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**Divine Water. The rite of "descent" in the Architecture of the Well. Semantic transpositions in the works of Francesco Venezia and Aldo Rossi**

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**Abstract**

The present paper tries to highlight certain characters of the Architecture of Holy Well starting from the Sardinian experience assumed as one of the first excellent signs of the architecture of Rite in the Mediterranean. In the Pagan rites, mostly than into the Roman-Christian subsequent experiences, the role of nature, the divination of its resources but also its figurative interpretation, they entered to belong to the idea of space to the point that the Architecture of Well could be considered as the ritual Sardinian Architecture's crowning point, at least until the Basilica period.

So, the paper is to be seen over the track already outlined by a certain Italian culture that sees the architecture as a continuous experience which has his roots into the most archaic spatial manifestations and also sees the rite as the first design form of architecture.

**Keywords**

Well Temples — Holy Well — Water — Archetype — Descent

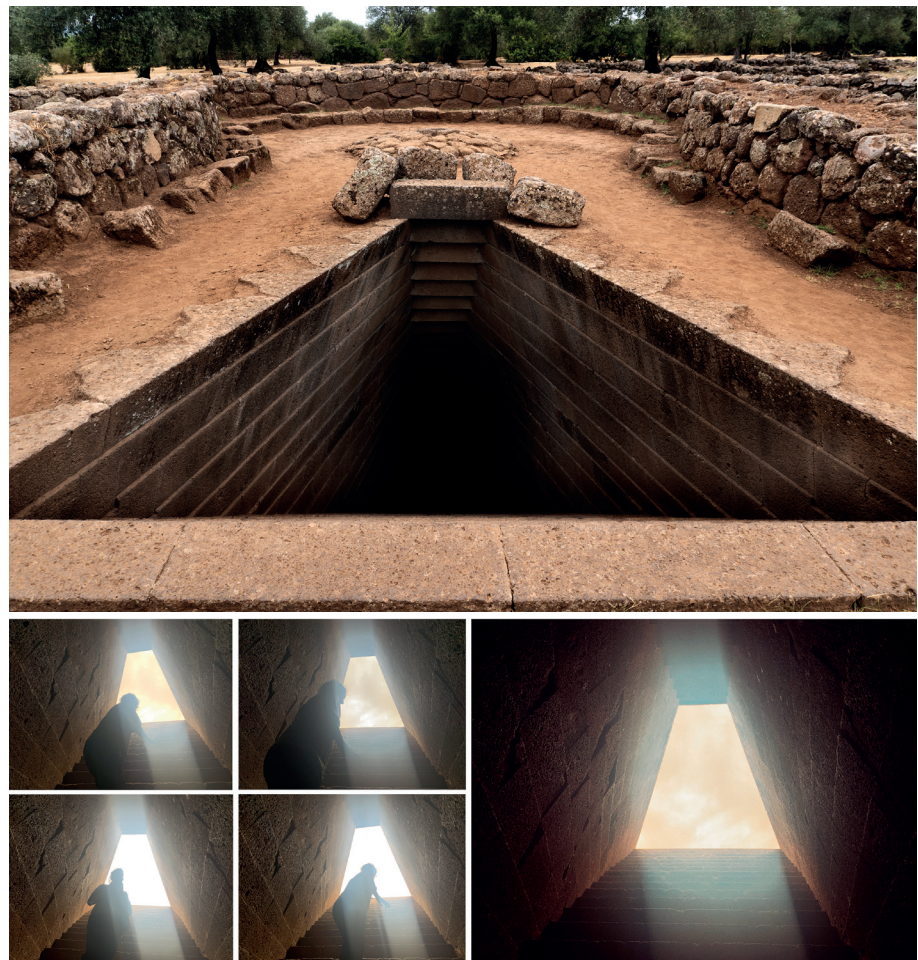
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**Identity between Rite and Space in the Holy Well**

Perhaps for the very first time, the Holy Well – a case that not only will not be repeated but significantly weakened – represents the really original element of the Sardinian landscape if we consider its emancipation from the pragmatic, functional, productive and proprietary idea often considered the cornerstone of its creation, mostly from the Roman domination. Starting right from that ‘anti-classical’ descent of the Sardinian civilization process – and, consequently, of the settled space – repeatedly invoked by Corrado Maltese to explain its customs, living cultures and its own rites, although many of them are still present in the contemporary, that we are allowed to highlight certain characters and, also, a certain influence over the ‘post-modern’ architectural culture.

