofs, although on rare occasions they had stone ones. They had a perimeter wall which was between 0.8 m and 1.5 m tall. They were sometimes built round the Nuraghe, although they can often also be found without a central Nuraghe (Fig. 13.2b). This process of the development and spread of the characteristic features of the nuragic civilization can be found throughout Sardinia, with no significant major differences. Overall, the elements of cultural material and the classes of the monuments are the same all over the island. Nonetheless there are accentuated differences in the density of monuments (Depalmas & Melis 2010, 180–1). One must remember that there are great differences in the geology, geomorphology and
Chapter 13 Memory as a social force: transformation, innovation and refoundation in protohistoric Sardinia

Figure 13.1. The single tower tholos Nuraghe of Crabia – Paulilatino (a); an idealized section of a single tower two-storey tholos Nuraghe (b); plan of single tower Nuraghe Solene – Macomer (c); an idealized reconstruction (d) of complex four towers tholos Nuraghe and plan of Nuraghe Santa Barbara – Macomer (e) (after Tanda 1990; Moravetti 1998a).

Figure 13.2. Plan of village Su Nuraxi di Barumini (a); the Nuraghe village huts of Serra Orrìos-Dorgali (b) (after Mibac-Progetto Mirabilia; Moravetti 1998b).
soil profiles in different parts of Sardinia, and it seems that the nuragic people were in some ways connected to the physical characteristics of the particular areas.

As previously stated, it is now clear that the characteristics of the Nuraghi changed substantially in the Final Bronze Age (1150–950 bc). At present, there is discussion about whether ‘nuragic age’ should be also used for the period of the Final Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, i.e. after the time span when the Nuraghi were constructed. The persistent use of this definition – which has its origins in the classification proposed by Lilliu (1982, 12–13) – may, however, lead to misunderstandings on the part of those who ignore the changes in nuragic society, and therefore I believe that a chronological extension of the definition is wrong. It would be better to use for the Final Bronze and the Iron Ages the respective names of the Final Bronze Age of Sardinia and the Early Sardinian Iron Age. The progressive weakening of the settlements that used the Nuraghi as a reference point reflected a true change in the society, as can be seen from the simultaneous renovation and consolidation of the hut villages, including those that were far distant from the Nuraghe.

The houses of the Final Bronze Age and Early Iron Age were both circular and of other shapes, with entrances through a connecting central courtyard, so that the buildings formed a compound (Fig. 13.2). In the villages, there was also a large circular hut with seats around the interior, which is called the ‘meeting hut’ (Fig. 13.4.e). Sometimes there was also a peristyle wall around the village. In the Final Bronze Age, villages often developed around the Nuraghe, sometimes overlapping the ruined walls or invading the courtyard and reusing stones which had fallen from the upper parts of the towers, and thus creating living spaces on top of the ruins (Depalmas 2009c, 147–9). At Nuracraba–Oristano a phase of abandonment after the Nuraghe was occupied in the Iron Age (Sebis 2008, 493–4). There is increasing evidence of how strongly the new society which developed among the ‘ruins’ of the Nuraghe was firmly rooted in the past. Thus, one notes in the pottery artefacts that while there were numerous innovations in form and technology, there were also many which clearly belonged to the Recent Bronze Age, albeit with different proportions and of different types. These traditional forms can be found in different contexts which will be presented in turn: funerary, religious ceremonial and iconographic.

The funerary context

Religious sites during the phases of the ‘nuragic civilization’ (Middle and Recent Bronze Age) seem to coincide with those reserved for burial rituals and for ancestor worship, as is suggested by the erection of symbolic standing stones. The exedra of the tombs were the spaces where offerings were left and where the communal ceremonies took place. In common with the Nuraghi, new Giants’ Tombs were not constructed in the Final Bronze Age, but rather reused, and their continued use is well documented. Apart from significant burials in the tombs of their ancestors, another element of continuity can be seen in the construction of corridor tombs with rows of squared stones. These are either on the surface, as at Motrox ‘e Bois in Ussellus, half-buried as at Su Fraigu in San Sperate or covered by tumuli as at Brunku Espis in Arbus, following a custom which had already been partly adopted in the Recent Bronze Age (Depalmas 2009c, 148). Inside the tombs, there is also evidence of deposits of a material which was closely connected with the past. Flakes of obsidian, sometimes retouched and sometimes not, have been found at Motrox ‘e Bois and at Su Fraigu. Such artefacts have also been found in the oldest Giants’ Tombs, from the start of the Middle Bronze Age. Particularly indicative of the link with the past is the use of the artificial neolithic rock-cut tombs. These are found all over the island and are called ‘domus de janas’.

