Introduction

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It all began in 1974, when fragments of ancient sculptures turned up in a field in western Sardinia. A whole world came to light; dozens of anthropomorphic stone sculptures representing archers, warriors, and boxers, alongside models of nuraghi (the prehistoric conical towers of Sardinia) as well as numerous sacred stones known as baetyls. Since then, several excavation campaigns have been done, the digging area has expanded, and, little by little, a unique and intriguing history is being revealed to the world here at Mont’e Prama (the “hill of palm trees,” in the local language). Meanwhile, the sculptures have been meticulously reassembled by Italian conservators who are global leaders in noninvasive diagnostic techniques and fully reversible treatments that do not alter the objects.

The giant statues—some as tall as 7 feet (2 meters)—and the individual tombs throughout this monumental necropolis make Mont’e Prama uniquely rich in its detailed representation of a culture’s values and traditions. At this sanctuary necropolis, high-ranking young men were honored in the same way as the heroes of the past. Military, political, and religious values were conveyed in this sacred space, which symbolized the identity of the society and granted a powerful sense of belonging.

Mont’e Prama is a remarkable example of how islands and insularity shaped the world in ancient times. It gives us the opportunity to delve into the beliefs, values, and practices of a community that lived in the
Mediterranean basin in the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, a period of transition marked by cultural challenges and social developments.

In this volume—commissioned by the International Observatory for Cultural Heritage, conceived within Columbia University’s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies—are essays by distinguished scholars in the field of Sardinian and Mediterranean archaeology, experts in restoration and conservation, and a lawyer battling the illicit trafficking of artworks. The book, along with the online digital exhibition that preceded it, are the first initiatives in a multiyear program developed with a grant from Italy’s Autonomous Region of Sardinia and designed to highlight Sardinia’s cultural heritage.

THE DISCOVERY AND THE EXCAVATIONS

From that first storybook moment in 1974—when farmers unearthed a large anthropomorphic stone head and some archaeological fragments on the Sinis Peninsula, which juts out from the southwestern coastline of Sardinia—Mont’e Prama has seen several excavation campaigns across a widening site.

The Archaeological Superintendency based in nearby Cagliari launched the first dig in 1975, under the direction of archaeologist Alessandro Bedini; this was followed by a series of digs by other distinguished scholars and archaeologists. These yielded a wealth of items: countless heads, arms, legs, and torsos. Along with the giant human figures were found models of baetyls and nuraghi, as well as the base of a temple; within just a few years, dozens of single pit graves had come to light, leading to the determination that a necropolis had been created here in the early period and had been used for many centuries.

A new phase began in the 2000s, when thousands of fragments were transferred to the Conservation and Restoration Center in the city of Sassari, and a team set to work skillfully reassembling the items. Because they were made of a friable limestone, the items were difficult to treat: the experts labored to find the most appropriate restoration methods for this delicate material.

As some teams worked in the laboratory, others sought to understand where the statues were originally placed, and why and how they were later destroyed. Fragments of a single sculpture have been found at quite distant locations. Archaeological stratigraphy showed that the statues were shattered
long ago—perhaps they fell on their own, or perhaps they were deliber-
ately destroyed and deposited atop and around the tombs, in which case,
by whom and why? These are the questions posed by Alessandro Usai, the
archaeologist of the Superintendence of Cagliari and Oristano, who has
been directing the research on the site for nearly a decade.

Like much of Sardinia, the Sinis Peninsula is a challenging area because
it is fragile and protected. The excavation and study teams have always
respected the environment and been careful to not disturb its exceptional
vegetation and fauna—they conduct their work so as to preserve the eco-
logical balance of the place. The archaeologists and all the institutions par-
ticipating in the research also strive to engage the present-day neighbors of
Mont’e Prama, leading to a constructive contribution that comes from the
involvement of local communities in the larger framework of local, national,
and international actors whose common goal is the preservation, study, and
enhancement of this invaluable cultural heritage.

THIS BOOK IN CONTEXT AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN NEW YORK CITY

This book is born of a commitment to the understanding of cultural trans-
mition and the urgent need to preserve all that is meaningful in culture.
The concept of heritage is extensive and is frequently modified, reinter-
preted, and updated; nonetheless, cultural heritage is widely considered a
common ground on which a community’s identity is based. The social fab-
ric and the surrounding landscape are also part of cultural heritage.

This volume—like the online digital exhibition that opened in spring
2022 (montepramaexhibition.italianacademy.columbia.edu)—is part of a
multiyear program sponsored by the Autonomous Region of Sardinia,
which includes a number of projects highlighting Sardinia’s cultural her-
itage, with a particular emphasis on archaeology. This entire program is
being developed under the umbrella of the International Observatory for
Cultural Heritage.

