

The antithesis of Baroque - the vernacular architecture of the Mediterranean islands

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Introduction

Magnificent prehistorical monuments in stone are located in the central part of the Mediterranean sea. The culture of stone is spread from the west, on the Balearic islands, to Corsica, Elba, Sardinia and Crete towards the east, and in the centre to Sicily and Malta. Material and climatic conditions in the Mediterranean determine stone as the basic building material. Stone can be composed dry, without binding, but clay, as a natural material – even during intermediate working and shaping – needs at least the softening of contact plates with water, as a bed. Stone is typically cleared from a pasture, field, orchard or vineyard and composed into a series of architectural elements, the peak of which is a stone shelter.

Both fields and olive groves or vineyards must be cleared of stones, to provide better growth, and also so that tools are not damaged during cultivation. If the stones are merely thrown on a heap, this heap will gradually disappear and the stones will return to the earth. Once again they will be in the way. We will have achieved nothing. If the stones are composed into a construction, though, so that the stones are in some way bound together two by two, and then successively, the construction will have an essentially longer lifespan. This is dry stone

building, without binding. And now the essence: if we are going to build a construction, it should at least be functional.¹

Construction in stone

The point is: what can we do with stone, and what and where has this been done? Simple, primitive constructions are well known from prehistory. Starting with a single stone – a menhir, a construction that achieved in its history more and more complex compositions, with its peak in a 3D object: a real dome. This timeline is only theoretically true: a dome is a very large and complex construction, built by professionals and with the help of binding material, ‘Roman concrete’. The culmination of vernacular architecture – as the work of unschooled masters – is corbelling.²

The typology of drystone construction is as follows:

1 A single stone, even decorated, is not yet architecture, even if the stones are standing in rows, explaining something (what, we cannot today understand). There are a lot of menhirs in France, Corsica and Sardinia, with either a plain surface or decorated.³

2 The ‘T’ principle is the structure of prehistoric monuments on Minorca (Balearics) called ‘taula’, but it shows the statics of the capital (on top of a column). It widens the top surface of the vertical and strengthens the construction. A ‘taula’ carries the roof construction over sacral and dwelling buildings on Minorca.

3 A dolmen uses the principle of an upturned ‘u’, with two verticals and a lintel over them. Some dolmens stand singly, as tombs (Sa Coveccada on Sardinia, for instance), some compose a ‘corridor’, a

1 Juvanec, B., *Mediterranean Arch in Stone Architecture*. In ‘*Journal of Civil Engineering and Architecture*’, no. 8 (2016).

2 B. Juvanec, *Architecture of Slovenia 1, Alpine Part*. (Ljubljana, i2 and UL 2009)

3 D. Zupančič, *Corbelled Chambers of Red Pyramid in Dashur*. In ‘*ISIS - Symmetry: Art and Science*’ (2009), 320-323.

long room - as burial places (tombe dei giganti, Sardinia).⁴

4 Corbelling means overlapping the layers, composing a usable room inside the construction.⁵

5 An arch came from the Etruscans: this is a smart composition of dressed stones (with conical cuts) over a span. This is a two-dimensional construction in cross section.

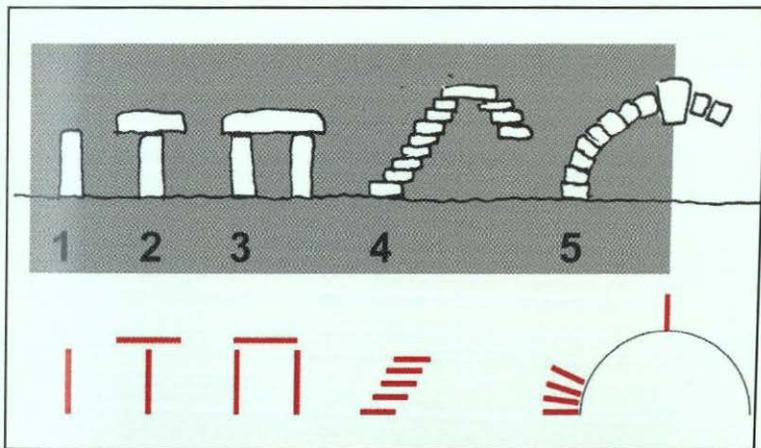


Figure 1: The simplest object in stone is a ‘menhir’ (Brittany, Corsica, Sardinia...). ‘Taula’ is a bearing construction on Minorca (Balears), a ‘dolmen’ has a lintel on the top, corbelling is composed of smaller rough or half-hewn stones, an arch is a composition of stones, cut on at least two sides. Corbelling can be built without any constructional help, an arch needs scaffolding.

This theoretical timeline can be seen in history, but great architecture, so called ‘classical’, also shows major exceptions. Atreus Treasury was built in the second millennium BC in corbelling – as an advanced system between a dolmen and an arch – all Greek great classical architecture is built with a construction system of lintels – almost one thousand years later, in the first millennium BC.⁶

4 M. Vellinga, *Atlas of Vernacular Architecture*. (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).

5 G. Rohlf, *Primitive Costruzioni a Cupola*. (Di Lares, Firenze, 1963).

6 B. Juvanec, *Classical Corbelling in Greece, Dry Stone Construction*. (SPS, Argostoli, 2018).

The first modern architecture, a real dome, was finished at the end of the first century AD.⁷

Corbelling

The drystone walling system means building with no mortar or cement, just putting together pieces of stone: natural, uncut with irregular shapes, or dressed stones with regular surfaces. Longer stones are used for lintels only, and larger elements are built into the corners. The corners are the most problematic elements, vernacular architecture, as an 'indigenous building technique',⁸ uses groundplans without them. The majority of stone shelters are circular.⁹

