

# Funerary Archaeology and Changing Identities: Community Practices in Roman-Period Sardinia

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To Gianni Albai, an inspirational man



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# 1. Roman-Period Sardinia: a semiotic Theory of Identity

*Tous les êtres se tiennent par une chaîne dont nous apercevons quelques parties continues, quoique dans un plus grand nombre d'endroits la continuité nous échappe. L'art du Philosophe ne consiste pas, comme il ne lui arrive que trop souvent, à rapprocher de force les parités éloignées pour renouer la chaîne mal-a-propos dans les endroits où elle est interrompue; car par un tel effort on ne fait que séparer les parties que se tenaient, ou les éloigner davantage de celles dont elles étaient déjà éloignées [...]. L'art du philosophe consiste à ajouter de nouveaux chaînons aux parties séparées, afin de les rendre le moins distantes qu'il est possible : mais il ne doit pas se flatter qu'il ne restera point toujours de vides en beaucoup d'endroits.<sup>1</sup>*

Jean Le Ronde d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie de Diderot et d'Alembert*.  
(Categorie parente: Science; Categorie: Cosmologie), 1752.

## 1.1 Archaeology and identity: a theory of signs

### 1.1.1. Scope and structure of the book

This is an archaeological study on Roman-period communities of Sardinia. Its purpose is to interpret the finds of Sardinia's funerary practices as signs of group identities. It looks at archaeology in semiotic terms, holding a postcolonial perspective that gives attention mainly to the people left voiceless by the official historical narratives of Rome and its provinces. These are mainly the people – the majority in Roman period society – that did not hold a clearly stated – i.e. through epigraphy – high political, economic, and social rank. Hence, the focus here is on Sardinia's communities and on those subalterns – *sensu Gramsci*<sup>2</sup> – who built their identities through daily activities that involved their interaction with signs left by past communities.

The word “subaltern” refers here to the original meaning attributed by Gramsci in the second paragraph of his *Quaderno 25. Ai margini della storia. (Storia dei gruppi sociali subalterni)* ([1934: (16)] 1975: 2283,2284).

<sup>1</sup> Everything is linked in nature; all beings are connected by a continuous chain in which we sometimes see the continuous parts, even though there are a greater number of places in which the continuity escapes us. The art of the philosopher does not consist, as it all too often happens, of forcing estranged parties together by inappropriately re-forging connections which are unfortunately broken in certain places; [...] Thus the art of the Philosopher consists of offering more links to those separated parties so as to have them at the least distance possible, but he should not flatter himself that there will no longer be any empty space in places.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of subalterns used here is neither that used by mainly Indian scholars who originated the fortunate area of Subaltern Studies in the '80s (see, for instance, the fundamental analysis by Chandra 2015); nor that later promoted in American Universities by scholars (Spivak, 1988, 1999) inspired mainly by Derrida and Foucault (see Liguori, 2011 for a detailed study).

There he writes about how the history of subalterns is disaggregated and sporadic and needs being treated systematically.

The five long chapters and two shorter ones into which this book is divided are meant to simplify the exposition as much as possible. Chapter 1, ‘Roman Period Sardinia: a Semiotic Theory of Identity’ sets up the debate around identity theories and the interpretive frameworks of the Roman world: it will eventually draw a semiotic theory of an archaeology-bound identity looking specifically at Italy and Sardinia. Chapter 2, ‘Funerary Archaeology of Sardinia: Methodology of Data Collection’, presents both my educational background (maintained here influential for the results of this research) and the criteria adopted in selecting the case studies analysed in Chapters 3 to 6; it accounts for both the data sources available and those unavailable from which the limits of this work derive. Chapters from 3 to 6 analyse the selected case studies in relation to both a chrono-typological perspective and the concepts of practice and identity outlined in Chapter 1. Chapter 7, ‘Sardinia's Communities and the Mediterranean at Large’, explores the potential of identity as an interpretive tool by comparing the case studies analysed in each chapter, placing them in a broader Mediterranean context. The last chapter will provide a semiotically informed appreciation of group identities, highlighting the fundamental relationship of each community with the materiality of its past, and offering a multi-dimensional model based on the reconstruction of continuities and discontinuities with such past(s), whilst acknowledging and embracing the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies with which the archaeological remains of funerary practices of Sardinia – and beyond – provide us.

The aims of this study are synthesised in this chapter, Chapter 1, that introduces a theoretical discussion of the three core points developed throughout the book:

1. the definition of identity;
2. the general understanding of the Roman world;
3. the social significance of funerary practice for the previous points.

Section 1.1 centres on the role played by the theory of identity within archaeology. Starting from the premise that any archaeological find is interpreted as a sign of something else – of what happened in the past – the section offers a semiotic understanding of the identity-archaeology relationship. It analyses the notion, definition, and functioning of signs in both Ferdinand de Saussure and C.S. Peirce's semiotic theories, questioning which of them helps the most to enhance the relational value of identity. Section 1.2 looks at key-theories regarding the Roman world – Romanization/*Romanizzazione* and critiques of them – produced in UK and Italy. It relates them to the semiotic theory of identity discussed in the previous and in the following sections. The discussion of Section 1.2 will allow me to define the position of this study in relation to the main interpretive traditions of Roman identity and to clarify why the application of homogenizing models to the Roman world is semiotically unsustainable. Section 1.3 centres on the development of the scholarship working on the interpretation of funerary remains through the last century, first at a general level, second within the Roman world, and third referring to Sardinia. This section will provide a synthesis linking funerary traditions, the Romanization debate, and the semiotic theory of identity.

