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REPUBBLICA ITALIANA



REGIONE AUTONOMA DE SARDIGNA  
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

# Necropolis of Sant'Andrea Priu

Patrimonio culturale  
**SARDEGNA** Virtual Archaeology



## ■ Description of heritage site

The territory of Bonorva, located in the historical-geographical region of Meilogu, in north-west Sardinia, has been populated since the Late Neolithic age, as shown by the presence of various *domus de janas* (fairy houses) necropolises.

The most important set of tombs is in Sant'Andrea Priu, located closed to the fonts of Santa Lucia, about 10 kilometres from Bonorva, at the foot of the rocky outcrop that borders the plain of Campeda, the Mariani hill, that opens up towards Goceano, and the Santa Lucia plain (fig. 1).

These are hypogeum tombs typical of Pre-Nuragic Sardinia, dated to the mid 4th millennium B.C. And traced to the Ozieri Culture period (Late Neolithic Age 3200-2850 B.C.), the evolution and enrichment of a type of tomb that was already known and specific to Bonuighinu culture.



**Fig. 1** - Bonorva, Rebeccu and the S. Andrea Priu necropolis site.  
(from Sardegnageoportale, reproduction by M.G. Arru).

The artificial collective burial grottoes, both simple and complex, are dug into the vertical wall of a rocky red outcrop about 10 metres high, facing South (figs. 2, 3).



**Fig. 2** - The trachyte wall where the *domus* of the S. Andrea Priu necropolis have been dug out of the rock (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



**Fig. 3** - Detail of a *domus de janas* at S. Andrea Priu (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The necropolis has single-cell tombs (with a single room) and larger areas that comprise secondary cells too (multi-cell).



The religious ideology of pre-Nuragic people was expressed through a number of architectural-decorative details and symbols sculpted, engraved, and painted in the *domus de janas*, found on the walls and floors of the *domus of Sant' Andrea Priu* (fig. 4). These elements, together with the plan of the hypogeum, are useful for reconstructing prehistoric houses, which have insufficient ruins on the ground for a full reconstruction of pre-Nuragic civil structures. Based on a summary of architectural elements found in the *domus de janas*, the archaeologist Giuseppa Tanda formulated “*a concrete, precise definition of the hypothetical reconstruction of pre-Nuragic houses*” identifying nine corresponding architectural modules with an interpretation of the various types of houses in stone.



**Fig. 4** - Detail of worship fire saved in the rock of the floor of the ante-cell in the *domus de janas* XIII cell at Sant' Andrea Priu (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Tomb V is also known as “Tomba a capanna circolare” or “Tomba a domus”, cannot be accessed due to the detachment of the rock on which the access staircase lay (fig. 5). A small rectangular room opens onto the larger cell, characterised by a conical ceiling decorated with a motif in rays engraved in the rock, to imitate the wooden ceiling of huts. In the floor there are several semi-spheric holes and a rectangular hole created during the

Byzantine age. Two irregular-shaped rooms, perhaps created in a later era, open onto the sides.



**Fig. 5** - Detail of the entrance to *domus de janas* V at S. Andrea Priu, otherwise known as “Tomba a capanna circolare” or “Tomba a domus” (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

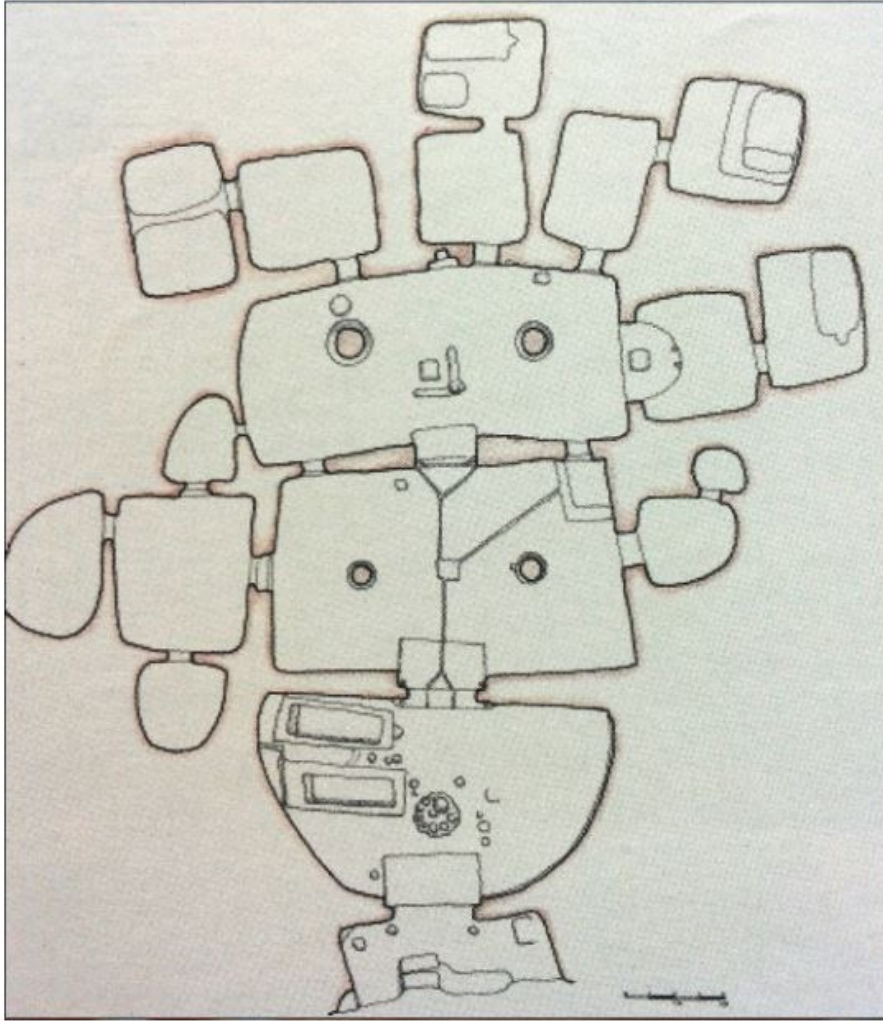
Tomb VIII, or the “Tomba a camera” was originally a monumental entrance with stairs, that have now collapsed. A rectangular atrium leads into the larger room, which is also rectangular, with a double sloping roof supported by pillars made from the rock. The detail of this tomb comes from the decorations engraved into the ceiling, that represent the sloping wooden coverage with central beams and smaller lateral beams, from a pre-Nuragic hut (fig. 6). On the long and short left side of the entrance, five auxiliary cells can be seen. There are several holes in the floor used for collecting offers in the deceased's honour and a tomb dug out in a later era.