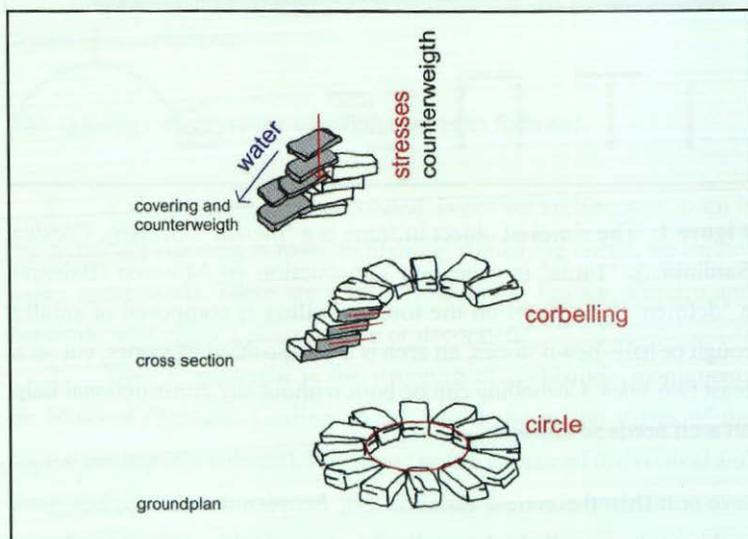


Figure 2: Corbelling as a principle: circle or square at ground level, circle after the first courses, overlapping in cross section and with a frame as counterweight and for leading off rainwater.

7 B. Juvanec, *Reinventer les abris en pierre*. (Quebec : ICOMOS, 2001).

8 D. De Lucca, *Maltese Vernacular Architecture*. In *Companion to Contemporary Architectural Thought*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1993), 210-214.

9 P. Oliver, *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.)

Corbelling is gradual overlapping that is repeated from layer to layer, in height all the way to the capstone. Experience suggests that the ideal height of a construction is $\sqrt{3/2}$ of the diameter of the base plus the thickness of the wall.¹⁰ The point of corbelling is that all the stresses are directed downwards, with no side stresses.¹¹ The construction in corbelling is the same in all objects, although the outer shape may vary.

The composition of a shelter – right up to the largest, with a diameter of more than nine meters – has three elements: corbelling as the supporting construction, an external frame, which leads off water, and weighting elements of the corbelling as counterweight. In between is the filler, which fills and with volume gives weight to the composition itself.

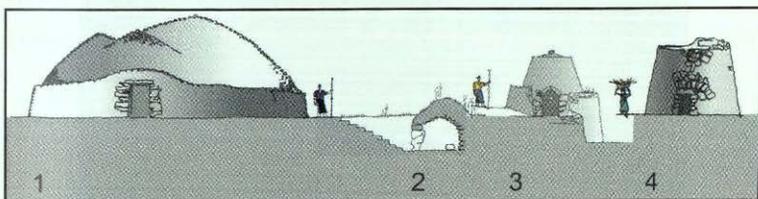


Figure 3: The biggest type of field shelter is 'el bombo' as a three-cell object in corbelling, covered by gravel until the wall around it; 'hiska' on the Italian-Slovene border are hard to find – they are dug into the green landscape; the stepped construction of 'girna' on Malta is a truncated cone; 'mantarah' in Palestine (Bethlehem) are the same as giren, but with an in-built staircase to the top of the object.

The external shapes of the structures are of course completely different.¹² It is the same with groundplans: there are shelters for one person only (trim on the island of Hvar), but the biggest multi-cell objects can be found in Spain as el bombo.¹³

10 B. Juvanec, *Basic Proportion Systems in Architecture*. In *Prostor* 17, AF Zagreb (2009).

11 U. Tonietti and L. Rovero, *Static Behaviour of earthen corbelled Domes in Aleppo's Region*. In *Materials and Structures* 45 (2012).

12 B. Juvanec, *Architecture of Slovenia* 5, i2. (Ljubljana: Ljubljana University, 2013).

13 B. Juvanec, *Chozo de Extremadura, Joya en piedra*. (ARTE, Caceres, 2008).

Origins

All the principle types of stone construction, starting with a menhir to the final arch, appear by the first millennium AD. The oldest objects can be found on the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia,¹⁴ in Oman, Sinai and Malta from the fourth millennium BC.¹⁵

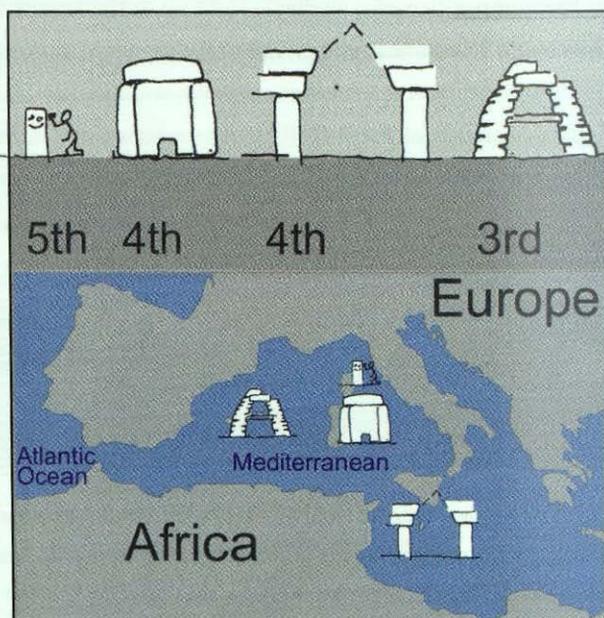


Figure 4: Types of stone construction over time: menhirs in Corsica with simplified human heads come from the 5th millennium BC, but older menhirs can also be found in Tamuli; those in Sardinia are younger, from the 3rd millennium BC. Dolmens can be very old, the dolmen Sa Coveccada in Sardinia being from the 3rd millennium. Temples in Skorba, Gozo are dated to the fourth and third millennia, and navetta d'en Tudons in Minorca (Ciudadella) are from the third millennium BC. a/ Menhir to corbelling, b/ distribution in the Mediterranean.

14 T. Steimer, *Le bronze ancien du Ramlat as-Sabatayn (Yemen)*, 'Paleorient' 27/1 (Paris, 2001).

15 A. Bonanno, *A Socio-economic Approach to Maltese Prehistory: the Temple Builders*. (Malta: Mid-Med Bank, 1986)

The same constructional principle appeared thousands of years later, as stone shelters, protecting the food of workers, tools, livestock and herdsmen.

Vernacular architecture is the product of unlearned masters, who were not familiar with important achievements in classical architecture – they did not have the opportunity to copy them. Vernacular architecture is invented every time anew. An important question to ask: had historical realizations any influence on this architecture?