Aiming at enhancing our understanding of the Roman world, this study explores the theoretical possibilities through which archaeology can contribute to understanding the social value of everyday practices performed in the Roman world, particularly burial-related activities, by connecting the static archaeological record to the dynamic practices that created it. This research springs from the assumption that each human practice is an action potentially able to produce, perpetuate and change – and to be interpreted in relation to – group identities, given the relational nature of human beings. This assumption is founded on Gramsci's wide work and thoughts on the nature of humanity. For Gramsci

“The fact that human nature is “the sum of social relationships” is the most satisfying answer because it includes the idea of becoming. Men become, they mutate continuously along with the mutation of social relationships. And because it denies the “man in general terms”: social relationships are expressed by different groups of men that acknowledge

themselves and whose unity is a dialectical one rather than a formal one’ (Gramsci, 1975 [1930-1931]: 885).

It is essential to understand the communities living in Sardinia during the Roman period in relation to each other and within the broader context of tradition and change, which occurred both at a local level and all around the Mediterranean. This work attempts to do so looking at the practices performed in six sites. These are located between central and southern Sardinia and are: Cagliari, Masullas, Sant'Antioco, Gesico, Ortacesus, Sanluri (Figure 2.5).

The concepts of identity, funerary practice, sign and community mentioned so far need accurate definitions in relation to archaeology before proceeding with their use as interpretive tools. Community is used here to mean a human group whose members share a common space. Archaeology highlights only a portion of such space – the site – artificially detaching it from the whole, where the group's individuals enacted collective practices that emphasize their perceived togetherness (Mac Sweeney, 2011: 37). This enhances the definition proposed by Trigger for whom a community is ‘a group of people who normally live in face to face association for at least part of the year’ (Trigger, 1978: 118, quoting Murdock, 1949: 79). The combination of these definitions has a twofold advantage. On the one hand, it avoids considering a community as a homogeneous and autonomous entity, as it accounts for the possibility of having different practices performed within the same community. On the other, it avoids the ‘danger of classifying different aspects of life of the same groups as different cultures’ (Trigger, 1978: 116), as it acknowledges that diverse practices can be expressed by members of the same community. The concept of community intertwines with those of identity and funerary practices that will be provided below.

### **1.1.2. Identity and archaeology: an inevitable relationship**

In 2007, Timothy Insoll wrote, at the beginning of his *Archaeology of Identity*. A reader that ‘identity today is a ‘hot’ topic even though it might not be defined as such’ (Insoll, 2007: 1). Eight years later, in May 2015, identity gained centrality during a heated debate that took place at the Laurence Seminar, *Rethinking Artefacts in Roman Archaeology: Beyond Representation*, organised by A. Van Oyen and M. Pitts at the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge. The seminar's aim was to move away from representational uses of archaeology, meaning by this to consider ancient artefacts *per se* rather than as signs of something else. By doing this, the seminar encouraged an understanding of Roman-period material culture through the implementation of new models, such as material agency. Although marginal to the scope of the majority of papers presented, the

concept of identity emerged repeatedly throughout the seminar. This indicates that today as in 2007, identity is still an issue of paramount concern, unavoidable, although seemingly marginal to the archaeological agenda. Furthermore, we live in a period when identity – often poorly defined and radicalised – is central to any piece of news in the newspapers, on television or on the radio. Some examples around an approximate use of identity will recall such trend.

Recently, on Sunday 21st of June 2015, thousands gathered in *Piazza San Giovanni*, Rome – for the ‘Family Day’ – to defend the so-called identity of the traditional family, and to protest against the recognition of civil rights to homosexual unions. In the last 24 months, E.U. has constantly called for strengthening the member states’ European identity in order to fight the challenges of today’s world.<sup>3</sup> ISIS/ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant, sadly famous all over the world for the atrocities committed across the Middle East and in Europe, is increasingly defined by western media as founded on religious principles, creating a permanent Orientalising and misleading identification between Muslims and a monolithic Arab world. Pope Francis himself felt the need to declare that ‘identifying Islam with terrorism is not fair and logically sustainable.’<sup>4</sup> A new identity, that of the illegal immigrants, is also arising, following the mass migrations, among others, of the Rohingya from Burma to Indonesia, and of the war refugees from Syria and Africa to the coasts of Italy and Greece, followed by the hysteria and the proposal of closure of the E.U. and Australian borders. Our world today, notwithstanding the extent to which it is interconnected through hi-technology and social media, reportedly thrives on the declaration of clear-cut identities seemingly committed to self-preservation and fearing contact with the ‘other’.

Archaeology, having a broad temporal perspective on the history of human beings through their relationship with things, has an enormous potential not only to enhance our knowledge of the past but also to contribute decisively to contemporary debates on identities, joining economics, sociology and anthropology among the disciplines with a voice.