The introduction of the indissoluble link between the natural resources management – and the same interpretation of nature – and their symbolic-figurative meaning, establishes that ‘spillover’ between prehistoric and historic communities of Sardinia in respect of which it is not longer the immature graffito or the bronze figurine to ensure the main representative form of community, but the space itself and the social behavior in that. Dissociated from a function strictly connected to the existential needs of the Nuragic civilisation, mainly the food and the military ones, the Holy Well seems to be the stronger expression of that civilisation, much more than its opposite and emerging figure, the Nuragic Tower.

It is precisely this characterization of ‘exceptional’, disconnected from its everyday dimension – temporary and ephemeral – finds the main reason precisely in the ritual climax, that makes it primary element, constant presence, and constantly adapting, in all the successive civilisations.

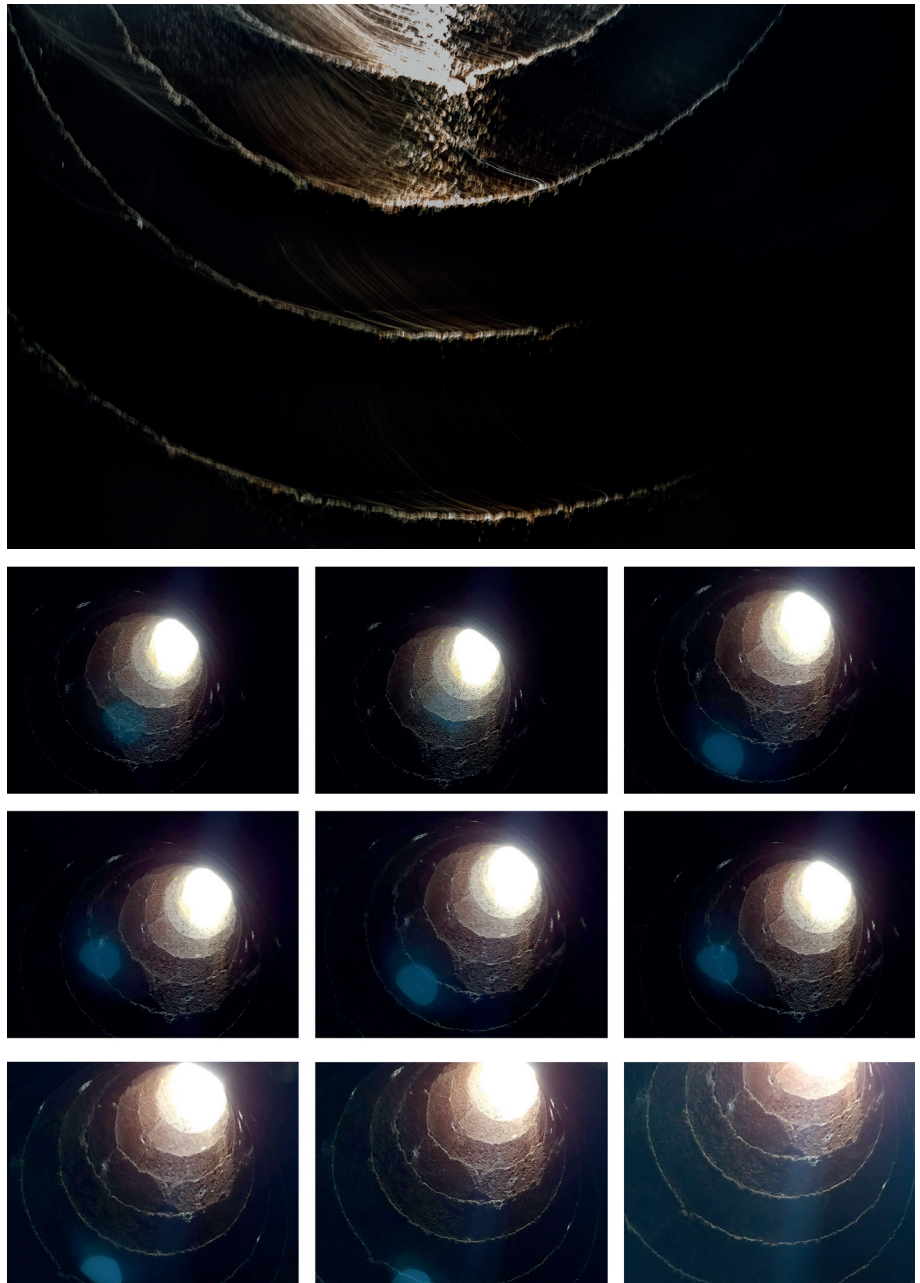
**Figg. 1-2**

Summary of the photographic reportage on the Well of Santa Cristina of Paulilatino. External view of the staircase vestibule; series on the entrance seen from the inside.