An interesting example can be seen in Malta, where the underground temple Hal Saflieni was hewn in the rock as ‘corbelling’, with stepped, overlapping elements. Hal Saflieni temple comes from the third millennium BC, but its origin is from the fourth. Temples in Skorba (Gozo), Hagar Qim and Manjdra show the origins of corbelled construction – with overlapping layers of stone. The builders of Hal

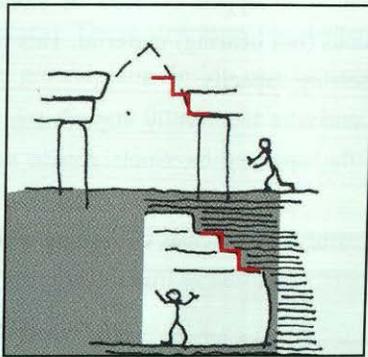


Figure 5: Cross sections of Mnejdra temple and the underground temple Hal Saflieni show the same constructional principle: corbelling. The Mnejdra example is real corbelling, Hal Saflieni is not. This can be understood as the idea of the baroque style: to show something different, not connected to the construction. The essential difference is that the construction in Hal Saflieni shows the removal of superfluous material, in the Baroque, decoration was added as new loading material. The third example, Atrous Treasury, was corbelling with the appearance of a real dome, with the cut edges of each layers (the builders wanted to build a dome, but they didn't know how to do it in the second millennium BC. These are different executions of the same idea.

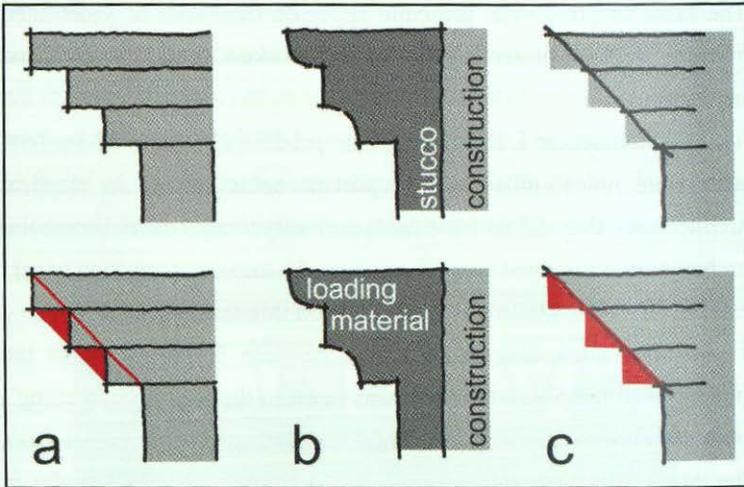


Figure 6: Comparison between constructional executions of Hal Saflieni, baroque stucco and Atreus Treasury:

- a Hal Saflieni: overlapped courses of stone with the detail removed – superfluous (not bearing) material. This reduces the weight and increases the bearing capacity.
- b Baroque stucco is technically superfluous, loading material, inserted only for the appearance. Such details are certainly more beautiful.
- c Atreus Treasury in Mycenae, corbelling with cut stones, and it looks like a real dome – this was its true intention.

Saflieni certainly knew and understood this principle. This is evidence of their professionalism. Direct copying could have been possible only on Menorca and Sardinia, where corbelled monuments from history and field shelters are built in the same system. There is only a slight possibility of that in Menorca, because there are only a few objects, called 'naveta', but in Sardinia corbelled 'nuraghi' are very common. Historical corbelling can be found in Malta only as the first layers – and only skilled professionals could understand it.

Stone constructions in corbelling in the Mediterranean islands

In vernacular architecture, what is most important is that the solutions are invented anew, each time afresh. Authors of vernacular architecture did not visit great architecture, they neither saw nor knew of them. Vernacular architecture in corbelling, as field shelters, is most numerous in the Mediterranean, on the continent from Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro to Greece. On the Mediterranean islands, it appears from the Balearics to Corsica, Elba, Sardinia, Crete and in its centre, on Sicily and Malta.

Balearic Islands, Spain

Field shelters can be found on both Mallorca and Minorca; in Ibiza there are numerous corbelled wells. The South-West part of Mallorca is very rich in barracas. These structures for sheltering herdsmen have square or circular groundplans. Inside can be seen perfect corbelled false domes with a lot of stone fittings: shelves, benches, niches, slings, windows. The false cupola is covered by gravel, with a pinnacle on the top.

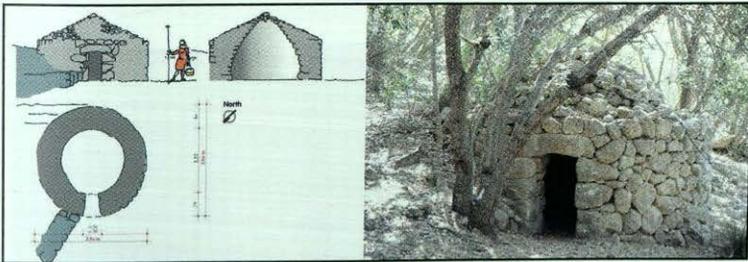


Figure 7: Mallorca has a lot of shelters in its southern part. Very few of them are preserved in the hills, where they served for workers preparing charcoal. a/ Barraca in the SW part of the island and b/ Barraca de miner on Puig de na Banca in the Serra de Tramuntana mountains, almost 1000 metres above sea level.

Barracas, as field shelters, are mainly located on flat terrain, but can also be seen in the hills in the north of the island. Preparing charcoal was developed as a successful craft there – some decades ago, this craft was still alive. Such objects can be found high in the mountains, at a height of more than one thousand metres.

Minorca (Menorca) has another type of shelters. Livestock there was mostly bulls, horses and sheep. These animals are very different in their height, so there are two essentially different types.

A large ‘barraca’ (Kastillian) or ‘pont de bestiar’ (Catalonian) is really big, an up to 11 metres high stepped construction with nine rings. It has a circular groundplan, but straight front elevation with entrance – suited to the height of bulls and horses, and mangers built into the wall. Inside is a circular room with a false dome. The difference between the usable room and the material built in is essential big - in comparison to the whole composition, the room is extremely small.

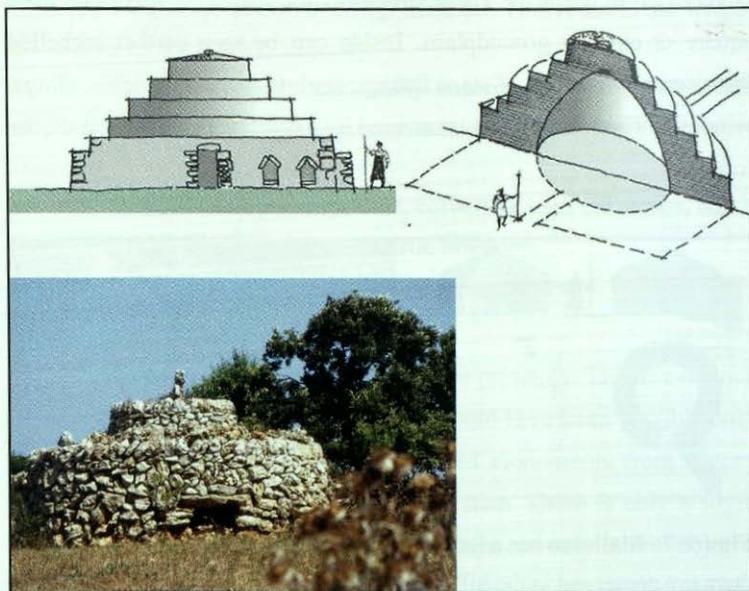


Figure 8: Minorca has two types of field shelter: bigger and smaller. a/ The barraca for horses near Ciutadella is an extremely large object with a small usable room and enormous built-in material. b/ Pont de bestiar for sheep in the central part of the island is essentially smaller.

Smaller objects have the same stepped construction, but up to three steps only. Groundplans are circular and there is usually a religious symbol on the top of the roof, a cross (this is very rare, especially with auxiliary buildings). The entrance is adapted to sheep and it is normally only 50 x 40 cm in size.

Corsica, France

The island of Corsica is rich in prehistoric monuments in stone, but mostly only menhirs and dolmens. In the south of the island can be found 'barracuns', circular shelters, mostly for livestock. In the north there are numerous objects called 'paghliaddiu'. These are rectangular structures with longitudinal corbelled ceilings. There is often a niche with fireplace and a chimney in the north wall. The chimney is hard to see outside: its opening is covered by roofing stone plates. Over the

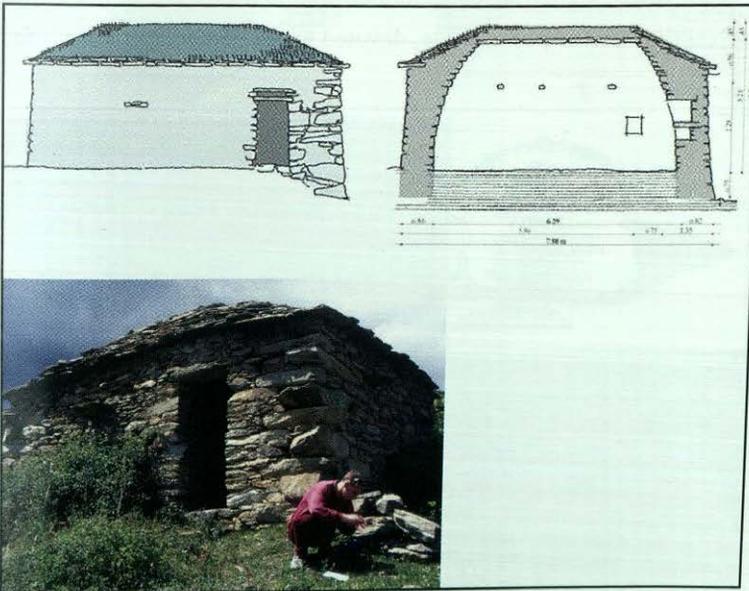


Figure 9: Corsica, paghliaddiu at Santu Pietru in the north of the island. Inside the object can be found a lot of in-built fittings. a/ technical drawings, b/ photo 1998.

door is a lintel, but another plate can be seen over this constructional element, as protection against rain.

Paghiaddius are for herdsmen, but donkeys are very often found in abandoned objects today, sleeping on the straw inside.

Elba, Italy

The entire small island is karstic, with only a few green plants. Sheep are needed for the meat and in the past for wool. Food for the sheep is a necessity today. Animals are worth more because of the rough nature, a flock of sheep has to be protected against straying and wild animals. Around the circular objects – almost half of a globe – can be found walls to protect the area at night.

Caprile can stand in groups, because of better animal protection and such clusters are very imposing in the hilly landscape. Livestock ('capra' means a goat) are concentrated behind the objects, entrances to the caprile face the public space, devoted to the herdsman's social life.

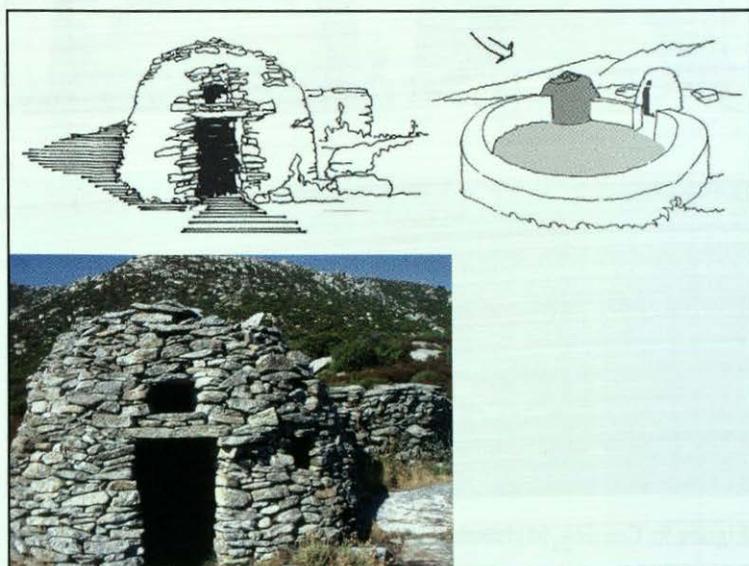


Figure 10: Elba island, caprile on Macinelle. An essential part of this object is the wall enclosing it behind.

Sardinia, Italy

Sardinia is a bigger island, with several types of landscape. Its prehistoric architecture is very important: the nuraghe era was a highly developed culture between 1780 and 385 BC¹⁶ and corbelling was the main building system used for messaging architecture, towers called 'nuraghi' (plural).¹⁷ The towers were built in the shape of a truncated cone, with a crown on the top: inside can be found one, two or three corbelled rooms, one over another. Messages were transmitted from

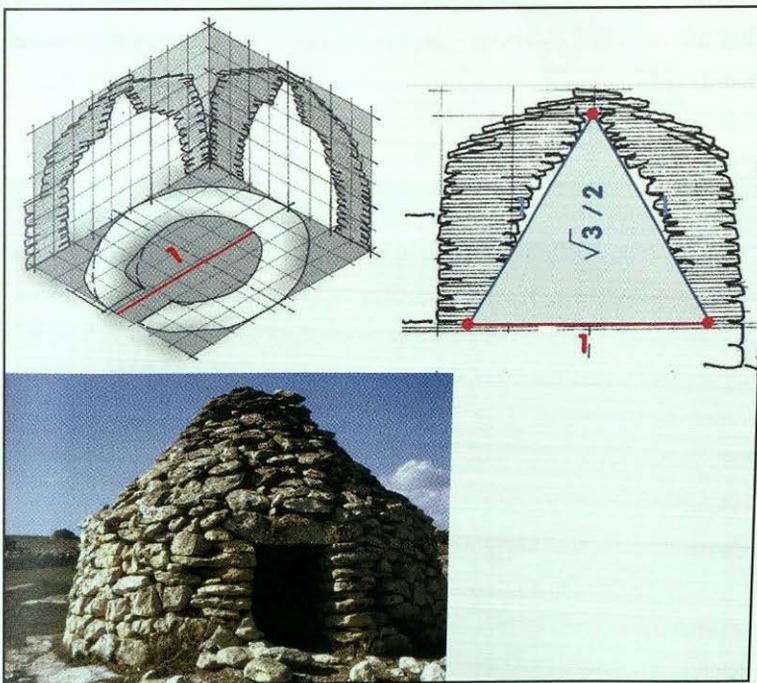


Figure 11: Su pinetu near Macomer shows its theoretical construction: the height of an equilateral triangle. The length '1' is difficult to measure from half of the wall on one side to half of the wall on the other: the exact length appears from the beginning of the door to the end of the room (on the left part of drawing). a/ architectural drawing and analysis, b/ photo 1995.

16 Vellinga, *Atlas of Vernacular Architecture*.

17 M. Miosi, *Tholoi d'Italia*. (Pagina, Bari, 2012).

one nuraghe to another with the help of hand signals, fire, smoke or reflection.¹⁸ Nuraghi are built with giant stones, hewn very precisely and have survived until today in perfect condition.

Su pinetu or 'su pinnetu'¹⁹ are the only objects that could have been built as a repetition of the construction system already seen in nuraghi. The objects are circular, with vertical walls and a more or less explicit roof (with edges as overhangs, symmetrical composition and a pinnacle on the top). Some of them are very tall, but this is because of better stability, if the stones are not hewn and the structure cannot be built properly. Historically, su pinetus were used by herdsmen, today they are occupied by sheep – unless the doors are closed with wooden boards and branches.

Crete, Greece

Crete is an unusually long island and has a cultural continuation in classical architecture, composed of posts and lintels, as in the continental part of Greece.²⁰ The older principle, corbelling, already seen in Mycenae almost a thousand years before the main objects in Athens, was forgotten. Vernacular architecture created its solutions on the basis of possibilities, it built objects with small stones. The only possibility is corbelling. On Nida Plateau, extremely big objects can also be found, for whole families during the pasture season, at a height of almost one thousand metres above sea level.

On the other side of the island, in the north, shelters are smaller, but separated for preparing cheese and storing cheese, while the livestock lived in underground shelters.

The objects in the central part of the island are circular, with enclosures for livestock. Herdsmen slept in a 'mitato' and lived outside, in the shade of a cultivated tree. Animals lived free, shut in overnight in-yards. Interesting details can be seen there: the entrances to the yards are designed as fixed pans for disinfection.

18 B. Juvanec, *Six Thousand Years of Corbelling*. (Paris: ICOMOS, 2001).

19 E. Contu, *Pozzi sacri, ipotesi ricostruttive*. (Sassari: SACER, 1999).

20 Oliver, *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture*.

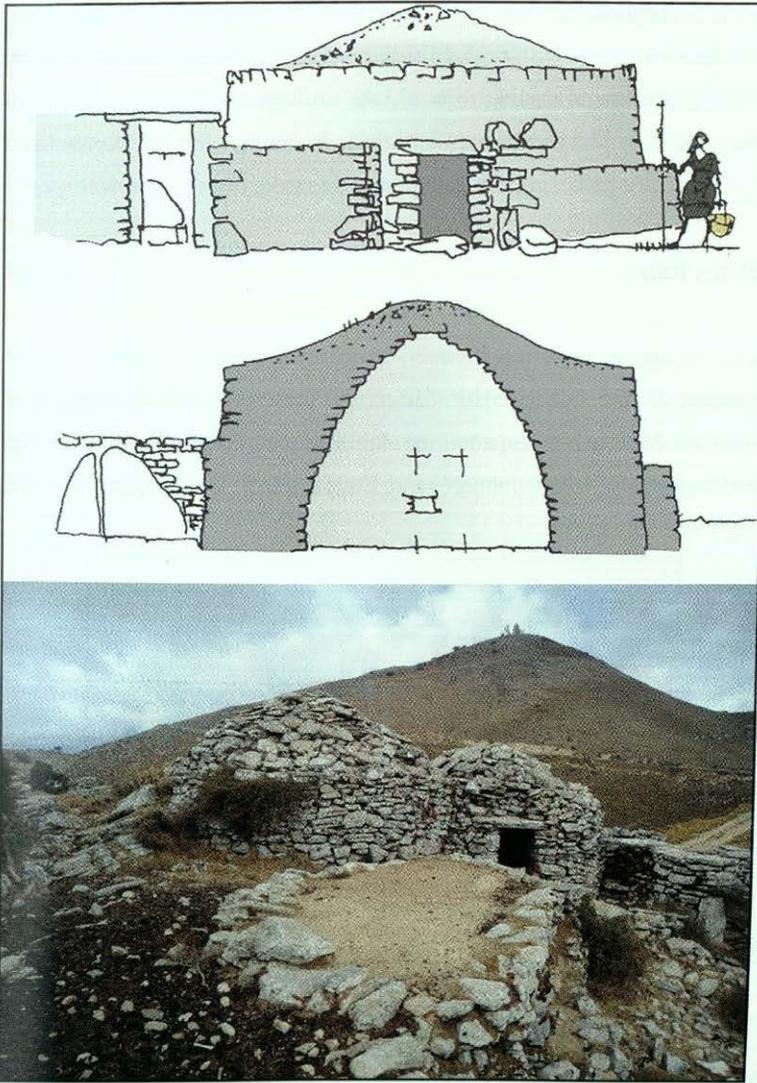


Figure 12: Mitata are objects on Crete: in the southern part of the island they are bigger and built with cut stones. They are still in use today, for the temporary life of herdsmen. a/ Nida Plateau in the centre, b/ Asfendiou in the north is a multi-cell object, containing a living hut, a hut for making cheese and for storing it.

Objects in the northern part of Crete are in multi-cell construction, devoted to sleeping, preparing cheese and storing it. Animal shelters, near the 'mitata', are underground objects. Some of them are only sixty centimetres high. It is enough for the sheep, but I had difficulty gathering the dimensions to make my documentation.

Sicily, Italy

Italy is rich in drystone shelters, from north to south. On the Karst plateau at the border with Slovenia, they are called 'hiska', in Abruzzi Mountains 'capano', in Apulia 'trullo', the Sicilian names are 'pagghiaru' and 'cubburo' near Etna volcano and 'cappano' in the Hyblaean mountains.

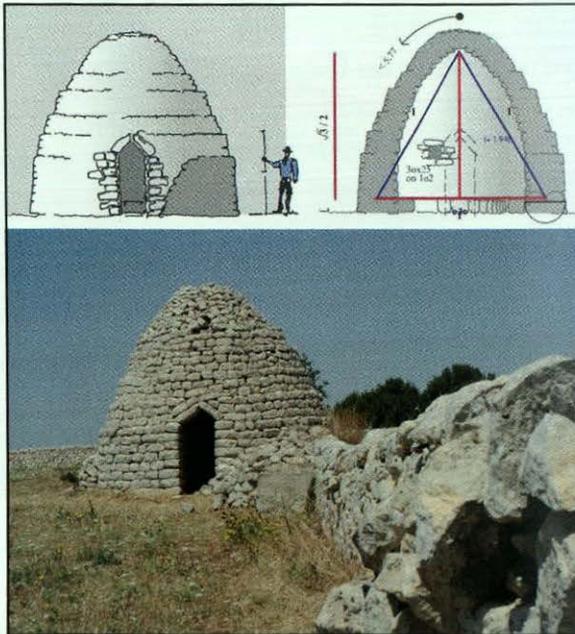


Figure 13: Cappano on the contrada Cilonia, north of Ragusa, built in white limestone, cut into a beautiful shape. The shape is composed with the aid of the square root of three by half, measured from the base stones. a/ Architectural drawing, b/ Photo 2014.

A 'cappano' is made of white limestone, while others are in local, more or less volcanic dark stone. 'Cappanos' are built in cut stone, their tidy constructions being beautiful.²¹ A lot of stone details are designed for animal use: pans, dishes, benches and water collectors. 'Cappanos' always stand in a wall, normally at the corner.

Malta

'Girna' as an object appears deceptively straightforward but it is in fact an elaborate piece of workmanship that requires good planning, considerable skill and patience.²² Several shapes and executions exist. The base of a 'girna' is sometimes strengthened on the outside by a low

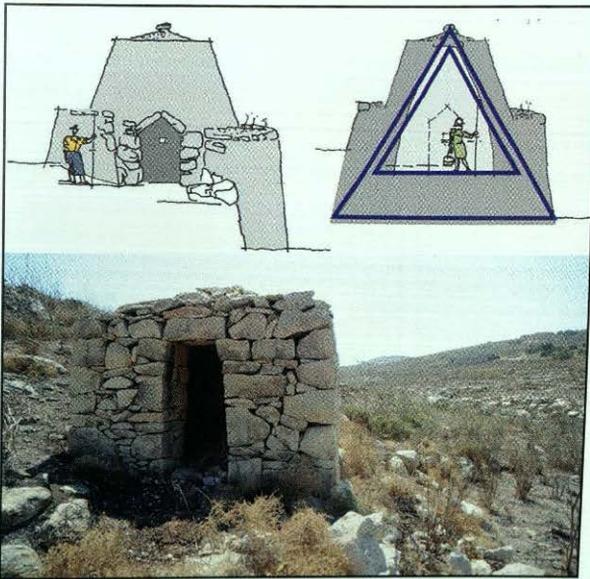


Figure 14: Girna on Ghajn Tuta, Malta. a/ It has a typical construction, composed with the aid of an equilateral triangle. b/ The girna on the southern outskirts of Gozo has a lot of windows: maybe it was built for the use of hunters, too.

21 P. Tiralongo, *Pietra su pietra*. (Ragusa: Edi ARGO, 2006.)

22 M. Fsadni, *The Girna*. (Malta: Dominican Publication, 1998.)

double wall buttressing, and some huts have an encircling ramp that also provided access to the top.²³ The most typical 'girma' are built as a truncated cone, but also square groundplans can be found. In terms of the corbelling principle, angular objects are also finished in a circle.