Even during the initial phase of the nuragic period, when the first Giants’ Tombs were constructed, these hypogeae continued to be used as tombs, as well as excavated following new plans and with significant hybrid additions. An example of this can be found in the province of Sassari, where a stele is carved on the facade of the rocks of the entrance (Melis 2010) (Fig. 13.3a). Later, there is evidence of other links with the past. One significant example of this can be seen in Sedilo. Here, in the partly ruined cell of the rock-cut...
tomb 2 of Iloi-Ispiluncas, a small stone cist was constructed between the Final Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. Inside the cist, there was a carinated bowl with burnt vegetal remains. The most plausible explanation for this seems to be that it was part of a ritual connected with the burial of the ancestors of one of the groups (or one part of a group) of the area’s inhabitants, perhaps from the village of Iloi which lies above it (Depalmas 2000, 23, 26, 73, 185).

The religious and ceremonial context

The strong uniformity of the post-nuragic culture (i.e. Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages), despite its wide area of coverage throughout the island and the new modes of settlement of the population, suggests that there were centres of political and religious coordination. These may have been linked with large cult complexes, which by this interpretation are also defined as federal sites (Lilliu 1982, 175–6). Examples of these are Gremanu in Forni, Sa Sedda ‘e Sos Carros in Oliena, and Funtana Coberta in Ballao. The changes made in the Late Bronze Age seem to indicate that the full development of the sanctuaries began in the Final Bronze Age and continued particularly into the Early Iron Age (Depalmas 2009c, 148; Ialongo 2010, 349).

In the new structuring of the landscape, where villages occupied the most important role, communal cult structures seem to have become of particular importance (Depalmas 2005a, 41). These took the form of sacred wells (Fig. 13.4b), springs (Fig. 13.4a), rectangular structures such as ‘megaron temples’, and structures with right angled or circular walls, although places dedicated to cult have also been found inside the villages and Nuraghi. Dwellings grew up around the temples, and these seem either to have been of a temporary nature or at least to have had close links with the celebration of the communal festivities.

In the Middle and Recent Bronze Ages, the sacred architecture did not appear to be well defined, even though there are notable finds from this period of rectangular buildings which may be identified – albeit with caution – as cult structures (such as megaron temples), and also of sacred springs and wells. A constant element is the presence of older finds – dating at least from the Recent Bronze Age – in and around the cult complexes and sanctuaries (Ialongo 2010, 349). In some cases – such as the well temple of Cuccuru Arrius – there is some doubt as to whether the older material which was found near to the building from the Final Bronze or Early Iron Age was really part of an earlier cult building from the Recent Bronze Age (Sebis 1982). In many other cases, finds of older ceramic fragments may be the result of the area being used before the building was constructed. The position of the sacred monumental complexes could have been determined by the pre-existent holiness of the topos, which in many cases were found near springs or water sources. It would, indeed, be too simple to argue that the springs were considered places suitable for cult ceremonies only from the Final Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, when the temples were constructed.

Stone models of Nuraghe are often found inside the sacred temples of the so-called ‘megaron temples’ and also in the circular structures with perimeter benches, as well as in other spaces used for communal and ceremonial activities (Fig. 13.4e, f). These stone models may depict either simple Nuraghe or complex ones, with four peripheral towers added, ending with a small towerng cupola and a protruding balcony that forms a terrace (Webster 1996, 190, fig. 79) (Fig. 13.5 b). These models are of particular importance for archaeologists as no surviving Nuraghe have complete upper storeys. Sometimes the model is at the centre of a pedestal in the centre of the complex, and this strongly indicates how this element was the fulcrum of, and the reason for, the building where it was found (Fig. 13.4e). In other cases, the model Nuraghe form part of functional objects, such as basins which contained liquids, or altars (Fig. 13.4c, d).