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In fact, the Rite of Water ‘that has been handed’, becomes an architecture ‘that has been handed’ and that acquires new forms mediated by the cultures of different times of history and by the new needs, but always with a common code. The ‘round’ architecture of well and the issue of depth entrance to reach the water, have always been present throughout the centuries: the medieval ‘cuba’ of Islamic origins, the covered well of churches squares, the Catalan terraced and fountain-wells, have been the clear evolution of the Holy Well during its progressive passage from being a funeral-divinatory element to a libation one; the libation became the main rite from the Roman to the Modern Period. The divinity of Water was evoked into the Well through the ancient propitiatory rites of rain, spread all over the Mediterranean area, but mostly through the choice of the catharsis places, linked to the rite of descent, of the return to the Source as a return to the ‘origins’. Into this interpretation it is possible to explain the succession of the two main spaces of the Holy Well – the staircase vestibule and the hypogean chamber – in which are represented at the time ‘the descent’ and ‘the stasis’, into the womb of the Earth Mother.

The first spatial experience materialises in the geometric-trapezoid slot, laid out along an enclosed cleaning and sunk into the thickness of the ground, in which the large entrance and the progressively narrow descent – and that becomes closer in all the dimensions – combines the symbolic aspect, made of clear anthropomorphic allusions and of a space that becomes figure and natural monument, with that ‘panic abstraction’ linked to the progressive construction of the darkness, of the cavity and also of the loss of the earthly coordinates. The second one occurs in a subterranean space, but also circular in plan and with a concave shape, that combines



**Fig. 3**

Summary of the photographic reportage on the Well of Santa Cristina of Paulilatino. Detail of the entrance seen from the inside.

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the millenary need and technical skill in building wells with the symbolic aspect of maternal womb that accepts the life.

About the interpretation of forms, it is not insignificant the ‘uterine’ form of the enclosure, axially open in front of vestibule, that divides the well’s area from nature, especially from woods and pasture lands.

### **The Rite of Death as return to Earth: the descent as space of “transition”.**

The functional duplicity of the Holy Well has been present in the main archaeologist theories since the half of the nineteenth century (initially and until at least 1924, it has been seen as tanks by Taramelli, from 2008 it has been definitely seen as Well-Temples by Usai, De Palmas and Webster), suggests non only the exceptional architectural fact, but the permeating of the divinatory rite into Neolithic societies. However from disinterested times, the overlapping between the burial and the well place has been a really important field of research as like as the identification, into the Sardinian construction culture, of a common *modus* and code with others similar



and contemporary cultures, mostly in the Mediterranean: in 1904, Albert Mayr, impressed by the strong similarities to the Mycenaean *Tholoi*, interpreted the Santa Cristina's Well like a really domed-tomb. In fact, as many historical theories show starting from the earliest Neolithic representations, the punitive rite linked to "non-return" from the well is not just an expression of the physical and earthly death, but mostly of the spiritual and "superhuman".

The *Sardus Pater*, but also the bronze warriors and the well-known "Giants" found into the funerary wells, show, in addition to their divine abilities, disproportionate eyes and arms, "exalted" where not multiplied by the magic functions of the water element.

The pagan Priests and the Wise Men considered water also to be a decisive instrument of law: in the case of any crime committed doubt, they forced all the community people to going down to well as a purification action – but also as a punishment; the "non-return" was a proof of guilt.

### **The stone for an abstracted construction. The isodomic form and the role of decoration.**

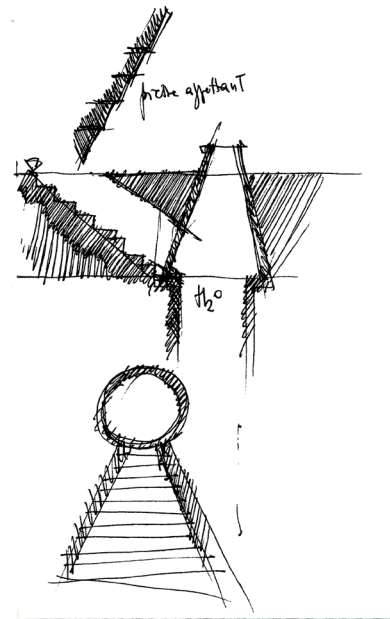
A very main role into the spacial research in this Architecture falls to construction, to a *tékton* which is linked to searching for time and space that are not in real time and real space. Aldo Rossi described it on the pages of *Quaderni Azzurri* as an «ancient presence, enough ancient to be future, because it is not clear if it is caused by a certain mind, machine or wisdom perfection». The research in the construction ways and in the accurate realisation suggests the ritual character of architecture reaching the figurative and symbolic peaks, mostly if we compare them to the contemporary tectonic practices.