**Fig. 6** - Detail of the ceiling that characterises the *domus de janas* VIII at S. Andrea Priu, known as the “Tomba a camera” (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The burial site was re-used not only in the Nuragic Age, but also in later periods, the Roman and Late Antique ages, when tomb VI, known as the “Tomba del Capo” (fig. 7), a *domus* with eighteen rooms, was used as a Christian place of worship and continued being used as a rock church until the High Medieval Age.





**Fig. 7** - Map of the so-called “Tomba del Capo” (from Boninu, Solinas 2000, p. 34).

This multi-cell tomb is of particular interest due to its complex layout and the wealth of architectural details. A small rectangular entrance leads into a semi-circular ante-cell with a slightly concave ceiling decorated with radial beam relief work, imitating the roof of the Pre-Nuragic huts (fig. 8).



**Fig. 8** - The endonarthex ceiling (photo Unicity S.p.A.).

On the back wall is a doorway (fig. 9) that gives access to another two rectangular larger rooms (fig. 10) with a flat ceiling supported by columns made from the rock, where entrance doors open onto the several secondary cells, with many niches and counters.



**Fig. 9** - The door that leads from the endonarthex to the room (photo Unicity S.p.A.).



**Fig. 10** - The room in the *domus de janas* VI at San Andrea Priu.  
(photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

There is a skylight in the ceiling of the last larger room, that reaches the floor above. During the final phases of use of the necropolis, the tomb was transformed into a place of worship and reached our times as a church dedicated to Sant' Andrea.

The rear wall in the middle cell still has some remains of Christian frescoes, dated between the 4th and 6th centuries A.D. (figs. 11, 12).



**Figs. 11, 12** - Christian frescoes in the wall in the room in the *domus de janas VI* at San Andrea Priu. (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Other frescoes can be found in the main rooms of the tomb, but are from a later era, probably the second half of the 8th century A.D. (figs. 13, 14).





**Figs. 13, 14** - The frescoes on the bimah wall in the *domus de janas* VI “Tomba del Capo” at S. Andrea Priu (photo Unicity S.p.A.).

The two burial tombs dug into the floor of the first cell is from the Byzantine Age (fig. 15).



**Fig. 15** - Byzantine tombs in the rock of the floor of the endonarthex in the *domus de janas* XIII cell at Sant' Andrea Priu (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Currently, as the rock face in which they are dug has collapsed some of the tombs in the middle of the outcrop are difficult to access and the collapse may possibly have covered up other tombs at the base of the same outcrop (fig. 16).



**Fig. 16** - Hypogeum X partially destroyed by the explosion in 1967  
(photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

At the top of the plain it is possible to see more simple *domus* (figs. 17, 18) and the rock known as the “Bull” or the “Bell tower” (fig. 19), that has a horizontal table supported by four pillars. Probably, it was originally a tomb with a single room, dug out of a large mass of rock jutting out from the crop, where the walls were later destroyed.





***Figs. 17, 18*** - The hypogea XIII, XIV and XII located on top of the plain (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



**Fig. 19** - The “Toro” or “Campanile” (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

For years, the area, which is full of archaeological findings, was the destination of experts, scholars, tomb-robbers and shepherds who used the hypogeum tombs, that have been violated since the beginning of time, transforming them into caves for housing animals and storing hay.

The necropolis was investigated with archaeological digs in 1916 and 1918 and by restoration work at the end of the 1990s.

## ■ Credits

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