

Making sense of death: a sensory reinterpretation of Punic funerary rituals in Sardinia (Italy)

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Introduction

Punic mortuary archaeology has seen a long tradition of studies in which the materiality of funerary practices has been greatly emphasized; tomb- and deposition-types, funerary assemblages, and spatial organization have been its primary focus. In the endeavor of moving beyond their material dimension, funerary objects and landscapes have been reassessed as ethnic and social markers capable of exercising agency in account of their sensible qualities.

However, in the perspective of mortuary rituals as sensory experiences, the role of these objects/landscapes has been mostly limited to a dichotomy between individual bodies and things. Sensory organs have been then interpreted as passive and distinctive receptors. They have been examined as epiphenomena based on the Western/Aristotelian paradigm of the five senses. This approach has produced, among the others, sound, visibility, texture, taste and smell studies in particular regarding necropolis, while Tophets (e.g. sanctuaries for infant cremations) have been neglected in this sense.

Objectives

This project intends to reanalyze Punic funerary experiences as synesthetic and trans-corporal interactions of bodies, things and landscapes. Based on the assumption that senses are culturally and historically informed, they are interpreted as active regulators of social life producing various experiences of the same event based on age, gender, social and cultural differences of the people involved.

New theoretical framework

In order to do sensory archaeology in regard to funerary practices, two assumptions have to be made:

1. Senses are not just epiphenomena

Whereas they can be studied by applying quantitative methods, they always have to be chronologically and historically contextualized (Tringham and Danis 2020). This requires a multidisciplinary approach combining the techniques of landscape archaeology and remote sensing with sensorial archaeologies.

2. Synesthesia

Analyzing separately each sense may be rationally and methodologically convenient, but it prevents from comprehending the synesthetic nature of ritual experiences (Hamilakis 2013). Therefore, the partition of funerary experiences into burial phases and the analysis of each of them in respect of the intersection of senses is presented as alternative method

Methodological approach

1. Case study

The colony of Monte Sirai (mid-6th – 4th c. BC) will be used as case study (figg. 1-2): abandoned in the 2nd c. BC and extensively archaeological excavated, it allows determining its historical landscape, the development of the necropolis and the Tophet.

2. Intra-site spatial relationship

A 3D model will be elaborated to obtain new insights on the inter-site spatial relationships.

3. Analysis of funerary experiences according to burial phases:

- **the arrangements of the tomb:** through the creation of 3D models of tombs' sample, the reconsideration of tomb-types in terms of visibility/invisibility, movement, and tactility (among others, textures of the employed materials, weight detection, required labour effort); the re-analysis of iconographies and inscriptions on the tombs' walls and stelae in respect of visibility and embodiment (figg. 3-4);
- **the preparation of the body:** the involvement of smell and touch as the body was shaved, cleaned and perfumed, shrouded and adorned based on the archaeological record's analysis;
- **the mourning:** the connection between human/musical sounds and the act of walking during the procession (based on spatial analysis), the way sounds spread and their impact (acoustic analyses) (fig. 6);
- **the transport of deceased and grave goods:** the reconsideration of anthropological and archaeological data (dimensions, weight, function and possible contents) in regards to textures of the employed materials and required labour effort;
- **the ritual:** re-analysis of inhumation, cremation, semi-combustion practices (fig. 5);
- **the deposition and manipulation:** the movement inside/around the tomb, variation of light and temperature, smells, iconographies, colors, and labour effort;
- **the feast and seasonal visits** (whether applicable): smell, taste and touch based on archaeological, zoological and archaeobotanical record;

The archaeological record from Monte Sirai seems to indicate the co-existence of different cultural groups, which practiced distinct funerary practices. This heterogeneity allows to test the clashes of sensorial experiences based on gender, age, social and cultural background.

