

When traditional architectural heritage can't fit with contemporary ways of living. Some consideration through the abandoned rural settlements of northern Sardinia

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## WHEN TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE CAN'T FIT WITH CONTEMPORARY WAYS OF LIVING. SOME CONSIDERATION THROUGH THE ABANDONED RURAL SETTLEMENTS OF NORTHERN SARDINIA

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**Abstract:** Starting from the second half of the twentieth century, in the region of Northern Sardinia known as Gallura, the traditional heritage of rural dwellings known as stazzi began to be involved in different processes, connected to the economic boom and the gradual change in lifestyle of the local population: abandonment, transformation and demolition.

The typological characteristics of these houses, often small, with few openings and low in height, together with their position generally far from the main centers, have made them unsuitable for the needs of technological progress or too complex to be transformed without excessive disruption. Today many stazzi have, in fact, new elevations and extensions, previously non-existent windows and doors, new roofs with different slopes and different external coatings with modern plasters and colors. Others have been demolished and replaced by more contemporary homes and still others have been abandoned.

The abandoned stazzi represent the last chance to keep a trace of the peasant memory of the past. Today these structures are largely ruins, but they still preserve intact many of the characteristic elements of their rural use, such as the fences and terraces that delimited the pastures and cultivated fields. Their reuse for residential, tourist or economic purposes is not impossible, but experience shows that there are few examples of successful interventions. What to do then? Is it possible and sustainable to conserve this heritage just as ruins? Can these abandoned rural traces be preserved as nothing more than memorial landmarks of a past that seemed and seems incompatible with the needs of our present life?

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### 1. Introduction

In northern Sardinia, and, in particular, in the historical region of Gallura, the social and settlement structure has been supported for centuries on a system of small, inhabited centers spread throughout the territory, in which agriculture and livestock were the fulcrum of an economic organization centered on the subsistence of the single families who lived there. This system resisted almost unchanged until the Second World War, when the movement of the population from the hinterland towards the coasts, on the one hand, and the development of the tourist phenomenon of the northern regions of the island, on the other, led to the abandonment of these places. because they have become unsuitable for the needs of a new lifestyle. The building around which this system evolved is the *stazzo*, or *stazzu*, from the Latin *statio*<sup>1</sup> (Baldacci 1952;

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that the Latin term *statio* indicates a resting place or a guard post. see the following sources Baldacci 1952, p. 21; Brandanu 2013, p. 17.

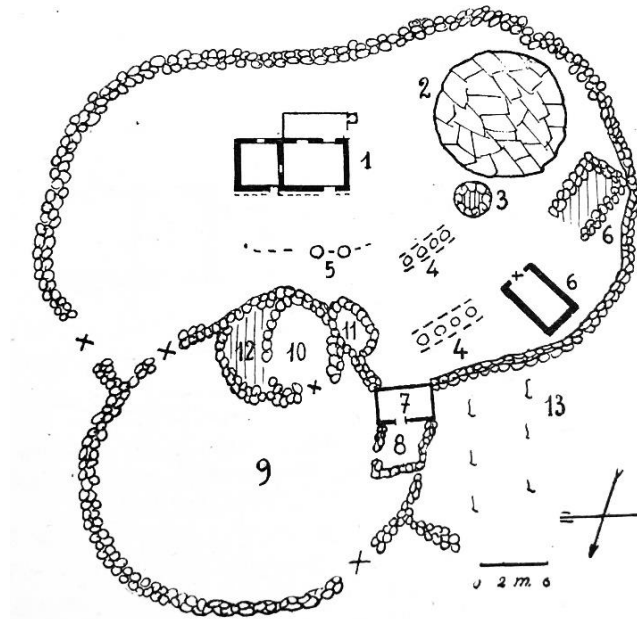
Brandanu 2013), a word which indicates both the building type designated as a residence, and the complex of service buildings and land for grazing livestock. and agriculture. The origin of this type of social organization linked to the stazzi is uncertain, as it



**Figure 1.** *An abandoned stazzo near Olbia with all its architectural characteristics intact.*

involves historical events related to both Gallura and Corsica. The first evidence of the settlement system of the stazzi dates back to 1610, when the canon Martin Carillo, general of the king of Spain, reports the presence of large, deserted areas, but also of shepherds who live in huts that are called stazzi (Brandanu 2013). Presence confirmed also in the ad limina reports drawn up by the bishops of Civita and Ampurias (Brandanu 2013; Doneddu 2001). These sources allow us to affirm that the first forms of stazzi are already found in the period between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. But the phenomenon that most influenced the spread of the stazzo, both as an architectural model and as the fulcrum of a particular socio-economic system, was the gradual transition from a transhumant pastoral lifestyle, already present since the 14th century, to a sedentary one (Day 1996). In the winter and spring months, the shepherds of the hinterland of Gallura moved with their families and livestock to the low-altitude pastures of the coastal and sub-coastal areas. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a political and economic system appeared based on the concession by the large landowners of land for grazing, the cussorge, and for cultivation, the orzaline (Loddo 2007). This system pushed the farming families to

gradually abandon the transhumant lifestyle in favor of the more sedentary one. With the privatization of the lands, the cycle that gradually led to the transition from a nomadic life system to a sedentary agro-pastoral one ended. The multiplication of the *stazzi* in the area also occurred due to the immigration



**Figure 2.** The illustration shows the different elements of a typical stazzo. 1. home; 2. farmyard with slab base granite; 3. chicken coop; 4. hives; 5. drinking troughs; 6. sty; 7. haystack; 8. Fence for calves; 9. Fence for cattle; 10. fence for sheep or goats; 11. Fence for the fattening of the pig; 12. pen for lambs or kids; 13. orchard (vineyard), from Baldacci 1952, p. 23.

of the Corsican population, and of the shepherds of Bonifacio, in Gallura. Corsica, in fact, starting from the eighteenth century, went through a period of severe social crisis, to the point that its inhabitants were forced to settle in the Gallura territories. By the way Maurice Le Lannou wrote in *Patres et Paysans en Sardaigne*: "This emigration, which was an advantage for north-eastern Sardinia, continued into the nineteenth century, thus giving these areas, together with their original dispersed habitat, a also ethnic originality that has never been erased again » (Le Lannou 1951). It is precisely in this context that the birth, development and diffusion of the *stazzo* are inserted, understood both as an architectural typology and as a cornerstone of the scattered settlement type that until recently characterized life in the countryside of north-eastern Sardinia. In 1840 the *stazzi* were about 1500, inhabited by as many families, for a total of about 11,000 people (Angius 2006). The situation remained unchanged until the mid-twentieth century, and then radically transformed in the years immediately following, when a gradual migration to cities, coasts and other regions of Italy began. The phenomenon affected the whole of Sardinia. To understand its extent, it is useful to observe the data reported in the housing censuses: in the 1951<sup>2</sup> census on the island there were about 20,000 houses concentrated in the cities and about 120,000

<sup>2</sup> The census of November 4, 1951 is the first census that at national level, in addition to the population data, defines that of housing.

rural houses. In the years immediately following, a gradual abandonment of historic buildings began: starting from 15,000 fewer units in the 1961 census up to 90,000 fewer units in the 1991 census. At the same time, the censuses indicate a progressive increase in new homes that are concentrated in the outskirts of the villages and in areas closer to the coast, testifying to a gradual dismantling of buildings deemed no longer adequate to the needs of the present.

The most usual conformation with which this type of building still appears today is that of a modestly sized house, made of granite, with a rectangular plan, sloping roof and minimized openings.



**Figure 3.** *The recurring constituent elements in the architecture of the stazzi*

### **The stazzo: some morphological and constructive characteristics.<sup>3</sup>**

The most primitive examples, when their use was intended for limited periods of time, during transhumance, were composed of a single room, without windows, and equipped with only two front doors to ensure the ventilation of the room. Currently almost everywhere the *stazzo* is appreciated in more complex forms, in which the first nucleus has juxtaposed over time one or more rooms, in relation to the needs and financial resources of the family who lived there. Given the small size of the house on average, a fundamental role was played by the so-called street-square, a sort of real extension of the living cell and the space dedicated to the family and its activities. The private space was therefore partly subordinated to the public one, which played a fundamental role in the local culture linked to community life. To this end, the stone benches placed on the main façades of each house, used both as a seat and for riding a horse, are evidence of the use of the road, understood not only as a place for social life, but as a "place for everyday domestic life" (Bianco, Cuboni 2009). In general, the

<sup>3</sup> For further information about the topic see Baldacci 1952; Cuboni, Sanna 2009; Bianco, Cuboni 2009; S. Brandanu 2013.

recurring constructive characteristics in the *stazzi* are: rectangular plan, total or partial absence of foundations, load-bearing dry or lime mortar walls, minimized openings, brick tile roofs. The countryside that still surrounds these residential areas, as already mentioned, represented a fundamental place for the self-sufficiency of families, since it included all the spaces dedicated to breeding and agriculture. As evidence of the use of the land, numerous low dry-stone walls still remain visible in the Gallura countryside, in many cases preserved in good condition, arranged in a circular shape, which once performed different functions: they defined the boundaries of the possessions of the various *stazzi*, divided the different crops, delimited the spaces intended for livestock or delimited the boundaries of a square inside the inhabited center, separating the civil from the rural.



**Figure 4.** Some “restored” stazzi found on internet using web-sites as Air Bnb and Bookin

### **The stazzo today: Some Issues on Conservation**

Starting from the second half of the twentieth century, with the gradual abandonment of this way of life, the heritage of the *stazzi* began to be involved in a series of phenomena that seriously compromised its survival. Many of these buildings have been demolished, because they are no longer usable, others have been transformed by elevations, extensions, creation of new doors and windows, picturesque insertions of extraneous elements and so therefore irremediably altered in an attempt, often clumsy, to adapt them to the new needs of the present and to the taste of inhabitants and tourists. These are perhaps the most numerous examples and they can be observed almost everywhere in Gallura. A quick search on the major web sites that rent holiday homes, like Air Bnb or Booking, using the word *stazzo* as a search key, allows to get an idea of the damage suffered by these rural homes. At first glance many appear as new buildings, but a closer observation reveals that they are *stazzi* transformed by excessive interventions. Others, on the other hand, abandoned or reused for marginal functions, such as tool sheds or shelters for livestock, have kept their characteristics intact. Traveling through the Gallura area it's very easy to come

across numerous cases of this type, which, located on the hills, on the roadside or next to new buildings, are a recurring presence of the landscape. It is precisely the examples in a state of neglect, which have not undergone any kind of recent alteration and in which all the elements of vernacular architecture are intact, that represent one of the last opportunities to save this heritage. Precisely their condition of ruins, as a landmark of peasant memory, could indicate the way for their conscious conservation, capable of protecting these testimonies from excessive alterations. In a context rich in ruins such as Sardinia, ranging from the Neolithic to industrial archeology, that of the stazzi represents a further page which is however, at present, a page that is still "unaware". These ruins should not be considered structures waiting to become something else, but also appreciated in their form of ruin, of historical testimony, like the archaeological ruins themselves. In this sense, one possible direction could be to keep them just as ruins, assuming a Ruskin-like attitude towards them<sup>4</sup>, thus intervening only with limited consolidations and protections and avoiding the temptation to re-functionalize them.

## **2. Conclusion**

But before the interventions themselves, it would be even more important to promote knowledge of these assets, making them visitable, involving them in cultural events and activities, to make them places once again perceived by the communities as identifying. This could already be done now, without waiting for concrete restoration interventions, but by starting indirect conservation processes, generating interest and cultural ferment around them. A possible way, immediately feasible both by the communities and by the municipalities, could be that of organizing cultural visit itineraries, widespread museums defined simply by identifying and signaling the existence of these assets, without waiting for restoration and enhancement interventions that may never arrive, but simply in order to spread the knowledge of such a reality.

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<sup>4</sup> About ruins, their values and their conservation see, in addition to the classic texts by Ruskin and Italian restoration theorists such as Cesare Brandi and Roberto Pane, the following ones: Woodward 2001; Ashurts 2006; Billeci, Gizzi, Scudino 2003; Barbanera 2009; Romeo, Morezzi, Rudiero 2017.



**Figure 5.** *The abandoned village of Badu Andria, near Padru*

The municipality of Padru moved in this direction in 2022, carrying out the “Antichi Borghi” project, part of the territorial development program of the Sardinia Region, which aims to promote knowledge of the small historic villages that arise around the town. In these sites, illustrative panels have been inserted in different languages which, through a QR code, lead to the Municipality website where further information is available. In this sense, the project gives a new meaning to these forgotten ruins, bringing them back into an area of widespread and shared culture among citizens. It is desirable that initiatives like this succeed in stopping at this stage, without going further. Unfortunately, however, the road that leads to the recognition of the eminently cultural value of these objects as ruins still appears long: from the few information found on the web, it seems that a second part of the project is expected. Referring to this next phase, in September 2022 the mayor of Padru said that the project plans to "convert some abandoned buildings into B & Bs"<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lanuovasardegna.it/olbia/cronaca/2022/09/15/news/a-padru-3-secoli-di-storia-da-salvare-i-turisti-scoprono-gli-antichi-borghi-1.100091249>

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