Since its origins, archaeology has dealt with identity. In the first half of the 20th century, it was mainly concerned with distinguishing between archaeological cultures – assemblages of objects – and people (Jones, Graves-Brown, 1996: 4; Meadows, 1997; Roymans, 1996, 2004; Pohl, Reimitz, 1998), contributing to the political creation of nations based on their archaeological

evidence (Jones-Graves-Brown, 1996; Meskell, 1998; Diaz-Andreu, 2005, 2007; McGuire, 2008). This approach, which tended to see artefacts ‘as “signatures” or “representations” of specific cultures’ (Casella, Fowler, 2004: 1), was widely criticised in the second half of the century (i.e. Trigger, 1978: 75, 131). Then, identity was often qualified with an adjective – cultural, religious, ethnic, gender related – in order to specify its human sphere of reference.

Despite its widespread use in social studies, there are not many clear definitions of identity available. Ambiguity has often characterized the use of the term identity in ethnography and anthropology too, where it is used to discuss both an individual and groups (Barnard and Spencer, 1996: 292). This ambiguity is linked with the concept of culture that developed in archaeology in the early decades of the 20th century. As noted above, archaeological cultures, defined by shared material features – pottery, metals, houses, graves (i.e. Gordon Childe, 1927, 1929) – became identified with ethnic groups (i.e. Bosh Gimpera, 1922 on the Iberic Peninsular). Such approaches in social thought and in ethnicity studies were modified through time. Barth (1969) had an important impact on the matter by suggesting that the boundaries between such ethnic groups – identities – were constantly created and renegotiated and never immutable.

From the 70s, the role of the individual became more actively taken into account when discussing group identity, especially due to the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979) and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (1972). Emphasis was placed first on the capacity of people to make choices – agency – and second on their understanding of how the world around them operates – *habitus*. Following this, identity came to be dealt with in association with feminist and gender studies (Gilchrist, 1994; Graves, 1989), status, particularly within Marxist studies of class struggle (McGuire and Paynter, 1991), religion (Mendels, 1992), and with a focus on material culture within archaeology (Hodder, 1982).

In the last 20 years, the tendency has been to deal with identity not in isolation but within its social context, creating links especially between gender and status (Hodder, 1982; Díaz-Andreu, 2005) gender and age (Lucy, 2005), religion and nationalism (Regev, 2013), ethnicity and gender (Hodder, 1982; Meskell, 2001; Díaz-Andreu, 2005; Mac Sweeney, 2011), and ethnicity and status (Gardner, 2007; McGuire, 2013).

Central to the plethora of identity-studies carried out over the last decades is the concept of practice, through which people’s actions create the material conditions to sustain their lives, to contribute to social reproduction, and, to an extent, to change the society

<sup>3</sup> See the inaugural speech by Matteo Renzi, Italian Prime Minister, at the opening of the E.U. Italian Semester, July 1st 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Words pronounced on the flight back from Krakow to Rome on July 31, 2016.

to which they belong and the personal and group identities which they embody. This framework makes identity particularly accessible through archaeology (Dobres and Robb, 2000) because allows scholars to define human groups looking – put simply – at what they do/did with the material objects available to them, rather than identifying them with such objects. It is clear that the introduction of the concept of practice in the identity debate has elevated our understanding of the past to a higher step. Nevertheless, the concept of practice is not a risk-free one, usable with no rules and specification, as the next sub-section will show.

### 1.1.3. Today's critique of identity approaches

On diversity in gender, minorities and individuality often within multicultural societies. One of the main methodological strengths of identity is its postcolonial potential –*sensu* Edward Said<sup>5</sup> – which allows ‘us to understand social groups and cultures that were not able or empowered to write their own histories’ (Pitts, 2007: 697). Said’s postcolonial aim parallels the one pursued in this book: highlighting mutable and relational identities against the background of a homogeneously constructed history of the Roman world. However, this scope is not free from risks. One cannot just argue for multiculturalism a priori, assuming that such model succeeded in the past and will succeed in the future just to be politically correct; one rather needs to assess and analyse contextually multicultural groups of communities (Insoll, 2007: 14). For instance, Pitts (2007: 696) has underlined the risk, specific to Roman archaeology, of dealing with identity as simply ‘a descriptive process, looking for diversity for diversity’s sake’, rather than attempting a historically informed exploration of how such diversity may have flourished within the Roman Empire. This work tries to deal with diversity contextually, looking at the evidence of funerary practices in Roman-period Sardinia by attempting to go beyond the blatant uniformity of objects used, and of the adoption of apparently uniform practices. Spotting diversity requires a very high and scientific attention for depositional details that will hint at diverse practices. Hence, despite considering the risks highlighted, the brief account of identity given so far raises the question of ‘whether one can actually have an archaeology that is not concerned with identity’ (Insoll, 2007: 1). This considered, the challenge today is, on one hand, how to deal with identity without reducing the archaeological evidence to a material support to a priori ideas of the world as-we-would-like-it-to-be; on the other, how to break the resistance to let diversity emerge through multiple identities that we ourselves attribute to the materiality of the world.

<sup>5</sup> As it appears particularly in *Orientalism*, where Said shows how multiple and complex cultures are often homogenised and simplified for scholarly and political purposes (Said, 1978: 12-14).

### 1.1.4. Semiotic definitions of identity and identities of semiotics

#### A. Remotti's identity between Peirce and Saussure

In his book *Contro l'Identità*, Remotti (1996: 60), aiming to describe the relational nature of identity, invites those who deal with it theoretically, historians and sociologists, to go beyond it, quitting the logic of identity *per se*. Obsessively sought, identity risks losing its own specificities that derive from the relation between diversities. An obsessive identity becomes simple identification. Despite they sound similar, identity and identifications encapsulate very different concepts. Roland Barthes (1977), in his imaginative *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, defines very effectively identification as a pure structural operation: it gives importance primarily to the ‘position’ occupied by an element/individual/society in a closed structure (Barthes, 1977: 153), neglecting their specificities and their capacity to act differently from others.<sup>6</sup> This work attempts avoiding this structural and ‘topographic’ operation by making clear the conceptual gap standing in between identity and identification and by consequently attempting to be as close as possible to the former and keep distance from the latter.

