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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
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Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ The lions of Sulcis

During the excavations of October 1983, two monumental sculptures in the round came to light near the necropolis of Is Pirixeddus (literally: "the small pools"), representing two lions which originally probably guarded a gate of the ancient Punic city of Sulky, or perhaps some temple structure adjacent to the Roman amphitheatre, where the statues were last placed during the second century A.D., for decorative purposes or as supports for a platform. The lions, sculpted in local limestone, are sitting on their hind legs, with the front left paw advancing and the right one pointing to the ground; the jaws are wide open as if in the act of roaring, their tail is curled around the left thigh (fig. 1).

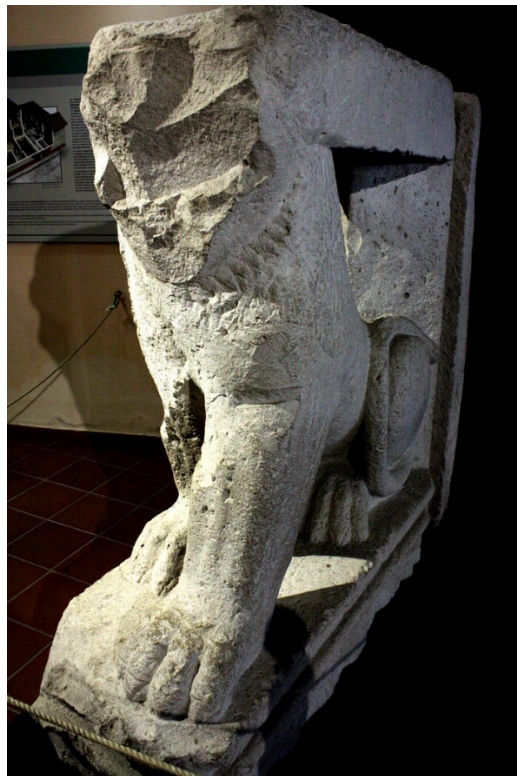


Fig. 1 - One of the lions of Sulcis, now on display in the Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca" (photo by M. Murgia).

The front legs are massive and the claws are still visible despite the wear of time (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 - Detail of the lion paws, claws still evident (photo by M. Murgia).

The large square head is softened by the mane that frames it fully, made with large flame-like locks while the strong muscles are shown with engravings (fig. 3).





Fig. 3 - Detail of one of the lions where the mane's texture, the stylised musculature of the thigh and the architectural elements part of the sculpture are evident (photo by M. Murgia).

The statures are framed architecturally thanks to three connected elements: a base shaped as an Egyptian *gola*: a rectangular architrave that stands on the heads of the felines on one side, blending into the, and on the other merging into a rectangular, shaped pillar which connects the base and the architrave, and is attached to the back of the statues. The sculptures are 156 cm high (figs. 3-4).



Fig. 4 - Detail of the base of one of the lions of Sulcis (photo by M. Murgia).

An immediate comparison of the Sardinian finds can be seen with the known lion of Tharros (fig. 5) which is different from the Sulcis lions in their general morphology. While having the same iconography, that sees the lion as the crouching “guardian”, the Tharros lion shows a more advanced natural image in shape, with a more organic conformation of the face and a more realistic interpretation of the mane that frames the head in a flowing manner. At the top of the head, there were some similar architectural elements to the ones preserved on the Sulky lions, but in this case, they are much less prominent than the whole of the animal figure.



Fig. 5 - Lion of Tharros (from MOSCATI 1980, p. 172, fig. 2).

The lions of Sulcis may be interestingly compared with many artefacts from the Near East and Greece. The iconography refers first of all to the Anatolic sculpture art from the 14th-13th century B.C., like the lion protomes sculpted on the doorway of the west gate of Ḫattuša, the capital of the Hittite empire (fig. 6) and, above all, to the neo-Hittite stylistic creations of the 10th-8th century B.C., that inspired the Phoenician workshops, together with the previous ones. One example of the latter can be found in lions at a city gate in Arslan-tepe (10th-9th century B.C.) or the crouching lions at the base of a column from Tell Tainat (figs. 7-8), but together with these one must consider the several-centuries tradition in

the near east, Aegean and Egyptian areas of the iconograph of the Sphinx, found in the specific details such as the tail curled round a thigh. It is the same curve seen in the Sulci lions and make the latter the result of a mix of stylistic and iconographic elements, also used in ancient Greece and in Etruria.



Fig. 6 - The Lions' Gate of Hattusa in Anatolia (from <http://romeartlover.tripod.com/Hattusa6.jpg>)



Fig. 7 - The Lion of Arslantepe (Malatya), in Anatolia (from BITTEL 1997, p. 269, fig. 307).



Fig. 8 - Column base in the form of crouching lions, from Tell Tainat (from BITTEL 1997, p. 245, fig. 277).

Attributing a precise chronology to the lions of Sulci is therefore a complex feat; according to the stylistic elements listed, some experts tend to think of placing them around the end of the 6th century B.C., while others, who believe the statues were created at the same time as the town walls, date them around the first half of the 4th century B.C.

■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas

■ Bibliographic abbreviations

- BARTOLONI 2007 P. BARTOLONI, *Il museo archeologico comunale "F. Barreca" di Sant'Antioco*, Sassari 2007.
- BERNARDINI 1988 P. BERNARDINI, *I leoni di Sulci*, Sardò 4, Sassari 1988.
- BITTEL 1997 K. BITTEL, *Gli Ittiti*, Milano 1997.
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