Apart from similar small bronze models, the towers of the Nuraghe are also reproduced as a logo or icon in other bronze figurines, in boats (on the handrails, the masts and the fore peaks) (Fig. 13.5f), on the buttons of clothes (as in Abini, Palmavera and Furtet) or also on utensils of different materials such as the soapstone smoothing tool found at Nuraghe Santu Antine in Torralba (Contu 1997, tav. CXLVII). The Nuraghi are also used to decorate clay objects such as standing lanterns or cylindrical vases and amphoras (Leonelli 2005, 51, 60–3, 117–21). These cult objects in communal spaces are clearly connected to the celebratory and ritualistic practices, and show that at the period after to their building one, the Nuraghe, albeit no longer under active construction, were large structures with great importance as totems of identity, and testimony to the great work achieved by the ancestors of the existing population.

The importance of the images is clear from their recurrent association with furnishings and functional cult elements such as vases, altars and lamps. They are an indication of the primary role assumed by the elite in managing and controlling the religious and cult environment. One example, made of sandy limestone, was found inside a hoard in the back of the temple of S’Arca ‘e Is Forros in Villagrande Strisaili. It was of medium size and seems to have been used for placing offerings, as the upper part had seven elliptical holes.
which contained traces of lead, which are signs that they were used for inserting offerings (Fadda 2011).

The Nuragic are the most evident elements of the built environment, and allude to the grandeur of the past, which the new society chose to exalt to reinforce the power of the dominant group and to legitimate their presence in the area, in the wake of past glories. The repetitive and excessive use of the representations is clear testimony to the centrality which the exaltation and cult of the Nuraghe had assumed for the people of the Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages. They had become a fundamental part of their own identity.

**Iconographic information**

The bronze figurines are clear signs of how much the elite celebrated their own power. As is well known, these are products of high artistic and historical value, and they reproduce, in miniature, women, men, animals and objects of ordinary life (Lilliu 1966). Attention is undoubtedly focused on human figures and they provide a detailed iconographic archive of the types, roles, clothing and attitudes of the society that the Sardinian craftsmen wished to represent. They were presumably produced precisely for use as offerings or as part of the cult.

The offerings of bronze figures are almost exclusively found in cult buildings, although some are found as burial offerings in buildings used for community purposes.

The most important finds are from near sacred springs and wells, and were placed inside sacred areas, usually without surrounding walls, connected to a meeting place with one or more fences, and to a settlement. In general, the offerings are found inside buildings, thus at the bottom of wells or inside the stone basins of the springs, or otherwise left in a hoard in a hoard dug out of the earth inside the perimeter wall which contained traces of lead, which are signs that they were used for inserting offerings (Fadda 2011).

The fighters were found in association with the stone models of sometimes single tower but usually complex Nuraghi, some thirteen of which have been reconstructed but many of which are still in fragments (Fig. 13.5a). The designs follow the same scheme as those of the bronze figures and seem to be intended to copy almost precisely the same iconography.

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One may note that the typical dress was probably used for ceremonial events. An example of this is the long horns on the helmets of the archers, which were probably parade helmets. The particularly elaborate armour, which would probably have been of little practical use on the battlefield, employed in typically ritualistic contexts, emphasizes the symbolic importance of the images. One must not forget in this context Mont’e Prama in Cabras which was clearly a celebration of the power and force of the elite. It consists of 27 sandstone figures which are more than 2.5 m high (lastly Minoia & Usai 2011; Bedini, Tronchetti, Ugas & Zucca 2012). The group consists of archers and boxers (Fig. 13.5a). The designs follow the same scheme as those of the bronze figures and seem to be intended to copy almost precisely the same iconography.

The warriors were found in association with the stone models of sometimes single tower but usually complex Nuraghi, some thirteen of which have been reconstructed but many of which are still in fragments (Fig. 13.5b). They seem to have been designed to convey an explicit message of the connections between the two. Lilliu proposed an overall interpretation of all the memorial monuments as a kind of Sardinian saga, in which the human sculptures would have been a representation of heroic godlike ancestors from the past, in a pan-Sardinian ‘national’ sanctuary: in other words using the language of sculpture to give the ancestor theme a sacred, epic and heroic dimension (Lilliu 1982, 201–2; 1988, 549). The images of the boxers have been seen as related to the athletes who took part in games connected to the cult or to burials, from a perspective which saw the antagonistic attitudes of the boxers as being closely related to religious action. The commissioners of Mont’e Prama might have been members of a family or group of aristocratic families, who alluded to their ethnic and cultural importance through the particular arrangement of the necropolis, the presence of symbols (the models