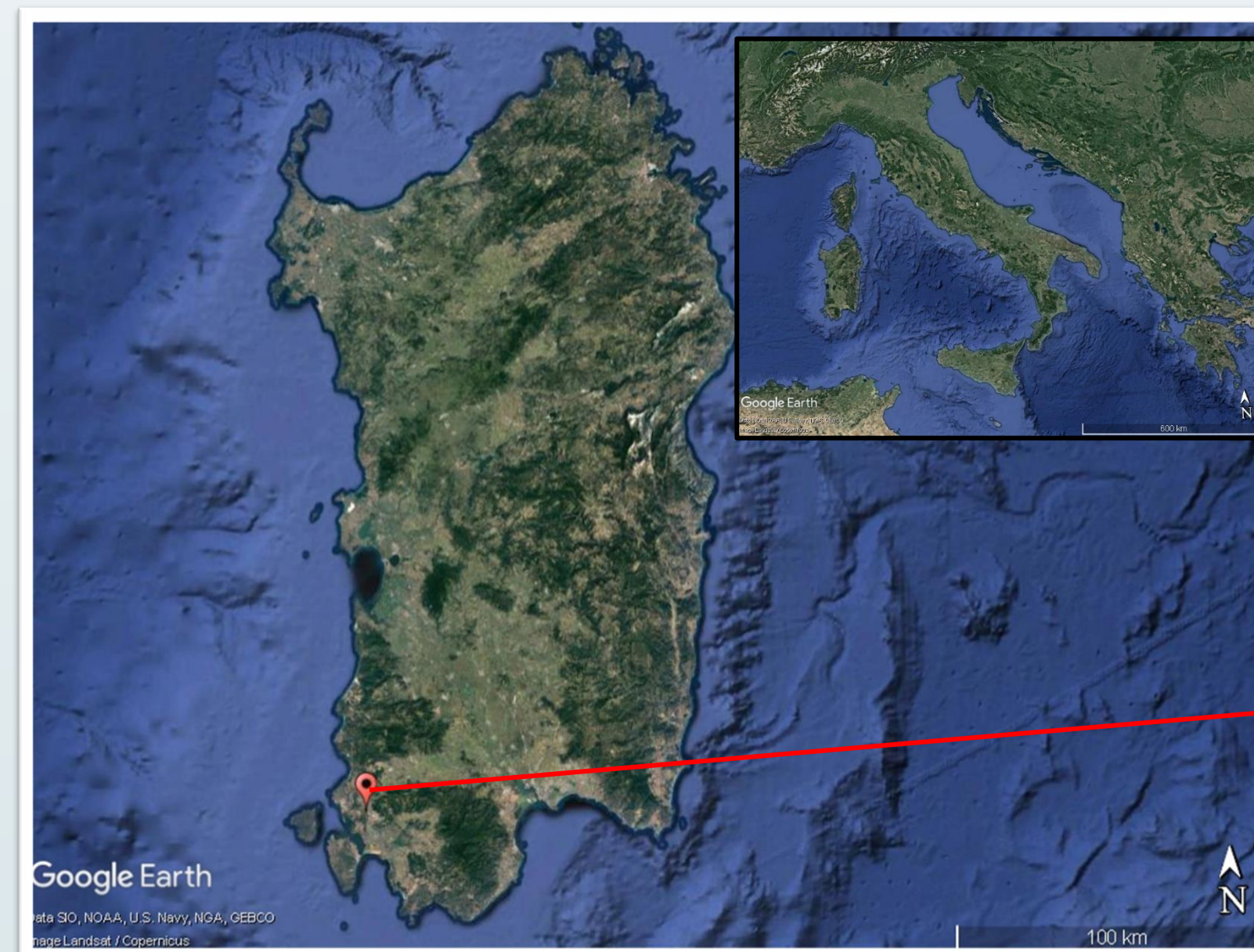


Fig. 1. Map of Italy with zoom on Sardinia and location of Monte Sirai (after <http://maps.google.com>).

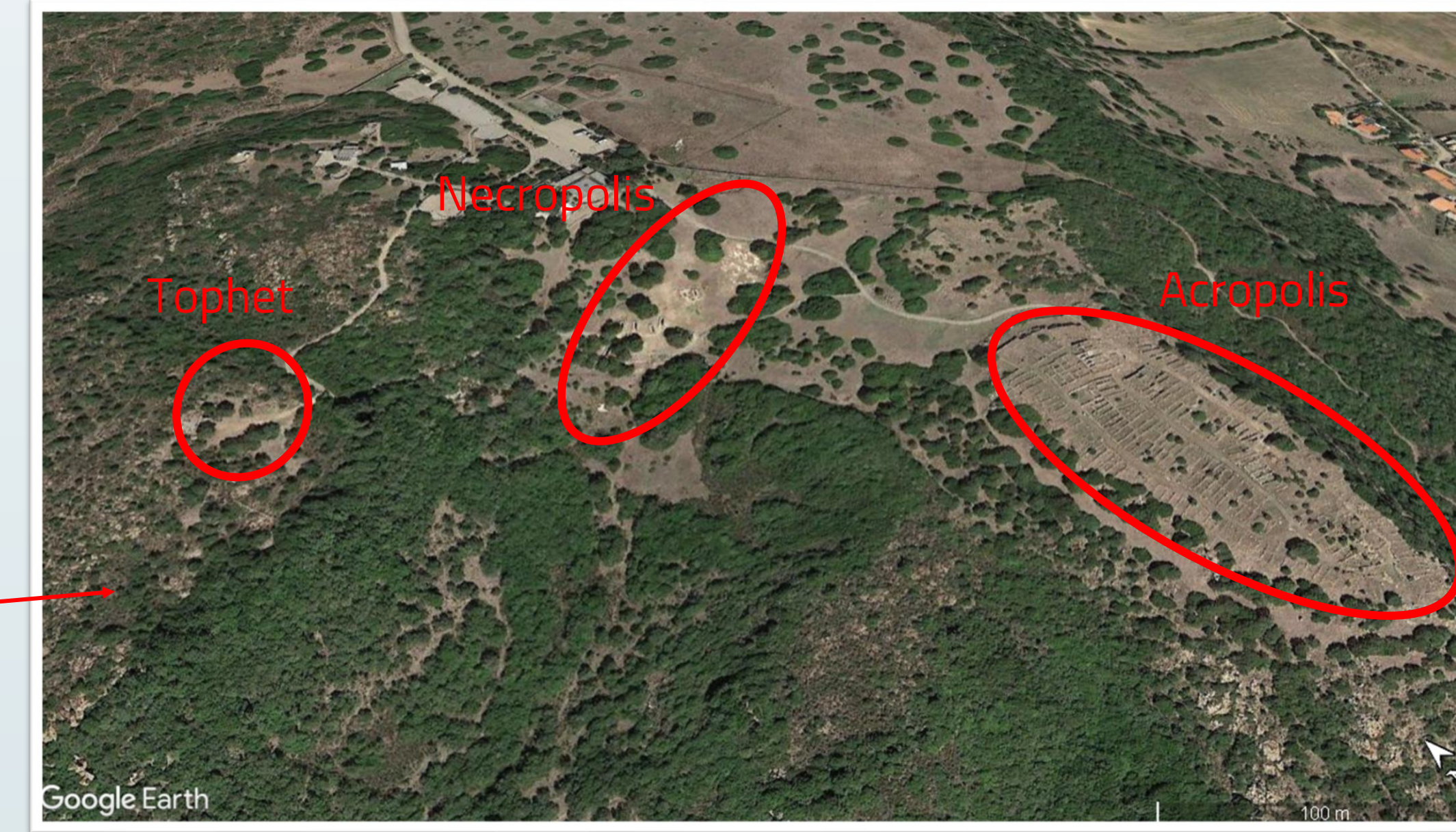


Fig. 2. The archaeological site of Monte Sirai with indication of the acropolis, necropolis and Tophet (after <http://maps.google.com>).



Fig. 3. Hypogeum T. 5 at Monte Sirai with detail of the upside-down relief of Tanit (after <http://virtualarchaeology.sardegna.cultura.it/index.php/it/siti-archeologici/eta-fenicio-punica/area-archeologica-di-monte-sirai/schede-di-dettaglio/1367-tomba-a-camera-n-5>).

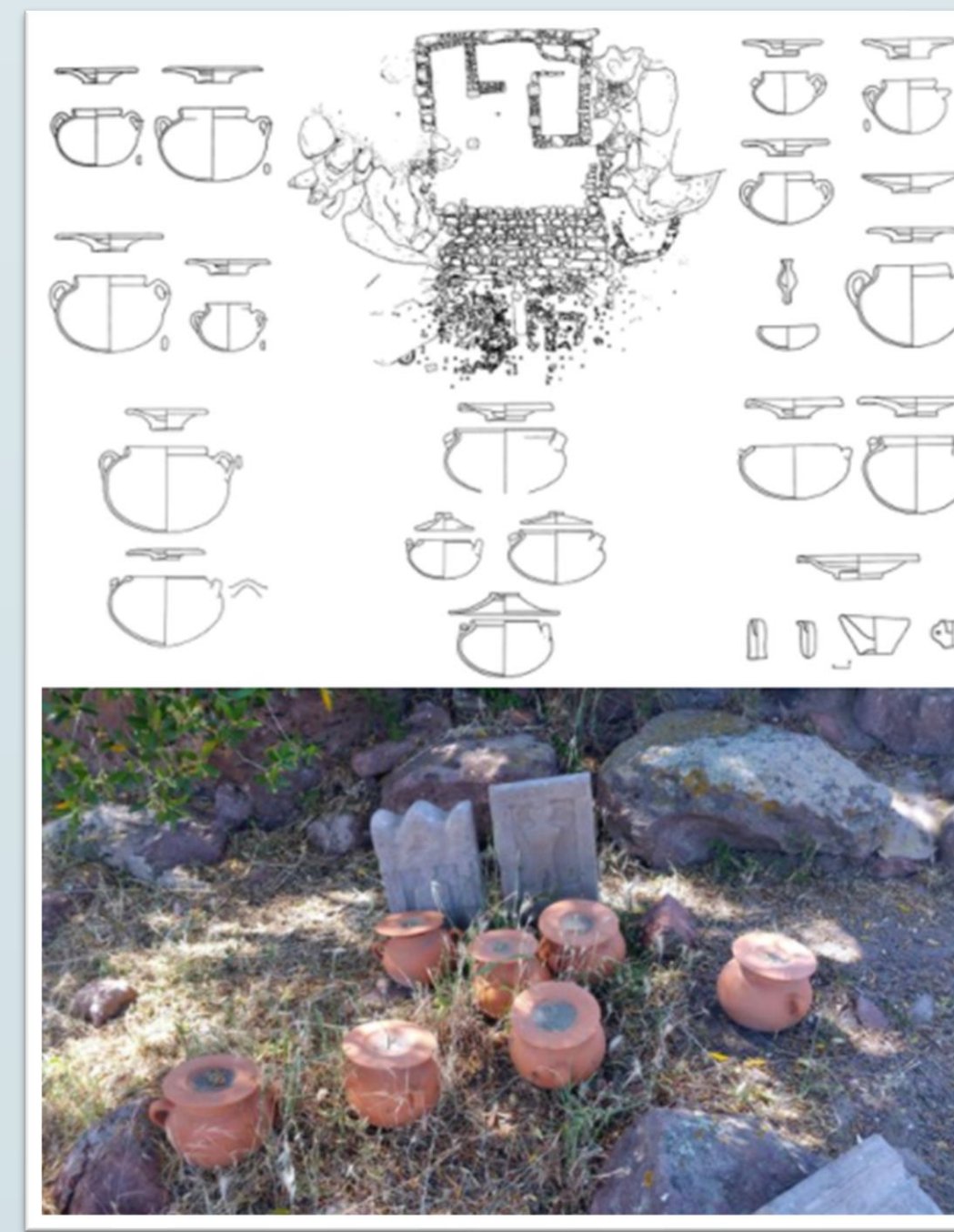


Fig. 4. Planimetry of the Tophet's shrine, distribution and typologies of the urns for infant cremations; reconstruction of Tophet's deposition with stelae and urns (after <http://virtualarchaeology.sardegna.cultura.it/index.php/it/siti-archeologici/eta-fenicio-punica/area-archeologica-di-monte-sirai/schede-di-dettaglio/1371-il-tofet>).



Fig. 5. Area of the ustrinum where the body of the deceased was cremated before being buried in his/her burial in the north-eastern sector of the necropolis of Monte Sirai (after Guirguis 2012, fig. 6).

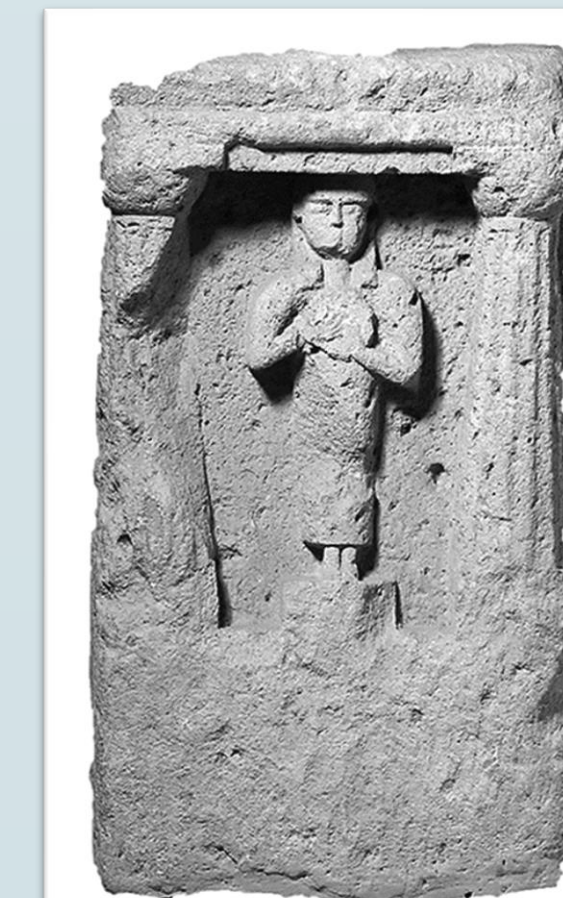


Fig. 6. Stelae from the Tophet of Monte Sirai: female tambourine player (after Pla Orquín 2020, 2807).

Conclusions

1. Re-evaluation of senses' agency

Understanding funerary landscapes and artefacts in terms of sensorial stimuli of, and responses to death, will help re-evaluating the embodied social power of mortuary rituals within Punic Sardinian communities.

2. Preservation and valorization of cultural heritage

This research is imperative, as material culture is subject to degradation, so intangible elements; all components are concurrent to the preservation and valorization of cultural heritage/memory.

Future research

- Application of the same approach to the study of other Punic colonies in Sardinia.
- Application of the same approach to the study of other funerary archaeological contexts.
- Adaptation of the theoretical model for archaeological sites which are less well preserved.

Digital references

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Information

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