

**PRESS RELEASE ▼**

# UNLOCKING A DILEMMA

LONG-TERM MANAGEMENT ISSUES AT SA PALA LARGA, SARDINIA

The flooded chamber of Sa Pala Larga tomb No. 3, note the irreparable damage  
Photo © G. Nash

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The wild Sardinian landscape as seen from the Sa Pala Larga necropolis

### Timeline

Within the western Mediterranean there is a number of Neolithic core areas, each possessing a distinct burial-ritual monument tradition. Distinctiveness is usually associated with particular architectural traits or landscape position in which the monument stands; exemplified none more so than the *Tomba della scacchiera*, a recently excavated rock-cut burial-ritual monument in north-western Sardinia. Although rock-cut tombs are relatively common in Sardinia, this monument has an altogether unique carved and painted rock-art heritage and is now at the centre of controversy.

In early 2010 the authors reported on the recent history of the *Tomba della scacchiera*. This monument, one of a number of Necropolis sites to have been officially excavated within the uplands of North-west Sardinia revealed by chance a wealth of painted and engraved art that graced its walls and ceiling. The importance of this site was initially brought to the world's attention by unofficial photographs taken by a neighbouring landowner, Antonello Porcu who has a keen interest in prehistory. This richly-decorated monument, Neolithic in date is arguably equal in quality and survival to the painted frescos found within the subterranean rooms of the Hypogeum of Hal-Saflieni in Malta. Was it not for the tenacity of Antonello Porcu, the international research community would not have had the privilege to witness these remarkable frescos. Following excavation the site was sealed and concealed from the public and researchers alike. Based on a site visit in October this year by an international team of specialists it was clear that certain basic protocols enshrined into the Valetta Convention have been violated (see below). Furthermore, nothing had been considered for the long-term conservation of this and other nearby Neolithic burial-ritual sites, including Tomb No. 3 (Tomb of the Spirals) at the Necropolis of Sa Pala Larga which was in an advanced state of deterioration.

### A very unique monumentality

The *Tomba della scacchiera* was probably in use, acting as a repository for its elite dead during the Ozieri period (c. 3000 BCE); at the same time when burial-ritual monument building in Iberia, Brittany and North-western Europe was at its zenith. The builders and users of monuments such as the *Tomba della scacchiera* sculptured bass-relief ornamental beams, doorways, thresholds and trusses, most likely simulating the timber-framing elements of a house for the living. The *Tomba della scacchiera*, so-named after the discoverers recorded an altogether unique dark blue and white chequer design across the ceiling, comprised a rock-cut façade and an entrance that led to a rock-cut passage and main chamber with three side cells beyond. The monument appears to have been deliberately chosen for its landscape vista; having exten-

sive views across several valleys and a vast volcanic-moulded plain to the west. The walls are painted in vibrant red haematite with curvilinear and rectilinear motifs including a series of seven interconnecting spirals. These particular symbols are usually carved rather than painted and found across most of Mediterranean and Atlantic Europe. In addition to these motifs are a set of sculpted bull heads that occupy the wall and door elements of the main chamber. The presence of such iconography suggests a ritual association between mausoleum and bovine worship.

### Addressing long-term conservation and heritage issues

Following reports made by the authors within several specialist archaeological journals and posted on the *Stone Pages* and *Past Horizons* websites, the authors visited the site and other nearby monuments in September 2010 including the *Tomba delle Spirali* (Tomb of the Spirals) which stands approximately 60m away (one of seven monuments belonging to the Necropolis of Sa Pala Larga). This rock-cut monument following excavation had the entrances to both monuments blocked with large stones and then covered with a film of concrete padding in order to conceal their whereabouts. Prior to closing the entrance of the *Tomba della scacchiera*, the Bonorva Municipality received funding to employ an archaeologist to survey and excavate the monument. The archaeologist, appointed by the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici di Sassari e Nuoro* (a local body of the Italian Ministry for Heritage) undertook a four-month excavation/survey programme. The excavation revealed a façade and entrance that led to a rock-cut passage and chamber beyond. The ceiling of the main chamber, standing c. 1.70m above the floor appears to replicate the structural elements of a (carved) pitched roof. Carved from the rock are a series of pseudo-structural carved beams.