This chapter follows Remotti's suggestion by attempting to go beyond obsessive identities – static identifications – by engaging with identity theoretically first, and looking at the material evidence second. It provides a definition of identity that looks at the multiple elements that take part in the processes of human interaction both historically and socially.

I maintain that central to the process of construction and negotiation of identity is the interpretation of signs. Hence, it is crucial to a successful reconstruction of such process to be aware of the different interpretive frameworks and definition of signs that have been given by philosophers, anthropologists, and archaeologists. It is undeniable that human beings act in certain ways, in relation both to others and to the past, by producing signs that allow people to make assumptions about who they are in relation to what/whom surrounds them. For this purpose, the study of identity pursued here is based on the definition of sign, the most relational entity existing.

The word sign is used here by referring to the definitions and theory of signification formulated by American pragmatist C.S. Peirce between 19th and 20th centuries, and later developed by Umberto Eco and other scholars

<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Barthes refers to the condition of the lover – to the person who has fallen in love – that is dealt with by society as always the same in each situation. “I am that individual who occupies my same position” (My translation of Barthes 1977: 102).

of the Italian<sup>7</sup> tradition from the 1970s onwards.<sup>8</sup> Peirce has defined a sign as ‘something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity’ (C.P. 2.228).<sup>9</sup> This definition points to the presence of three elements at once with which the interpreter has to deal, by building on an action of *semiosis*. This, for Peirce, always involves a triadic relationship, which can never be resolved in a relationship between any two elements (C.P. 5.484). This definition is crucial to clarify the particular theory to which I have chosen to refer<sup>10</sup> (and that which I reject) by using the words semiotics, sign, meaning and interpretation. And it is also crucial to understand the impasse that often characterises the debates on identity.

Two main school of semiotic studies have developed: one from the work of C.S. Peirce, and the other from that of French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.

Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Cours de Linguistique générale* (1916), defined the sign as a two-faced entity, formed by signifier and signified - *signifiant et signifié* - which are respectively ‘a concept and a sound pattern’ (Saussure, 1966: 66). This description derived from Saussure’s studies in linguistics and has remarkably contributed to develop a semiotic consciousness (Eco, 1975: 25). The key of Saussure’s theory is that the correspondence between signifier and signified is programmatically ‘unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified’ (Saussure, 1966: 69, in Preucel, 2006: 19). This works fine when it comes to the use and understanding of language, that was exactly the sphere of interest of Saussure. Saussure’s definition of sign differs in many ways to those provided by Peirce, one of which was quoted above in this subsection. The definitions of sign of the two philosophers differ, foremost, because of the number of elements involved in the signification process. These are two for the French linguist, three (and never fewer), for the American philosopher. But they also differ fundamentally in their theoretical nature, although some intriguing attempts of combining the two have recently arisen (i.e. Paolucci, 2010). The three interchangeable entities in Peirce’s theory are contrasted by a codified correspondence of two elements, signifier and signified, container and content, in Saussure’s one.

An example will further clarify the conceptual distance between the two semiotics. The relationship that characterises the Saussurian sign to its meaning is that between a word and the idea to which it refers. The word ‘tree’ designates an entity characterised by a vertical trunk, which branches out and grows green leaves and fruits, and that uses roots to find nutrients under the soil. No one who speaks the English language will be confused when the word tree is mentioned and associating the word tree to a specific tree will seem to anyone the most logical process. Nonetheless, the relationship between these specific features of the tree - the signified - and the word composed by specific sounds is in no way intrinsic. It is not a naturally occurring one. Rather, it is a conventionally established one. By contrast, Peirce introduces in the interpretive mechanism a third element to mediate a meaning to a specific sign. Peirce calls this third element *interpretant*.

Peirce defined the interpretant in numerous ways. The most quoted one, but also the most misleading if read by itself, is ‘a mental sign of the same object’ (E.P. 1998: 13), where the object is the meaning of a sign. Peirce explained in various ways that the interpretant is a name he gave to a process, rather than to an element. For Peirce, ‘the soul without the body is simply an impossibility and an absurdity [henceforth] a sign must have an interpretation or interpretant, as I call it. This interpretant, this signification, is simply a metempsychosis into another body’ (MS 1906: 298: 15, 24 quoted in Gorrée, 1993: 196). Eco synthesises Peirce’s numerous definitions by stating that an interpretant is what grants the validity to the sign even though the interpreter were absent (Eco, 1975: 101). In other words, the interpretant is another representation of the same meaning. It could be either an idea, an object, or even a complex discourse that not only translates the sign in its meaning but also develops all its logical possibilities (Eco, 1975: 13), for example an encyclopedia, an history book, or a typology of Roman pottery to which we refer when studying the material culture dug out from an archaeological site. Let us now go back to the example of the tree. The Peircean sign would start from the interpretation of the word ‘tree’ and potentially arrive to signify, for instance, the father of the interpreter, via various interpretants: a photograph (sign) of a specific tree that the interpreter planted in his childhood (interpretant) can trigger the memory of his family (meaning). Due to their capacity of offering a physically verifiable object to the rightfulness of the interpretation, interpretants can be properly ‘material expressions’ (Eco, 1975: 379) rather than just mental ones. In the example of the tree, the memory recalled by the interpretant is certainly mental, but for the interpreter it has a physical value as it will bring back with it experiences that he himself lived once: the smell of the wet ground, the cold of the shovel used to dig the

<sup>7</sup> U. Volli, P. Fabbri and recently P. Violi, M. Leone, C. Paolucci.