An exceptional, in fact, that is difficult to find in its contemporary architecture, like as Nuragic towers, huts, *domus de janas*, still indissolubly linked to a primitive *modus* of building which starts from a basic and archaic *tholos*, urgently needed for defense, shelter and burial.

In the Holy Well's architecture the archetype is made of a precisely sculpted *tholos* which is enhanced by the isodomic construction in which, as stated Francesco Venezia, «...is repeated the trapezoidal figure starting from the single stone's form to the staircase-vestibule's one, in the plan and section viewing». He shall even referred to the Santa Cristina's Well, in the Central basaltic Highlands of Sardinia, near Paulilatino, which represents in some way the "model" of this kind of Architecture. In 1955 Cesare Brandi wrote about it: «in this place everything is incredible, the stones, the elegance of construction, in comparison with it the Atreo's Grave in Mycenae, that is much more bigger, seems like a countryside work, nor can it be imagined that the good Nuragics might have called an Achaean architect».

Close to the Santa Anastasia Well, in Sardara, was discovered a decorative fragment probably belonged to some frame solution of an upper holy niche; it is made of a geometric and serial pattern, a sort of tryglyph *ante litteram*. However, the name of 'Temple' was attribute just since the excavations of the largest archaeological area in Sardinia, that of Santa Vittoria in Serri, in the Central Hills, due to its accuracy of construction and the stone-base over the underground chamber; in the Holy Well *Su Tempiesu*, we can find an interesting variation of a monumental substruction with main facade, characterised by a large triangular pediment close to arch-shaped solutions. Subsequent studies showed precise geometrical relations between plans and elevated structures, proving the consolidated manipula-

perché non si sa dettata  
da quale perfezione di-  
mente, di macchina o di  
sapienza -  
E il contrasto con la natura  
perché il taglio della pietra  
sembra di un'altra civiltà -  
dono sempre affascinato  
da questo sistema di  
discesa mediante scale  
per entrare in uno spazio  
che è illuminato dalla  
luce zenitale - E qui il  
rapporto è tra il cielo  
e l'acqua, così in due  
anni in un anno nell'anno  
in cui la luce entra  
perpendicolarmente  
nel cono e nell'acqua -



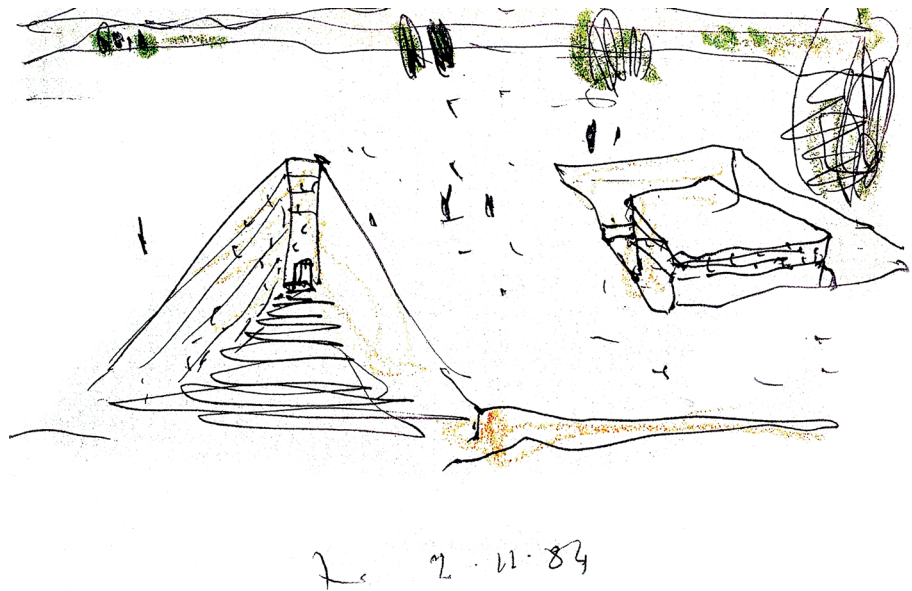
**Fig. 4**

Reproduction of Aldo Rossi's  
Quaderni Azzurri, n. 33, 1987.

tion of proportions and measures linked to astronomical references, as we can usually find into Mediterranean and pre-Christian cultures.

### Continuity in the contemporary design: the Archetype of excavation, the Hypogeum and the “weight” of zenith into Venezia’s and Rossi’s work.