The main chamber is divided into several spaces, separated by rock-cut door jambs, whilst the chamber side walls replicate the internal elevation of a timber-framed building, probably a dwelling.

In addition to in-filling the entrance, the heritage authorities had also covered most of the outside surface of the tomb area with a concrete skin, further destroying the potential external context of the site. According to officials, this *act of conservation* was undertaken in order to protect the tomb from looters and vandalism<sup>1</sup>. However, in contradiction a report on the Sa Pala Larga group published in 1997 claimed that the project formed a wider policy of promoting cultural heritage.

### Conservation legalities

Although a report on the *Tomba della scacchiera* has yet to be issued, we are reassured that the excavation was undertaken to the highest standards. However, sealing a monument with such an important artistic repertoire is unethical and restrictive and as a result we urge the Sardinian *Soprintendenza* to read, digest and acknowledge international protocol such as the Valetta Convention (1992)<sup>2</sup>, of which Italy is a signatory. The Treaty of 1992 aims to protect:

*The European archaeological heritage as a source of European collective memory and as an instrument for historical and scientific study. All remains and objects and any other traces of humankind from past times are considered elements of the archaeological heritage. The notion of archaeological heritage includes structures, constructions, groups of buildings, developed sites, moveable objects, monuments of other kinds as well as their context, whether situated on land or under water.*

Within the Treaty are specific details concerning procedures, protocols and the dissemination of information to academic, professional and public audiences in order to facilitate a common understanding of the past. Furthermore, by excavating the *Tomba della scacchiera* site without considering its long-term future and to deny access for research and education contravenes Articles 7, 8 and 9 of the Valetta Convention (see box at the end of this article). In our view, the monument is of immense importance to the academic community as well as to the people of Sardinia. The painted motifs and the bas-relief architectural elements are equal to those within the Hypogeum of Hal-Saflieni, in Malta. By sealing a monument such as this only fuels the inquisitive mind of the potential looter and vandal (Note, the chambers have been cleared of archaeological debris). There are numerous other ways of protecting this most important heritage asset; uppermost is education. Further, by profiling the site, the local Municipality could consider this and other neighbouring burial-ritual monuments important heritage assets that could with sensitive marketing be as successful as the nearby Sant' Andrea Priu Necropolis.

### What next?

Based on what was observed and recorded at other nearby rock-cut tombs, a long-term strategy of conservation and monitoring needs to be implemented. Observations made by the team at the nearby Sa Pala Larga No. 3 site noted that the chambers were flooded, probably up to 0.10m deep in stag-



Three beautiful spirals are carved on one side of the entrance to the Sa Pala Larga No. 3 tomb's inner chamber (photo © G.Nash)

nant water. Standing water can have adverse affects on this most fragile of archaeological resources. Active water percolation, absorbed upwards through sedimentary rock will cause long-term damage that include:

- ▶ [laminated] flaking of the natural bedrock and worked areas;
- ▶ Moistening and weakening of any worked surfaces;
- ▶ Severely damaging/destroying any fragile painted surfaces;
- ▶ Adjust the microclimatic conditions within the chamber, establishing aggressive algae colonies; and
- ▶ Chemical reaction between [corrosive] concrete (coming into contact with water) and limestone.

In order to address these and other issues we urge the *Soprintendenza* to consider the commissioning of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP). This document will outline monument context in relation to other monuments within the vicinity; collate all the available archaeological information about the site (including a summary of the report); address the short, medium and long-term conservation issues and consider its heritage value in terms of cultural heritage tourism.

It is imperative to point out to Sardinia's *Soprintendenza* (and any other national governmental heritage body) that no one body has an exclusive right to the past. The *Tomba della scacchiera* is unparalleled and is potentially an extremely im-

<sup>1</sup> The only official news from the *Soprintendenza* about this discovery has been presented on a short speech during the XLIV Riunione Scientifica dell'Istituto Italiano di Preistoria e Protostoria - La preistoria e la protostoria della Sardegna (Cagliari 27 November 2009): L. Usai, F. Sartor, La tomba N° 7 della necropoli di Sa Pala Larga (Bonorva - SS) See here: [http://www.iipp.it/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/XLIVRS\\_RS\\_-\\_programma1.pdf](http://www.iipp.it/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/XLIVRS_RS_-_programma1.pdf) Almost one year on, the World awaits a published report.

<sup>2</sup> Officially known as *The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage*



14 years after the first excavation, this is the state of conservation of the Sa Pala Larga tombs (photos © G.Nash)

portant heritage asset. During our visit to Sardinia we have witnessed the short-term solutions following excavation with the closing and concealing of the Sa Pala Larga No. 3 monument. According to its excavators, this rock-cut monument - located on an east-west ridge - was difficult to access. There was partial collapse of a wall section and the ceiling. The tomb contained rare bas-relief images and engravings including a bull head with extended bas-relief horns that were carved into the ceiling. Flanking either side of this carved beast were two vertical rows of four spirals and two symmetrical carved bands. Recorded elsewhere are traces of red ochre on the walls of the chamber. It is clear that the conservation solution applied to this and other nearby monuments has been detrimental.

#### In summary

The *Tomba della scacchiera* constitutes an important archaeological and cultural heritage resource that is of international importance, and the same can be said for its neighbouring monuments. Whilst we applaud the authorities for investing money into the excavation and survey of this monument, it is of great concern that - as far as we are aware - no rock art specialist has been invited to inspect the artistic repertoire to verify its significance and to advise upon the long-term conserva-

tion of the site. In addition, it is of great concern that after spending four months excavating the *Tomba della scacchiera* (a length of time which suggests a professional exercise was undertaken) once the excavation was complete, the site was very crudely covered with a concrete skin. As we have witnessed at the neighbouring *Tomba delle Spirali* the rotting timber planks covered with a layer of fibrous membrane and then sealed with concrete is visual proof that this type of conservation has had detrimental effects on the long-term protection of this and probably other monuments within the region. Not only is such a way of 'sealing' the site going to potentially cause irreparable damage to the archaeology and rock-art, it is more importantly, a severe health and safety hazard for members of the public. Whilst we appreciate that the site is on 'private' property, the site is poorly fenced off, there are no signs to inform individuals that the site is private or to warn them that what is within the site is highly dangerous. The question has to be asked, was it wise to rush to excavate this site when (a) the site was not under any immediate threat from development and (b) without first having considered the long-term future conservation and management of the monument once the excavation was complete? The indigent way in which this site has been 'sealed' demonstrates that little thought has been given to the long-term future of this site.

### ARTICLES FROM THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON THE PROTECTION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE (otherwise known as the Valetta Convention, ratified in 1992; enforced by EU States in 1999)

#### Article 7

For the purpose of facilitating the study of, and dissemination of knowledge about, archaeological discoveries, each Party undertakes:

- ▶ to make or bring up to date surveys, inventories and maps of archaeological sites in the areas within its jurisdiction; and
- ▶ to take all practical measures to ensure the drafting, following archaeological operations, of a publishable scientific summary record before the necessary comprehensive publication of specialised studies.

#### Article 8

Each Party undertakes:

- ▶ to facilitate the national and international exchange of elements of the archaeological heritage for professional scientific purposes while taking appropriate steps to ensure that such circulation in no way prejudices the cultural and scientific value of those elements;
- ▶ to promote the pooling of information on archaeological research and excavations in progress and to contribute to the organisation of international research programmes.
- ▶ Promotion of public awareness.

#### Article 9

Each Party undertakes:

- ▶ to conduct educational actions with a view to rousing and developing an awareness in public opinion of the value of the archaeological heritage for understanding the past and of the threats to this heritage; and
- ▶ to promote public access to important elements of its archaeological heritage, especially sites, and encourage the display to the public of suitable selections of archaeological objects.