<sup>8</sup> Umberto Eco’s *Trattato di Semiotica Generale* (1975) results from decades of semiotic studies in Europe, US, and Russia, and began a new tradition of study that is widely cited, both in Italy and worldwide.

<sup>9</sup> The texts of C.S. Peirce are referred to as CP: *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, volumes I-VII; EP: *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*.

<sup>10</sup> See Preucel’s (2006) *Archaeological Semiotics* for a full account of the use of different semiotic theories in relation to the paradigms of both processual and post-processual archaeology.

tree bole, the texture of the tree at the touch, the green of its little leaves, and so on.

The main novelty of Peirce's semiotic theory is that the production of meaning is potentially infinite, a phenomenon that Peirce calls *synechism* – or continuity (EP: 312-33). This consists in a chain of interpretants and meanings each of which contributes to explain the previous and following ones by holding different perspectives on apparently the same matter/sign. The meaning just found – a specific tree – can itself become a sign standing for, for instance, the feeling of coolness mediated by the memory of the shade that the tree creates in the hot weather, and so on.

Where Saussure's signs are arbitrary and independent, and under rare circumstances allow to account for change, Peirce's signs are interrelated and participate in the signification process in such a way that the sign itself becomes a process rather than an entity.

#### B. Exemplifying Peirce's semiotics: Umberto Eco and Karl Marx

At this stage, it is useful to provide a clear explanation of the opposite directions that the study of any material culture may take depending on whether Peirce's or Saussure's semiotics are applied to identity studies. A fitting example comes from the theory of the form of value provided by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, where he shows how all commodities can become signs that stand for other commodities (Eco, 1975: 40). Eco is particularly interested in the fact that Marx suggests that commodities are organised in a system of oppositions that is very similar to that used for phonological values in linguistics (Eco, 1975: 40). However, what is looked at here is how Marx designed the concept of value warning against its reduction to a simplistic identification between two elements only, in a similar guise to what is attempted in this study on identity. For Marx,

'if we say that, as values, commodities are mere congelations of human labour, we reduce them by our analysis, it is true, to the abstraction, value; but we ascribe to this value no form apart from their bodily form. It is otherwise in the value relation of one commodity to another. Here, the one stands forth in its character of value by reason of its relation to the other.' (Marx, 2013 [1867]: 29)

The key expressions in this passage are 'mere congelations of labour' and 'value relation'. Although Marx admits that labour is embodied in the value of a commodity, he manifests his dissatisfaction in making this value correspond to the congelation of labour that was necessary to create it only. Stating that, Marx exposes an idea of stasis that fails to explain

the concept of value, which is instead a dynamic and mutable entity in both capitalist and pre-capitalist worlds. This is where Marx clarifies that we take into account the bodily form of commodities, but if we want to understand their relational use we have to go beyond that.

Apart from the necessary account of the labour embodied in it, value is expressed by the relational character between commodities. From this follows the famous example of the value of coats in relation to the linen from Section 2 of Chapter 3 of Volume 1 of the *Capital* (Marx, 2013: 68-77). Although the amount of labour to produce the two commodities may remain the same over time, one has to be aware that production, economic, and social conditions can change in such a way that the relationship between the two commodities can be completely modified. The result is that the labour necessary to produce them can become, at some stage, less significant than other factors.

If we substitute the word 'value' with 'meaning' and 'commodity' with 'sign', we will find that Marx's definition of value matches Peirce's definition of sign. This should cause no surprise as both philosophers lived between the middle and the end of the 19th century, witnessing the first results of the industrial revolution. Both were interested in the social significance of the material world in relation to human beings' needs and concepts. Both are deep-rooted in a humanistic interpretation of reality.

Synthesising, Saussure's theory is closer to the system of value that Marx criticises, the one that provides a congelation of value/meaning, a direct correspondence between signifier and signified, a fixed content for a fixed container. In fact, the famous equation Marx makes – 20 yards of linen = 1 coat – in isolation would be of no use in a social and economic system, being only a static correspondence unable to account for change in taste, availability of sources, climatic conditions, exploitation, workers' requests, capital status. This is the reason why Marx reminds us that 'their change of value is seen as soon as they are compared with a third commodity' (Marx, 2013 [1867]: 32). The inclusion of a third element within what started as a binary relationship is fundamental to allow the latter to produce meaning, unblocking it from a static identification. In order to help us understand what this means, Marx literally takes us out to the market – the real place where commodities are given value in relation to each other – 'to accompany the owner of some commodity – say our old friend the weaver of linen' (Marx 2013: 69). Following the weaver to the market, Marx disentangles the labour-value of his linen to that of the coat introduced earlier, and introduces another term of comparison in the guise of other commodities. The weaver manages to sell £2 of linen but does not go

home with those. Rather, he re-exchanges exactly those £2 with another commodity 'which is destined to enter his house as an object of utility and of edification to its inmates': the weaver bought a Bible. By doing so, Marx disproved the idea that the value of commodities is embodied in the labour required to produce them. This would not be enough to explain value at all. Hence, he introduced the concept of use-value. The amount and types of labour required to produce £2 of linen and a Bible are certainly not comparable. However, the two commodities could be exchanged for the same money because our weaver – together with other sellers and buyers at the market – has acknowledged the use-value of the book. The use and the request of the market to use some commodities give value to them. And as practices, ideas, and uses of objects did change and may change, so did and will their use-value, independently from the labour provided to produce them.

