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Rethinking symbols and images, art and
artefacts from history and prehistory

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NEOLITHIC ART AND ARTEFACTS IN CAVES NEAR SEULO IN CENTRAL SARDINIA: ‘GRUTTA I DE LONGU FRESU’

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Abstract: Two caves in the Barbagia di Seulo region of mountainous Central Sardinia were identified by their deposits as having been used in the Middle Neolithic Age. One is the ‘Grutta I De Longu Fresu’, sited near a river whose name translates as ‘The Trees of the Dead’. A panel of rock art, thickly overlain with stalagmite flow, was found. The black paintwork appears to depict anthropomorphic figures that may relate to traditional folklore activities that still take place in villages of central Sardinia today. A human skull at the far end of this cave’s main gallery is also sealed by stone-flow, and was dated at Oxford University to 4259-4042 cal. BC (at 95.1% probability, OxA-X-2236-44). This is the oldest-dated Neolithic human remains known for central and southern Sardinia. The other cave (the Oval Room at Is Janas) is treated in a separate paper.

Key words: Neolithic, rock art, Sardinia, symbolism

Riassunto: Nella regione montuosa della Barbagia di Seulo, Sardegna centrale, sono state identificate due grotte con depositi archeologici ed antropologici del Neolitico Medio. Una è la Grotta 1 de Su Longu Fresu, situata in prossimità di un ruscello il cui nome indica, nel dialetto locale, ‘l’albero dei morti’. Una parete con pitture rupestri di tipo antropomorfo e zoomorfo, di colore nero, sigillate da un velo di carbonato di calcio è stata rinvenuta all’estremità destra della cavità. Nella parte finale della grotta un cranio umano, ancorato al suolo da uno spesso deposito carbonatico, è stato datato nei Laboratori dell’Università di Oxford avente 4259-4042 anni prima di Cristo (probabilità del 95.1%, OxA-X-2236-44). La seconda grotta sarà trattata separatamente in un altro lavoro.

Paroli chiave: Neolitico, Sardegna, pitture parietali, simbolismo.

Introduction

This is the second of three summaries about discoveries made in the mountainous region of the Barbagia di Seulo in central-southern Sardinia. A study of place-names and a recognition of landscape features led to the discovery and interpretation of a number of Neolithic sites of caves and rock shelters (Gradoli 2005; Gradoli and Meaden 2012, 2012a, 2012b). Similarity of certain symbols may have developed worldwide because of fundamentals in the psyche that are common to agricultural communities everywhere through respect for ancestors and the people’s need for fertility success in their fields, their animals and their women.

The cave described in the present paper is the ‘Grutta 1 De Longu Fresu’ with its painted rock art. A well-referenced archaeological summary of Sardinia’s caves is given by Skeates (2012). This is one of the first examples of prehistoric painted rock art known for all Sardinia, although

mural rock art painted as spirals on subterranean walls has since been reported (but not yet published) from a site 100 km to the west near the coast.

The cave ‘Grutta I de Longu Fresu’—and its art and shrines

The cave ‘Grutta 1 De Longu Fresu’, which we call “Skull Cave” following our major discovery, opens in a direction NNE—SSW above a small stream called ‘Riu Su Longu Fresu’. In the Sardinian language, Sardo, the ‘Longu Fresu’ is a species of tree that is said, locally, to be the ‘plant of the dead’. The cave is naturally formed in the limestone cliff. It is about 15 metres long, 2 to 3 metres wide and 1 to 2 metres high. Fig. 1 is a plan. Fig 2 is a general view.