Smaller 'giren' are made of found rocks without any shape. Such constructions are especially hard to build. These architectural structures are mostly made from undressed stones or are quarried from the surface of the bedrock.²⁴

In contrast to 'mighbah' (beehive huts), which can almost not be seen in the landscape, 'giren' are numerous objects on both islands, Malta and Gozo. They are part of the typical landscape, but today almost abandoned and disregarded in the local culture.²⁵ On the other hand, some new 'giren' appear near settlements, where they are used as auxiliary buildings. These objects are mostly built in their typical shape of a truncated cone.

Wells and ice huts

Wells, as the source of water, have to be protected against rain, dust, dirt and the access of unwanted individuals, all interventions that might be a threat for the water quality. Enclosing the wells means preventing animals from entering, which could fall down the shaft trying to reach the water. A dead body can poison a well for a long time. A well has to be practical for the user.

Many vernacular wells, built in stone and covered by a corbelled false dome, can be found on Eivissa (English: Ibiza) and of course on all the other islands.

A well in which the whole groundplan is a big basin or reservoir, is a 'bassa' on Mallorca. Such objects are widespread in the South-West part of the island. The same principle can also be seen on the continent

23 C. Jaccarini, *Giren at Imgiebah of Mellieha* (Malta: Mellieha Local Council, 2002)

24 E. Vella, *A Stratigraphic Study of the Giren at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra, limits of Mellieha, Malta*. In 'Malta Archaeological Review' 11 (2013), 68-78.

25 G. Vella, *Barumbari, Giren and Mgiebah – Vernacular gems in Oblivion*. In 'The Gozo Observer' 30 (2014), 3-11.

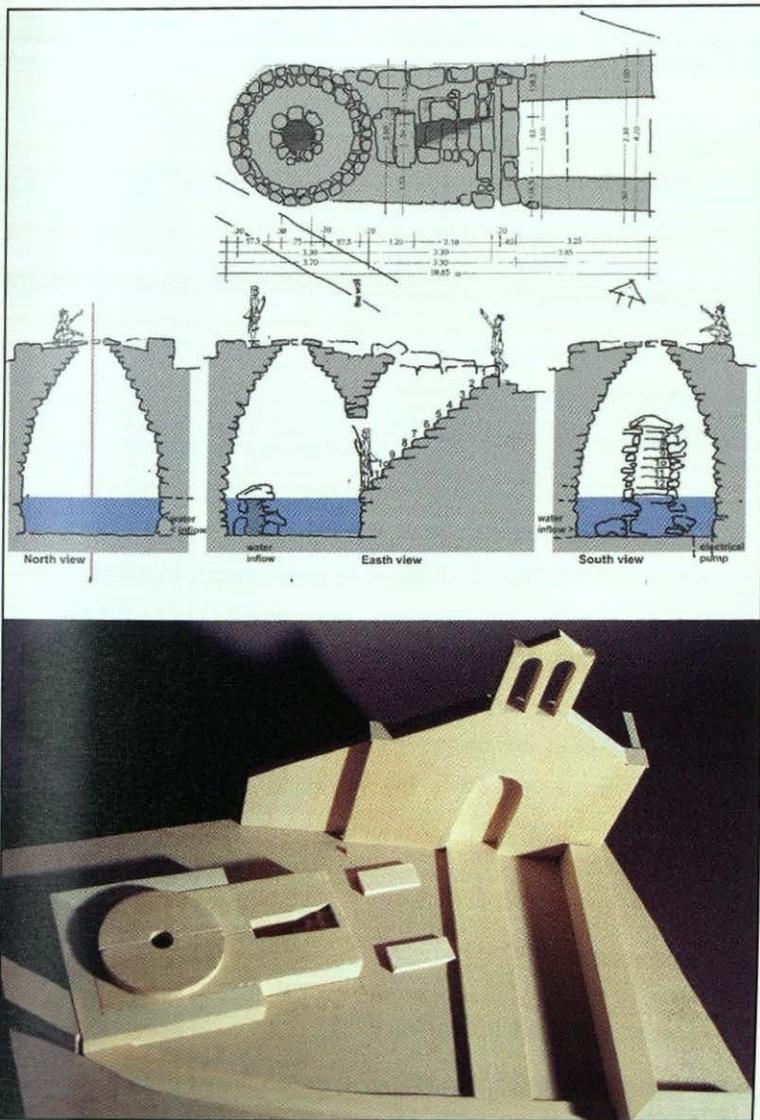


Figure 15: Pozzo sacro Sant'Anastasia in Sardara, Sardinia is a sacred well, where the sun's beam is used for a miracle: light comes twice a year from the earth – as result of reflection. The name of Saint Anastasia comes from old Greek 'anastasos', which means resurrection. Archaeologists date this well to 1200 BC. a/ technical drawings, b/ photo of sacred well with the church.

as 'skedenc' in Slovenia and 'pocuo' on the slopes of Lovcen Mountain in Montenegro.

Historical wells are very numerous in the nuraghe culture in Sardinia as sacred wells, 'sacri pozzi'.²⁶

Another important object in drystone is an ice hut, with several names in local environments from Spain, through France, Italy to Slovenia. In the continental part of Spain, especially by the Mediterranean shore with a hot climate, ice huts are extremely important. In France, ice production was an important economic activity from the sixteenth century. An ice hut is dug into the terrain because of good insulation, only ten percent of the object being seen from the outside.

Numerous ice huts can be found in Spain, built in drystone and covered by a false 'cupola'. Such objects contain several cubic metres of ice up to some hundreds of cubic metres. In Italy, in the vicinity of Pistoia a series of ice huts were built with artificial basins, with roofs thatched with straw. The same was true in Slovenia: the last ice hut was in use in 1972.²⁷

Ice was in use for healing and as a luxury in rich houses in classical Greece. It was especially needed in a hot climate, including the Maltese islands, but today there is no trace of them. Have they really disappeared or is this interesting architecture just forgotten by the local population?