It is maintained in this study that Peirce's sign is very close to Marx's value relation of commodities, being able to include, in the production of meaning, the contextual variables – a third element – that make them acquire dynamism, allowing those who study them to avoid a reduction to pairings and to account swiftly for change. Two further decisive elements from Marx's theory of value can help us understand better how signs work in Peirce's theory, and how they are used in the theory of identity proposed here. The first is that value, which is the ability of one commodity to stand for another, 'exists in the case of any commodity B, only when some other commodity A enters into a value relation with it, and then only within the limits of this relation' (Marx, 2013 [1867]: 34). This recalls the 'some respects or capacities' of Peirce's definition of sign through which he tells us that a relationship established between two things, their meaning, is not valid under all circumstances, but only under specific and contextually motivated ones. The second element is the concept of infinite continuity (see sub-section A above). For Marx (2013 [1867]: 41), the expression of value is potentially infinite as 'the chain of which each equation of value is a link, is liable at any moment to be lengthened by each new kind of commodity that comes into existence and furnishes the material for a fresh expression of value'.

The social dynamism Marx expresses through the theory of value of commodities resembles the theory of *synechism* and the chain of interpretants of Peirce. The key concept for both is that no value/meaning is fixed unless it becomes conventionally motivated for someone with a specific purpose, provided that all subjects involved accept the stagnation that it brings along. Socially dynamic meanings/values are, instead, constantly renegotiated via the introduction of new elements that reinforce, motivating it, or weaken,

denying it, the relationship between two signs/commodities.

This example from *Das Kapital* should have clarified that where Saussure's theory is a model of equivalence, Peirce's theory is a model of logically-motivated inference: interpretation. It is an act of mediation between two elements, A and B, by a third element, C, which can exist only in relation to the others.

### *C. Semiotics and archaeology: only a partial commitment*

Several archaeologists have engaged systematically with the literature on semiotics (i.e. Gardin, 1992; Preucel and Bauer, 2001) although principally referring to Saussure (Preucel, 2006: 3; Lele, 2006: 50) rather than to C.S. Peirce.<sup>11</sup> The approach inspired by the Swiss linguist has been particularly successful within cognitive archaeology (Renfrew, Zubrow, 1994; Marcus, Flannery, 1994; Renfrew, Bahn, 2000) and is detectable within Roman archaeology too.

In one of the most recent attempts to link Roman material culture and identity, Eckardt highlights the flaws of post-processual approaches to material culture by stating that their 'concept of objects as essentially arbitrary signs fails to engage with the physical and specific nature of things' (2014: 8). This comment reveals a widespread assumption held by scholars of the Roman world: when material culture studies adopt a semiotic approach, they follow the Cartesian division between mind and matter. This shows that the understanding of material culture is deeply, even if perhaps unconsciously, entrenched in the Saussurian theory of sign. Eckardt's critique refers, indirectly, to Saussure's binary sign, constituted by a physical half and a mental half: the symbol.

Indeed, whenever a semiotic approach is brought into archaeology, its users tend to make the materiality of things disappear and the arbitrariness of meaning manifest. This way of proceeding is typical of symbolic rather than of contextual archaeology. In opposition to this trend, the latter is sought in this book.

An illustrious example of a symbolic – Saussurian – approach in archaeology is D'Agostino's study of Iron Age necropolis of Pontecagnano. Discussing typology and the function of material culture, D'Agostino (1988: 13) claims that, when trying to approach objects' meanings, as in linguistics, one can speak of the arbitrariness of the sign-object, which needs to be considered inside a codified system. This framework is typical of an attempt to discern the world through

<sup>11</sup> See also Gambatesa (2015 and 2016) who engages with a further semiotician, Algirdas Julien Greimas and with his semiotic square of oppositions, quickly dismissed in archaeology.

symbols, as happens in communication. Indeed, a symbol is the sign that expresses a meaning by means of a communicative act (Eco, 1975: 25). This appears in all of the examples of signs Saussure refers to, which are all highly conventionalized and often come from linguistics studies. Conversely, Peirce's examples of sign offer a plethora of cases, including both intentionally produced signs, aimed at communicating, and unintentionally left ones, available for any potential interpreter to consider as symptoms, unconscious behaviours, unwitting gestures, and practices.

The distinction between Peirce's and de Saussure's sign is important here because it provides a scientific base for the archaeology of practice and identity. Along with Preucel (2006: 3) and others (Gottdeiner, 1995; Keane, 2003; Parmentier, 1997; Sirigu, 2003, 2005), I maintain that the Saussurian theory of signs cannot support a sound and relational interpretation of material culture. By contrast, the Peircean model provides a dynamic theory indispensable for questioning homogenising models. It does so by extending the signification process to all archaeological finds on a site, whether intentional or unintentional products, seeking a correlation between all of them. It allows us to assess any human practices – and relative material signs – as relevant partakers in signifying identity. The adoption of Peirce's theory of sign allows us to define communities fluidly, based on what people did individually, collectively, in relation to each other and, particularly, to the past. This work seeks to apply such framework to the burial sites of Sardinia looked at here.