At the far end, opposite the entrance, a human half-skull anchored in stalagmite (Fig. 3) was positioned near a natural hole in the end-wall which, when cleared of the

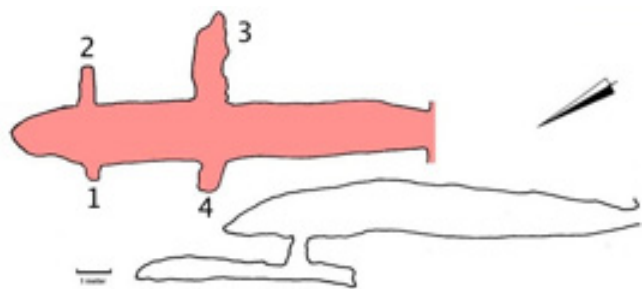


Fig. 1. Plan of the 'Grutta I De Longu Fresu' cave (pink) with its niches numbered 1 to 4, and a side view (white) drawn as if looking from the north-west.



Fig. 2. View SSW along main passage.



Fig. 3. Human skull (at right) and the hole in the cave wall that held the skull pieces of Fig. 4.



Fig. 4. Pieces of skull from the hole pictured in Fig. 3

little stones that had closed it, revealed additional pieces of a cranium (Fig. 4).

Fig. 5 shows a lateral view of the skull. This was sampled and analysed at the University of Oxford Radiocarbon Unit, and was dated to 4259–4042 BC (95.1% probability, OxA – X – 2236 – 44) (Fig. 5). This is Middle Neolithic and the oldest human skull known for central and southern Sardinia.

The stone-covered cave floor has since been excavated to determine whether artefacts and more human bones are buried beneath it. On the plan of the cave (Fig. 1), the numbers 1 to 4 indicate natural alcoves or niches (e.g. Figs. 6, 7) created long ago by the passage of falling waters. Niches 2 and 4 produced more discoveries of Neolithic Age.

Niche number 2

Niche 2 presents at its base a 70-cm deep artificially-excavated pit (Fig. 7) which could have served to collect water draining into a lower level of the cave in order to prevent flooding of the skull and other bones. On the left side of this niche, a 30cm by 30cm rock-art panel was drawn by the finger of an adult using natural black paint (Fig. 8) which was preserved by a thin layer of calcium carbonate. The latter will be dated by sampling at the base

of the stalagmite that coats it using the Uranium Isotopic Series.

Use of the colour black is apposite—because it befits an underworld cave-shrine to death and the ancestors. Black symbolizes death, whereas the colour more often encountered in rock art in external different circumstances is red ochre, which symbolizes life. For instance, compare Simek and Holliday (2009) with regard to the Amer-Indians of the South-West Plains.

In Fig. 9 the photograph of the black pictographs have been deliberately “colour enhanced”. Each different colour represents a continuous movement of the finger in the act of drawing. In green one can see an anthropomorphic horned-head figure (possibly wearing a wooden carved mask typical of the Sardinian pastoral tradition) and holding a bow and arrow towards a horned animal depicted in red. The others signs, in part discoloured and incomplete, have not been interpreted.

Niche number 4

In niche number 4 (Fig. 10) pieces of human skull were found beneath stones covering the floor. Here, too, are features of ancient waterfalls and a pit excavated at its base.

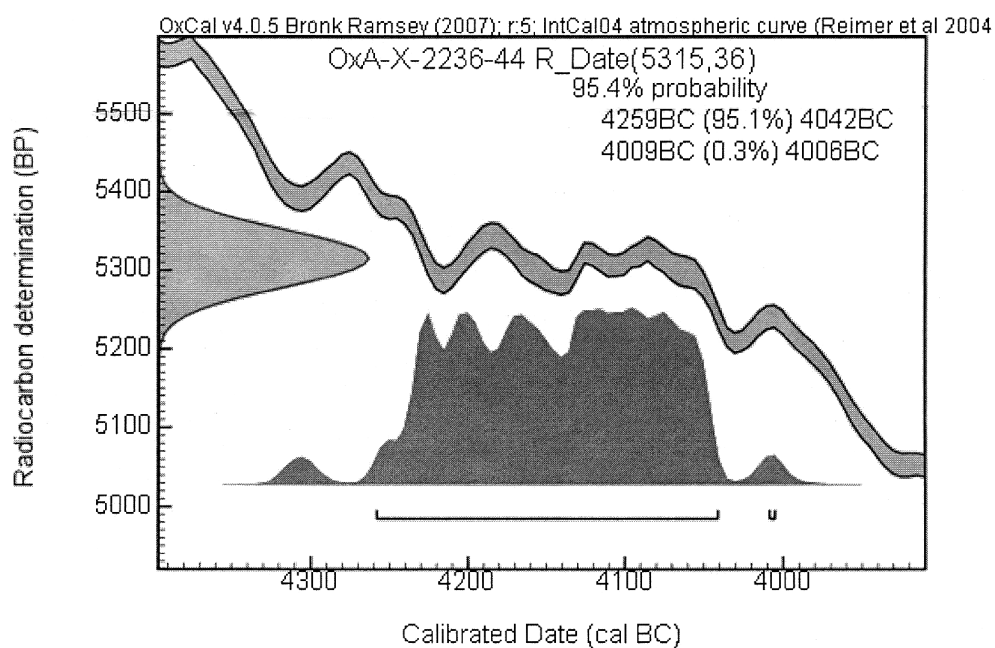
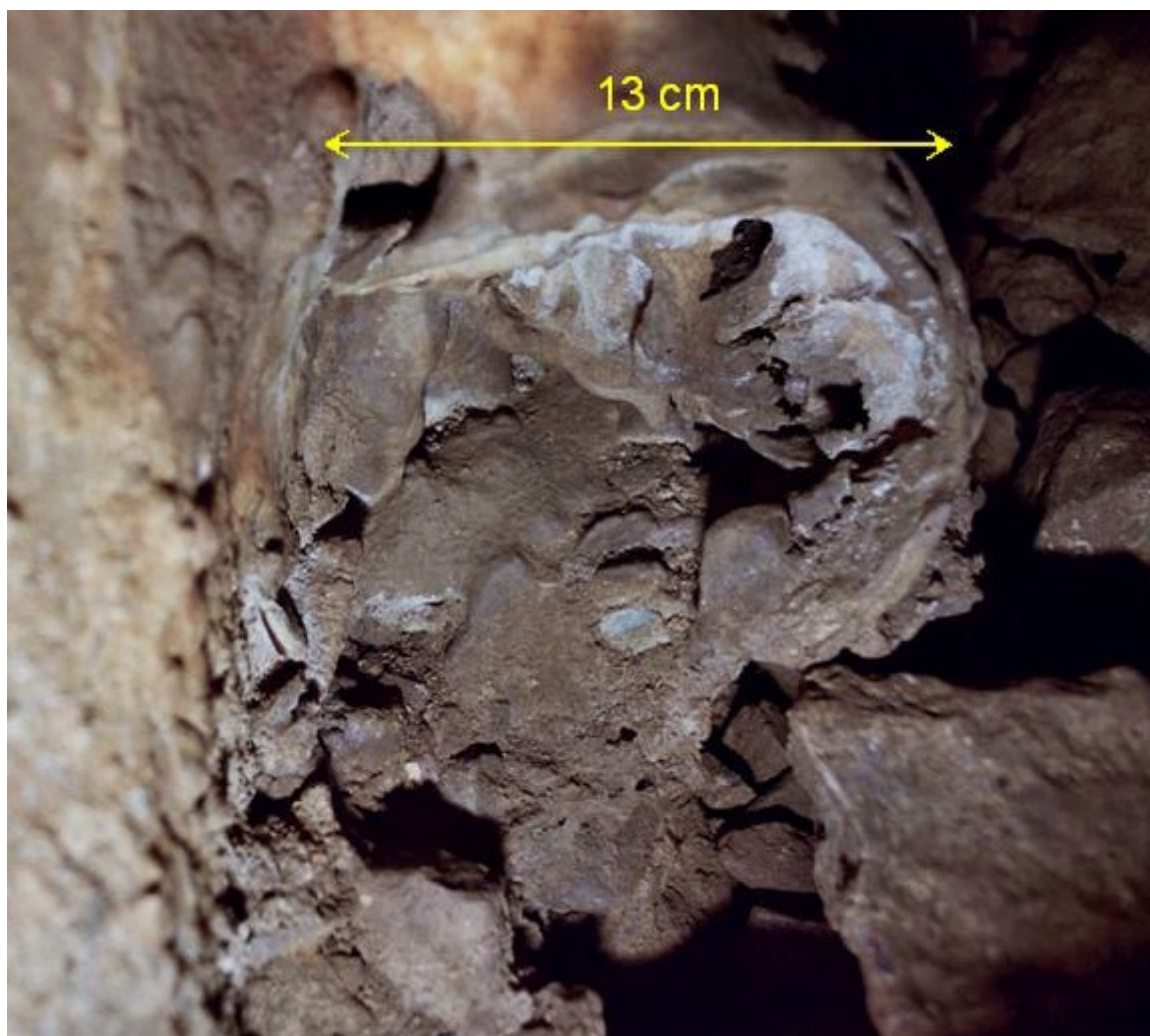


Fig. 5. Close-up of the stalagmite-covered skull dated to about 4259-4042 BC

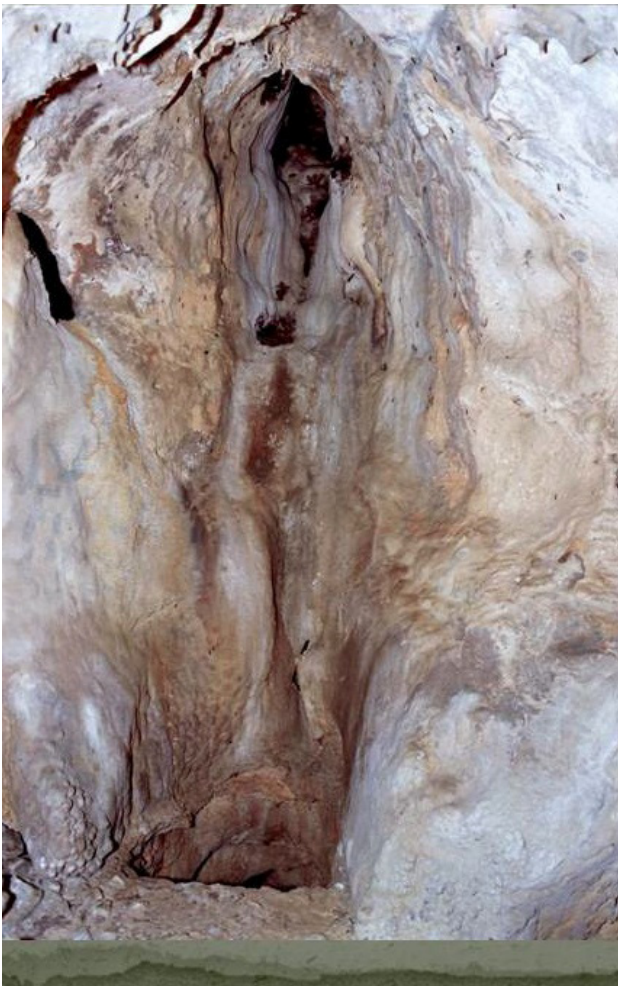


Fig. 6. Alcove or niche number 2. Note the black-painted marks on the cave wall at the left

Comparing ‘Grutta I de Longu Fresu’ with ‘West Kennet Long Barrow’ in England

Some previous researchers have commented that chambered long barrows are artificial constructions whose primary objective was to imitate the dark interior of natural caves. Cyriax (1921) made a case that the interior of passage barrows and chambered barrows (i.e. artificial caves) represented the dark womb of a mother deity like the Earth Mother.

The long barrow at West Kennet near Avebury, Wiltshire, England, was excavated by Piggott (1962). Fig. 11 is from his plan. In the previous century Dr. Thurnam (1861, 416) entered the barrow by digging through the roof of the western end. One of several discoveries was the skull of a child positioned on the floor at the western end against the back wall on the centre line of the gallery (Meaden 1999, 102-108). This is wholly similar to the placing of the human skull at the far end of the cave of Grutta I de Longu Fresu. Might there be a similarity of purpose for these two ancestral/death locations that are so far apart in Europe and yet so close in Early-Neolithic agrarian/pastoral prehistory? The ancient British deposited the skull in the



Fig. 7 Vertical picture illustrating the artificially-deepened hole at its base.

barrow in about the 38th-century BC. (Whittle et al. 2008). The ancient Sardinians did so in the 42nd-century BC.

Conclusions

People appear to have made pilgrimages to the cave of Grutta I de Longu Fresu to honour the dead. They decorated a wall in a way that was meaningful to them but can only be guessed by us. There is a possibility that the art includes a human figure in ceremonial or magical headdress—and, indeed, current traditional events in the villages may be reminiscent of and relate to this. The placing of a human skull at the remotest spot in the cave—subsequently preserved beneath calcitic stoneflow—is similar in location to that known for a major Early-Neolithic British long barrow. Whatever else, the 20m-long natural cave named ‘Grutta I de Longu Fresu’ certainly became a shrine in Early Neolithic times over 6000 years ago. Excavations, led by Dr. Robin Skeates (2009-2010), began in the 2009 summer season.

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Fig. 8. The art: black drawings made by a finger



Fig. 9. Photograph of the same panel, highlighted in colour in order to emphasise the chief elements. The horned man holding a bow-and-arrow has been coloured green.



Fig. 10. Niche no. 4. In the foreground a piece of human skull found together with some pieces of ceramic in the inner part.

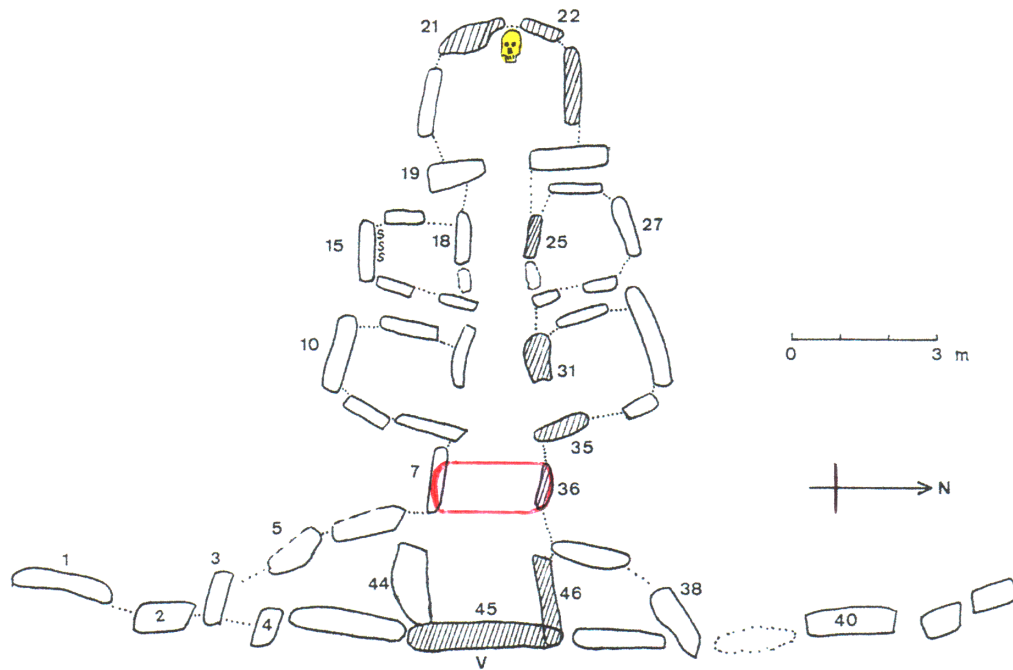


Fig. 11. Plan of the equinoctial long barrow at West Kennet, Avebury, England. The child's skull was positioned on the floor at the far western end. The letter V marks the stone carved with a vulva 2m long. The lintel between Stones 7 and 36 is carved as a deer.

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