**Figure 13.5. Stone statue of boxer (a) and complex Nuraghe model (b) from Mont’e Prama; bronze female figure from Santa Vittoria-Serru (c); stool – linteobalunus from Ponte Ratto – Caralupu (Vulci) (d); bronze warrior from Senori (e); bronze boat model from Pipitza – Orroli (f) (after Minoia & Usai 2011; Lilliu 1986; Ageri et al. 1981; Depalmas 2005).**
of Nuraghi), the ostentatious exaltation of religiosity and the desire of the ‘Minotaurus’-type bull, which is incorrectly described as half man and half bull, may also belong to the same mythical and fantastic world. The figure has the head and raised arms of a man and an animal’s body with four hooves and a curved tail. The interpretation of the figure as being that of a man dressed in a ritual animal costume would not be in conflict with other archaeological finds which have indicated that the Nuragic society included common magical and religious heritage (Depalmas 2012, 5).

It is worth recalling that there are strong links to the prehistoric pictorial traditions of Sardinia in these images of men combined with animals and especially bulls. Figures with horns (presumably shamans) are also found in images from the Neolithic (Melis 1998) and Chalcolithic period. It has been suggested that by masquerading as animals in a ritual context, the men were mystically and momentarily transformed into animals and they assumed their powers, thus chang-
ing the existing reality (Aldhouse-Green 2004, 168–9).

If the masquerade had a totemic value for the clan, the ritual of transformation may have been con-nected to the elaboration of a possible ‘foundation myth’ for the group. The specific masquerade rituals and ceremonies could have formed part of the cult practices which, without doubt, took place in the temples and sanctuaries. These were the places in which the bronzes were kept and where they were left. It is significant that echoes of the ritual practices in which men dress as animals can still be found in various masquerades in the folklore of Sardinia such as in the Merdules of Ottana, the Mamuthones of Ossi and the Coriollos of Neoni.

The emphasis on mythological episodes linked to a common past may have been part of the ideol-ogy of the dominant group, who, by recounting the efforts and history of their ancestors, promoted their own prestige and strengthened the whole commu-nity. Our interpretations are limited by the lack of data, but images like that of the figure from Cann’è Fadosu (Ugas 1985, 222, n.15), where a man is shown climbing a Nuraghe, may represent an episode from a battle. Other protagonists in the mythological narrative may be the monkey on the Golgo boat or the snakes on both the bronzes (in the bestiary of the Vetulonia boat) (Depalmas 2005b, 141) and in the decorations on both the bronzes (in the bestiary of the Vetulonia boat) (Depalmas 2005b, 141) and in the decorations of the nuragic society. Sardinian protohistoric culture included a complex magical and religious heritage (Depalmas 2012, 5).

The nuragic sculptures at first did not represent concrete forms which may suggest that originally this was taboo, but gradually they moved towards realistic representations, although this did not mean eliminating their associated symbolic connections. This corresponded with profound changes in the wealth of the community. One can show that there was a degree of manipulation of the collective reality at the level of the imagination. This was done through the proposing or imposing of symbols characteristic of the strong ideology and the predominant mentality of the hegemonic group.

The significance of these images, which were cult objects in the communal meeting places, can clearly be connected to the celebratory and ritual practices. They are also evidence that, when the properly nuragic period finished, the towers, while no longer being built, had become de-functionalized and raised to the level of a totem of identity, and treated as witness of the great work achieved on the island by the ancestors of the community.

In this sense the Nuraghi, and the characteristic built landscape, assumed the role of being the medium through which cultural memory operated, embodying a kind of physical memorial, a space for commemo-
ration. This was celebrated through reproducing the Nuraghi precisely or schematically in a way which can be compared to logos or icones (as semata).

The sanctuaries and the meetings of the tribes of the area must have been the moments when the legends and the stories of their ancestors were recounted. In this context, the cult, the offering of evocative votive figures, the ceremonies, the mythical masquerades and the ritual celebrations of a complex society such as that of Sardinia in the Final Bronze and Early Iron Ages, can all be seen as part of the reorganization and the refoundation of the identity of the community based of the symbolic power on the nuragic towers.