Discussion

It must be remembered that information was transmitted much more slowly in the past than now. It is the same with the movements of tribes or parts of nations, so these movements marked both the space and the culture in it. The development of technology is not a matter of general culture and development for all, it is bound to specific professions,

26 B. Juvanec, *Pozzo sacro Sant'Anastasia*. In *Restauro archaeologico* 22, no. 1 (2014), 79-93.

27 B. Juvanec, *Hiška (Slovene Corbelled Hut)*, i2, *SAZU*, (Ljubljana: Slovene Academy of Sciences, 2016).

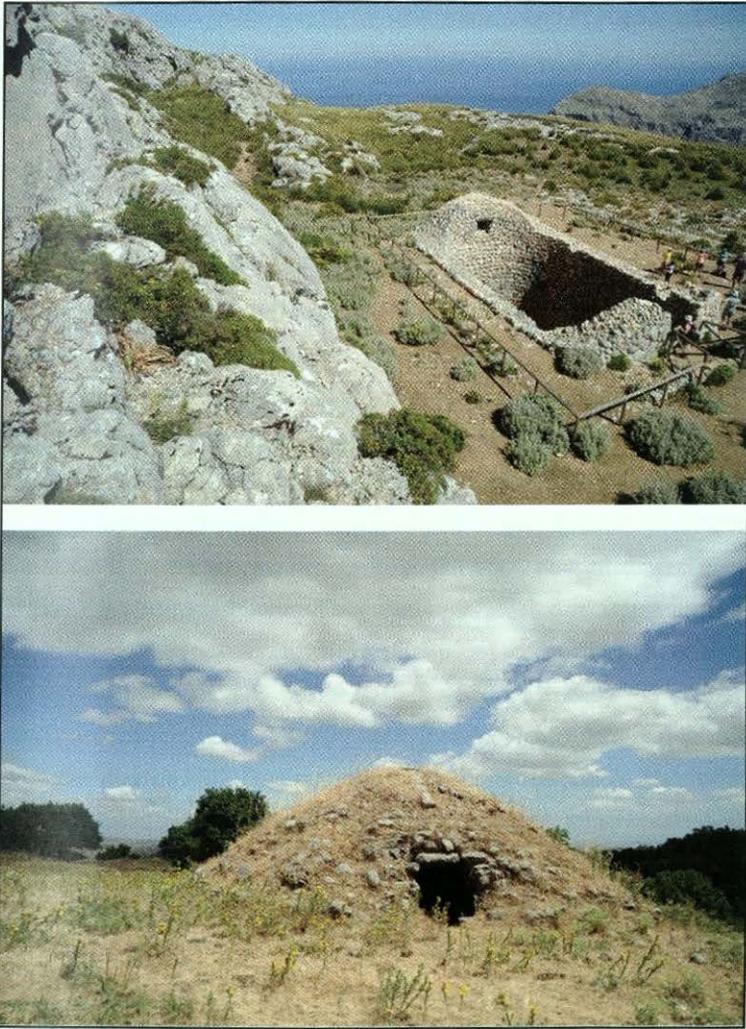


Figure 16: a/ Numerous ice huts appeared in recent centuries in the northern mountains of Mallorca. Rectangular groundplans were covered by longitudinal corbelling. The ice was carried on shoulders, and the paths to the shore were paved with stone. El pou de neu d'en Galileu is located at 1092 metres above sea level and the walk to the sea took several hours (Juvanec 2016a). b/ Ice hut in the Hyblaean mountains of Sicily, built as a perfect corbelled construction under the ground, can hardly be seen in the landscape, covered by grass.

among which builders were also an important element.²⁸ Thus key influences - also in architecture - are the fruit of international links, and not so much experience, education or copying.

Vernacular stone architecture enables firstly survival, then economic activity, and finally culture. Vernacular architecture (in contrast to sacral) does not have these links at all; each detail, each object is invented anew.

However, the islands of Malta have proved themselves to be particularly susceptible to outside influences because of their geographical and strategic location right in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. Their indigenous built environment consequently reflects the input of a wide variety of cultural traditions of both European and North African origin. The vernacular architecture of Malta has its own origins in prehistoric monuments, but only in a theoretical sense, including use of order and geometry. The tradition of this use is very rich on Malta. There are remarkable fortifications that protected baroque Malta from Turkish occupation, designed by Giovanni Battista Vertova (in the seventeenth century), a prominent but forgotten engineer, who used all the advantages of mathematics.²⁹ This already seen and understood order was also used in vernacular objects.

Architectural compositions from the past cannot be bad architecture: all the bad constructions have collapsed over time. Good architecture survived. This has to be noticed today.

Conclusions

Vernacular architecture has been helped to a large extent by nature: fertile soil must be cleared of stones. A construction is the result of need, since stones thrown in a heap gradually disappear. A construction is necessary: and corbelling is the simplest method, indeed

28 E. Lehner, *Wege der Architektonischen Evolution*. (Wien, Phoibos, 1996).

29 D. De Lucca, Giovanni Battista Vertova: *Diplomacy, Warfare and Military Engineering Practice in Early Seventeenth Century Malta*. (Malta: Midsea Books, 2001.)

the only one. If an object is going to be constructed, it must at least be functional.

Corbelling has been known as a construction principle in architecture for several thousand years: a little less than three thousand years ago, it was supplemented with the arch, which defined a vault and subsequently a cupola. The first cupola, the Roman Pantheon, is also the first modern architecture of our time. However, this was made by masters, who were acquainted with the achievements of high culture and had learnt there.

On the other hand, unschooled but not unlearned masters built smaller constructions in the simple method of overlapping much, much later, right up to today.

It is important that this is a new invention of architecture each time, since local masters did not have the opportunity to travel, and were not acquainted with, had not seen and did not understand already existing solutions.

If, according to the great theoreticians (such as Vitruvius), architecture is the complex of needs, possibilities and opportunities, with the result being function, construction and aesthetics, vernacular architecture is simply the realisation of these starting points.

Vernacular architecture is really theory in practice.

This part of vernacular architecture is the real antithesis of the Baroque, which is especially rich in the central Mediterranean, in Sicily and Malta. Its characteristic is designing open spaces on the one hand, and details on the other. Its rich decoration is planned with the great influence of geometry, above all symmetry. This is a reflection of the social life of the time.

Baroque is typical architecture of cities, vernacular architecture of the countryside. Vernacular architecture, as a product of unschooled masters, does not know decoration. It is pure construction, functionality, without any additions. In comparison to the Baroque it is simple, poor, but sincere. The only common element of these two different architectures is the use of geometry, on the one hand learned, on the other, used by instinct.