Conceived in 2016 at the Italian Academy as it marked its twenty-fifth
year as a Columbia center for advanced study, the International Obser-
vatory is dedicated to all issues relating to the survival, protection, and
conservation of cultural heritage. It is historical, practical, and theoretical. It sponsors and encourages research into monuments, artifacts, practices, and traditions. It records losses and destruction of international cultural heritage in all media and across all boundaries and conducts research on treasures at risk—whether from age or location, natural disaster, urban development, conflict, war, or other perils. It is also social, in that it seeks to understand the meaning and value of monuments and objects not only to humanity but also in their local contexts. And it is timely, as it spotlights the political uses and abuses of heritage sites and monuments as well as the exchange, transport, and trafficking of material culture.

Located on the Columbia campus and drawing in part from the expertise of the university’s scholars, the observatory has shaped this book and its exhibition so as to introduce the university community (and New York City at large) to the importance of Sardinia in Mediterranean culture. An island marked by cultural contact with outsiders—peaceful contacts as well as invasions by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Vandals, and Arabs, and later by Spain and Austria—Sardinia has unknown treasures that merit more study in the United States.

THE ESSAYS

This volume takes the reader through details of the various discoveries at Mont’e Prama, the development of research on the site and its artifacts, the landscape and context, and the meticulous restoration of the items. It ends with a word about the illicit trafficking of Sardinian cultural property.

The iconographies of Mont’e Prama’s statuary were established in 1977 by Giovanni Lilliu, the renowned archaeologist and expert on Nuragic civilization, and were confirmed following the restoration of the sculptures. In chapter 1, Raimondo Zucca, a prominent figure in the field of scientific excavations, emphasizes that understanding Mont’e Prama requires clarifying the meaning of the unarmed statues found at the site. Furthermore, toward the end of his chapter, Zucca raises an array of questions: Who was buried in these slab tombs? How did they die? Were they from one single Sardinian lineage? He notes that DNA research now underway may shed light on these issues.
The illuminating chapter by Emerenziana Usai follows. As she directed several excavations at the site starting in the 1970s, she knows every detail of the archaeological work, and thus her essay walks us through the decades of remarkable discoveries by Alessandro Bedini and Giovanni Ugas, by herself, and—in recent months—by Maura Picciau and Alessandro Usai. In this essential chapter can be found every step of the excavation and analysis of the site.

The third essay is a posthumous piece written by the late Guido Clemente for this project at Columbia: Clemente provided an overview of Sardinia’s historical and social context at the time when the limestone statues of Mont’e Prama were created. He noted that this site was strategically located along the only route between the sea and the rich mineral deposits inland: the builders had precise goals in mind. They may have blended historical realities with memories of their revered ancestors, thus ennobling themselves as elites who could invoke the magnificent nuraghi to claim power and prestige both within and outside their community.

According to Peter van Dommelen and Alfonso Stiglitz (chapter 4), Mont’e Prama can best be understood if we accept that landscape is socially constituted: that it includes both the physical environment and meaningful places where lives are lived. The authors examine how Iron Age Nuragic people lived in their daily lives; their cultural and commercial contacts with Phoenician and other communities outside of Sardinian shores; and how traces and places reveal their memories and attachments to ancestors during the Iron Age.

Moving from the field to the laboratory, Roberto Nardi, who directs the Archaeological Conservation Center of Rome—which won the prestigious European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage in 2015—opens his essay in chapter 5 by lauding the “titanic work” of a distinguished archaeologist, the late Antonietta Boninu. She brought together regional and national institutions to foster the rebirth of the sculptures, to collect them in a single location, and to make them known to the world. Nardi sketches the puzzles and solutions found as he supervised the restoration of 5,178 fragments, and he describes the synergy between forward-looking public officials and committed conservators in the private sector. Mont’e Prama, he notes, stands as a model for cultural projects.
It is sad to learn that (as Giovanni Lilliu noted) “there are more Nuragic bronzes abroad than there are in Sardinia itself.” Giuditta Giardini’s essay in the appendix examines the illegal trafficking of Sardinian antiquities, with an overview of the supply chain of tomb robbers, intermediaries, and international dealers. She urges the creation of regional Italian documentation like the “Red Lists” published by the International Council of Museums for other countries with cultural heritage at risk.

THE FUTURE

To our knowledge, this is the first English-language book to address Mont’e Prama’s limestone statues, one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the past fifty years. It has been rewarding to introduce these powerful artifacts and their history to new viewers and readers with the initiatives here at Columbia University, and doubly exciting to be doing this in a moment of fresh discoveries. After our team gathered these essays and developed the first public part of the project—the digital exhibition at the Italian Academy—dramatic news began to appear from the Mont’e Prama excavations. Within days of our exhibition going live online, newspapers around the world reported the finding of new statues at the site, described by the Italian culture minister as “two new jewels” that are an “exceptional discovery.”

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A LOST MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE