# Medieval rural settlements in central Sardinia (Italy): a case study

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Current research is investigating medieval and post-medieval settlement in a central area of Sardinia (Italy). The Middle Ages were the principal formative period for many current rural settlements and yet little effort has so far been made to analyse and understand the sources, structures, and archaeology of these places and to see them in their landscape context. Another core aim is to analyse how people lived in these rural areas in the period AD 1200–1700 and how they used and perceived the landscape as worked and lived space. Using landscape archaeology and historical research in union is vital to study medieval and post-medieval settlements whether in a Sardinian or, much more widely, a European or Mediterranean context.

This study aims to use a specific case study in rural southern Sardinia, and is the first to explore the medieval landscape of this region. During the Middle Ages the area was divided into two different regions, the so-called *curatoria* of Siurgus, once situated on north-western frontier between the Kingdoms of Calari and Arborea. Presently, the area is divided into two modern regions called Trexenta and Sarcidano, while one village is now in the region of Gerrei. The northern and eastern parts of the study area are the most mountainous, with porphyritic and schistose rocks cut by the Flumendosa and Mulargia rivers (which were themselves transformed into reservoirs during the 1950s). Volcanic rocks and basalt flows were created by the volcano of Planumuru. Soils are dry and not very fertile. The southern and western area is much flatter with miocenic sands and limestones that produce fertile soils. Areas of clay and wetland were reclaimed during the 19th and 20th centuries, and a network of minor waterways feeds into this landscape.
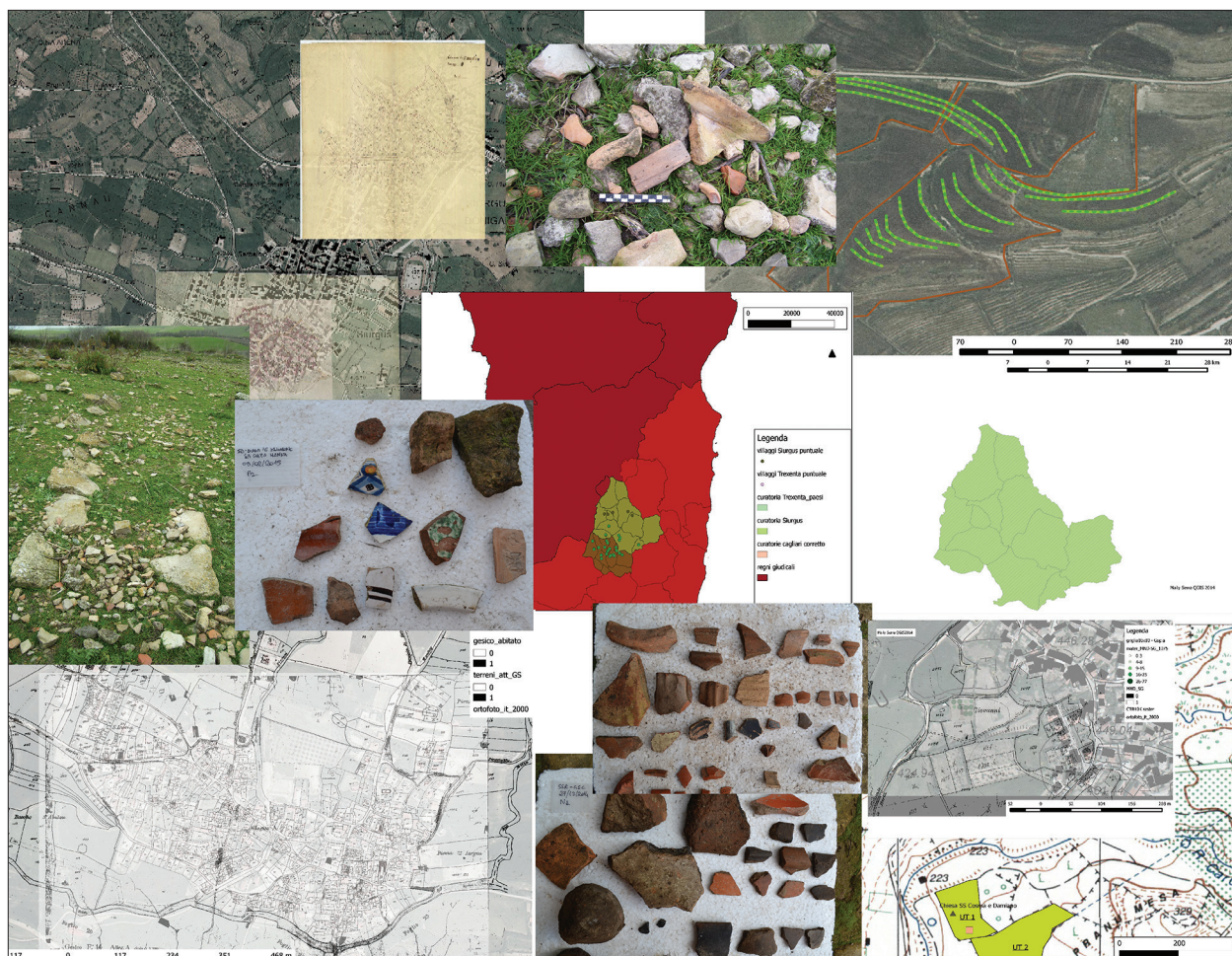