Starting from the idea of Francesco Venezia: «the subterranean world, which better than any other express an essential reference for the human condition, it is, in the memory, a primal perception of building. Each of us, while is thinking about the earliest building form, thinks about digging», and from that of Aldo Rossi, which identifies in the Holy Well’s architecture the apical experience of «the descent space for entering the place illuminated by zenithal light», we can understand not only a renewed and embedded regard for archetype, but also a main characterisation of a settlement culture, the Mediterranean, indissolubly linked to the ritual of space. The question that still today can be putted on this archetypal form – and implicitly on architecture of rite – is particularly useful into the rediscovery process of the basic principles of the architecture in itself and of finding a new central role into design of the original materials like earth, water and light. From these two ideas it doesn’t remain only the informative description of direct experience, but mostly their design intents proved by the unfinished analogical process – through the journey sketches – between the archetype and the architectures which they were designing at the moment. We may identify a precise moment in the Francesco Venezia’s work, at the beginning of 80’s, in which the important reference to this archetype is reflected in the role of the material to capture the time and in the material expression into hypogeum. It appears a growing conviction, already present in the previous years, that one of most important objectives of an architect would be finding the way to put the hidden forms of the subterranean world in the contemporary time and revealing them through the construction. Even if in a tectonic of extrusion or in a ground modeling, instead explicitly of hypogeum, we can find clear reference to the space of descent and shadow in the eroded walls of the Gibellina Archaeological Museum’s patio entrance (1981-87); to those issues in addition to the presence of water in the great cracks of ‘Hidden Gardens’, always in Gibellina (1986); to the shaded de-

**Fig. 5**

Francesco Venezia, sketches of hypogeum forms (Cerveteri).

scent followed by deep doors on earthly tick walls and isodomic stones into the artificial arena of little open-air theatre in Salemi (1983-86).

However, it is at the beginning of 2000's that the Venezia's research and work into hypogeum found a practical and direct application in the recovery and spatial adjustment of the Cathedral of Caserta's Crypt well described in *Nel profondo della Cattedrale. Caserta 2010-2014*. In this case, it is in the concrete walls of the new exposition rooms that is impressed the dramatic and erosive action of the water and of the sand that reveal the layers below, evoking the temporality interpreted in the meaning of the long sedimentation process of material. This renewed role of material temporality of the hypogeum pursued by Venezia, inevitably intersects the continuous research in the field of relationship between the light and the empty space in architecture, not only to design devices for the expositions, but mostly for linking the exposition itself to the symbol and measure of the time. It is still during the beginning of 2000's he designed the exposition for the Venetian Palazzo Grassi titled 'Gli Etruschi', characterized by a big truncated-pyramid skylight which compacts in the middle the brown architectural space of the main room; and also between 2012 and 2015, even if markedly referred to the Egyptian culture, he designed the installations for the 'Salone della Meridiana' of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples and the well-known big pyramid built in the center of amphitheatre of Pompei in which was contained the exposition titled "Rapiti dalla Morte"; in particular those two last works have been completed during 2014, the year in which he traveled again in Sardinia and he held a *Lectio Magistralis* at the Cagliari's Faculty of Architecture opened proper with a presentation of the Paulilatino's Well with many clear references to it.

Due to this interpretation we may better understand the last Aldo Rossi's consideration on the Quaderni Azzurri pages about the visit to the Santa Cristina's Well: «and there is the link between sky and water. It must be a day of year in which the light goes perpendicular into the cone and the water». The two Quaderni pages dedicated to the Well opened with the really close similarities between it and the entrance cone of the Carlo Felice Theatre in Genova, relating to zenith light excavating the thickness of the architectural mass, but mostly in comparison with the Fontana Monumento in the Segrate Municipality square, in which – even if it is showed a meaning inversion be-

tween the descent and the rise, the space in elevation and the hypogeum – it is clear a composition of very similar elements and the exaltation of symbolic circular and triangular forms that sustain a suspended pathway in which manifests the «the slow water leaching on the material».

In order to support the argument, the Holy Well's Architectural Experience is seen as an opportunity, when it is continually being discussed the role of the Rite in architecture, to review the archetypes as one of most important references for the architectural project. As Alberto Campo Baeza writes, in fact: «the light is matter and material (...) it leads our perception of time perforating the space created by generally massive structures, that needs to be hold to the ground to transmit the force of gravity» and insists: «the Ancients required the light from above, what I call 'vertical light'. (...) This is the dimension of that kind of light which penetrates the shadow, it is the extraordinary case of Pantheon».

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