This framework fits Gramsci's definition of human nature quoted in Section 1.1.1, where he considers that social relationships and becoming are essential to all men. Gramsci's idea is embodied in two of the most successful attempts to apply Peirce's semiotic framework to archaeological studies: Lele's concept of human identity and Preucel's account for semiotic ideology.

Lele (2006) has stressed how, when it comes to material culture, Peirce's semiotics helps overcoming the Cartesian division of mind *versus* matter that underpins Saussure's conception of sign. He demonstrated that material habits provide the substance for human identities, looking at how the use of rosaries performed in Aran, Western Ireland (2006: 58-62). The rosary is a tool composed of 50 beads linked together by a thread that finishes in a cross, used by religious Catholics to pray the Holy Mary. The rosary works as a reminder of how many prayers are to be recited to the end of a series of 50. Lele came across someone using a rosary with worn-out beads in a western Irish house, and inferred that they were the physical sign of usage of the rosary. Being each rosary formed of five groups of ten beads, each bead indicates to the person using it how many

prayers, out of a total of 50, he/she has recited and how many are left. The way through which the person using the rosary can realise the exact number of the prayer he/she is at, is by constantly touching each bead while reciting it. Hence, the beads bring with them at least two significations. The first, common to all rosaries, is the numbering of the prayers – 50 – useful to any religious person praying. The second, proper of that unique rosary witnessed by Lele, is its deterioration, for the holder of the rosary passed each bead through his/her fingers so intensely to leave perceptible marks on them. The worn beads are the material sign of – stand for – the prayers recited by their holder. It is only through their materiality that an interpreter can recall the gestures that involved those specific beads. The specific worn-out beads are the sign (*representamen*) standing for the prayer (meaning/object) via the practice of holding and rubbing them while praying (interpretant).

Preucel (2006: 210-246) has provided an assessment of Anglo-American archaeology throughout its historical engagement with structuralism and semiotics, applying Peirce's theory to the case study of the Pueblo revolt, an event occurred in New Mexico between 1680 and 1696. The revolt has long been considered as the natural outcome of a cultural revitalization of the villages who wanted to fight Spanish authority during the 17th century colonization. This interpretation has been taken for granted since its first acceptance, and has rarely been challenged since. Preucel has tried to go beyond that simple appreciation. In his study, he looked at the practices through which the revolt was put in place. Preucel has this way highlighted that the goal to eliminate the Spanish rule was mediated by the development of an ideology among the Pueblo people. Such ideology had manifested materially through the signs left by a series of practices, among which architectural choices and decorative innovations of common used objects. On one hand, the revitalization of the architectural features of both the new village and the main plaza of Pueblo, for instance, aimed at getting rid of the buildings that had been signifying the Spanish authority to the local people. Clearing the Spanish period buildings, the new architectures connected ideally to the pre-Hispanic authority while linking physically to the architectures of the ancestors. On the other hand, during the same years, the women of the villages started to produce vessels' decorations imitating the pre-Spanish ones. Preucel names these practices as 'signs of history' – the architecture – and 'signs in history' – pottery forms and decorations – depending on their unique way to refer to the past. None of such signs would be correctly understood if simply treated as a symbol. In fact, in the first case, the architectural choices are an attempt of physical connection to material remains older than the Spanish rule, and as such they indicate them. They

signify through their indexicality. In the second, the decorations made by the women aim at recalling the decorations of the old times, resembling their aspect. As such, they signified in an iconic way. Peirce's semiotics was used by Preucel to show effectively how 'signs function not simply to represent social reality, but also to create it and effect changes in that reality' (Preucel, 2006: 249).

Lele and Preucel's studies show how, to produce meaning, signs not only need a material ground of human interaction – practice, decision-making, reaction to the stimuli of the material world; they also need to be deeply grounded in materiality themselves. Peircean semiotics accounts successfully for the materiality of objects (i.e. the rosary's worn beads), unveiling the impact of both practice and choice on the corporeality of the world, as much as that of the established social structure.

#### **1.1.5. Identification and identity: the archaeological context as an interpretant**

The sections above should help to anticipate that in any discipline that studies signs, and hence also in archaeology, identity tends to become identification if it follows Saussure's binary structure. Archaeological signs, mainly material culture with certain morphological characteristics, have been for long identified with people and their movements, particularly within the culture history tradition of studies (i.e. Childe, 1929: v, vi), where vessels and brooches became substitutes of people (Trigger, 1989: 237). This simplistic identification process has been partially overcome through the decades, but it still re-emerges sometimes, especially when archaeologies of the empires are looked at. Using Peirce's structure of sign and interpretation can help to move a step further in overcoming identification and getting closer to multiple identities of human groups. Given its tripartite structure, it forces us to account for an element – the interpretant – that can bridge the gap between the object – i.e. a pot assemblage – selected as a sign of something else and what it stands for – i.e. a people.