*Figure 1    A montage of images from the project relating to rural central Sardinia.*

The study began by collecting and analysing published and unpublished written sources, including place-names from documents and maps. By combining modern and historic cartography using GIS, it was possible to identify elements of settlement morphology, land use, parishes, boundaries, ancient routeways, trackways, and environmental resources. The research also drew on a range of aerial photography including publically-available orthophotos taken between 1954 and 2006 (available at www.sardegnageoportale.it) and historic aerial photos taken in the early 1950s and supplied by the Aerofototeca Nazionale Italiana. They show ancient monuments such as churches, *nuraghi* and Roman complexes, but also cropmarks and soilmarks that are useful for analysing deserted settlements, field systems and land-use.

During fieldwork, extensive areas have been analysed along transects, while smaller areas have been surveyed with grids. All archaeological evidence has been recorded and digitally archived. The project GIS allows the team to create integrated analyses using different kinds of maps. The study area represents an ideal laboratory to study medieval settlements and landscape, but also to analyse prehistoric, protohistoric and Roman landscapes (Fig. 1).

During the Middle Ages this study zone was made up of about 15 villages. In this note I present an example comprising five settlements – four surviving (Siurgus, Donigala, Mandas and Gesico) and one deserted (Mulargia). Various villages in this and other zones have had a very long history, in some cases developing from prehistoric (e.g. nuraghic) or Roman (e.g. villa) settlements, such as Siurgus and Gesico, while in other cases, sites developed or emerged because of the presence of new religious buildings, as at Mandas, or moved for political or economic reasons, as in the case of Donigala.

The village of Mulargia disappeared during the 17th century because of a (documented) plague, and its surviving population transferred to the nearby village of Orroli. Currently, the site lies beneath a lake.

The village of Siurgus, which was the seat of the 'Curator' in the Middle Ages, had prehistoric roots, developing from one the Sardinia's distinctive *nuraghi*. Its territory features many ruins of farmsteads and hundreds of documents refer to the village from AD 1215 onwards. The medieval plan is evident, linked to changes in the local road system. The church was originally built in the 7th century and is dedicated to St Theodore, patron saint of soldiers. In the rural area traditionally linked to the origin of the settlement fieldwalking demonstrated the presence of 16th century pottery only, probably related to an hamlet.

Donigala is mentioned by several documents in the 14th century. Its original core was probably the site of Ortolanus, a Roman settlement which disappeared during the early Middle Ages. The church has been dedicated to the Virgin since 14th century, though the medieval dedication was to St Biagio. Fieldwalking demonstrated the Roman roots of this settlement, though in the area traditionally linked to the medieval core all sherds identified can be dated to between the 16th to 18th century.

Mandas is a polyfocal settlement which developed and shifted during Aragonese domination of Sardinia in the 14th century, and in the 16th century was the seat of the Duchy. The erection of a new religious building caused the displacement of the villages on the east side of the current nucleus.

Gesico's presence in the landscape is documented from the 13th century. Today's settlement is composed of two villages which were combined in the 19th century: Gesigheddu, probably only created during the 17th century, and Gesigu Mannu, the original medieval village. The sites are divided by the Mannu River, which flows through the centre of the parish. Fieldwalking allowed the team to reconstruct the evolution of the main village, Gesigu Mannu from a large Roman settlement that was probably situated in the same area as a nuragic (Bronze Age) hamlet. The modern site of Gesigheddu reused an area previously populated from the 3rd century BC to the 1st century AD.