The role of the interpretant, the element by which one justifies the logical sustainability of an interpretation, should not really be new to most social scientists, in particular to archaeologists. Archaeologists are largely used to giving meaning to finds – literally signs-from-the-past – through the analysis of artefacts within the context in which they are found. A thorough application of Peirce's semiotics to material culture is indeed perfectly in line with a rigorous usage of contextual archaeology. It is one of the main purposes of this work to illustrate the equation between interpretant and context.

Using contextual elements systematically as interpretants, triangulating the meaning of archaeological finds, fluid and mutable identities are more likely to emerge than any one-to-one correspondence between an object and its meaning. This process, so familiar to archaeology, is not rarely neglected when it comes to interpreting archaeological contexts as signs of a human group's identity.

Contexts are often overlooked, especially when dealing with identity, to the advantage of the old and frequently criticised use of artefacts as signatures of cultures and peoples. For Pitts (2007: 701) 'by looking at contexts in which different vessels types and fabrics are found (e.g. domestic, funerary, religious, regional), it is feasible to approach the role of pottery in the articulation of complex webs of interrelated identities.' However, the contexts exemplified by Pitts are too broad and leave little room for a proper interpretant to contribute to the interpretation process. Sirigu (2004: 5), by quoting Starobinski (1981: 193), reminds us that 'the language with which we indicate data is already the same language with which we are going to interpret such data later'. Even innocent archaeological choices of nomenclature create a series of linguistic thresholds that limit and define finds' interpretation (Sirigu, 2006: 73, 74). For instance, defining a context as religious and framing the pottery within a religious domain and language is, at its best, unhelpful for our knowledge of the past and allows essentialism to emerge.

Avoiding essentialism is hard and the risk seems inevitable, but there are prospects of success. As archaeologists, we not only need more fine-grained data and better ways to collect them. Archaeology has indeed invested consistently in the last decades in new technology to obtain them. Nonetheless, we must also consider fine-grained contexts and interpretations.

Using contexts and periodizations that are too broad – religious, domestic, Roman, local – we run the risk of building homogeneous interpretations that neglect those details – those fine-grained interpretations – that could reveal significant diversities. A good example is the division of burial practices between cremations and inhumations and their consequent attribution to broad ethnic identities based on that evidence alone.

Although providing a base for further interpretation, a distinction between cremations and inhumations is, on its own, insufficient to define group identities. In Roman archaeology, cremations found in the first centuries B.C. in the provinces are often considered a sign of Romanness – or Romanization, or auto-Romanization, or the presence of people from Italy – as is the presence of some pottery such as *terra sigillata italica*. It is precisely this attitude that makes simplistic identifications emerge rather than identity.

Identification – rather than identity – takes place when the presence of a specific object, ritual, style is made a symbol of a specific identity.

Conversely, the context must be a fine-grained one, to detect as many details as possible that are often generated by unconscious behaviours. This approach springs from the need to go beyond the idea that human decisions often derive from the will communicate something to someone. Rather, significant diversities lie behind signs that their producer left unconsciously, with no communicative aim whatsoever. Signs are simply the product of ordinary living. As Gardini (2016) puts it referring to the Latin word *signum*, a sign can be anything: the light of a star that disappeared millions of years ago, an invisible dripping, an unexpected cloud, a stomachache, a pointing finger, as long as we decide that that specific thing evokes something more than what it represents *per se*. Detecting these details and attempting their contextual interpretation is the key to success in understanding community identity.

Anthony Snodgrass accounts for such a scientific attitude by referring to the mid-20th century art-historian Sir John Beazley. In order to identify the authors of Renaissance paintings very similar to one another, Beazley looked for answers ‘not in those overall effects for which the painters were consciously striving, but in the trivial differences of rendering which they unconsciously, yet regularly, observed’ (Snodgrass, 2012: 22). This passage is crucial.

This method – named ‘*metodo circostanziale*’ by Giovanni Morelli – is the core of the fundamental essay on signs as ‘spies’ – *spie* – by Carlo Ginzburg (1979). Ginzburg underlined how even Sigmund Freud (1957) found Morelli’s art historical method inspiring for the importance it attributed to secondary, apparently insignificant, details, close to the *modus operandi* of medical psychoanalysis. What brought Freud, Morelli and Sherlock Holmes to follow the same methodology is, for Ginzburg, the use of a method founded on the refuse, the marginal data, whose importance is reversed in this paradigm, capable of revealing only the bigger picture (Ginzburg, 1979: 58). Marginal data acquire the form of symptoms in Freud, of hints in Sherlock Holmes, and of painted signs in Morelli, all inspired by the model of semiotic medicine (1979: 59). The same focus on assemblages of details is pursued here, aiming to highlight conscious and unconscious behaviours that can reveal human groups’ relational choices and identities.

Material culture assemblages – collections of things that give contextual meaning to each other in a given place –<sup>12</sup> the position of their constituents and proximity to

each other, are fundamental to the reconstruction of the practices that formed them. I refer to heterogeneous – that is, real – assemblages made of any objects, biological and anthropological remains in physical proximity. This is a contextual assemblage. By treating each element of the assemblage as an interpretant, a chain of interconnected interpretants emerge, each element becoming indispensable to sustain an interpretation, the latter being never reducible to a correspondence between two elements.

The next section will link Peirce’s framework and the concept of context as interpretant with the value of identity in archaeology.

#### **1.1.6. Practice, agency, structure: signs of a semiotic continuum in identity negotiation**

As underscored above, archaeologists have largely criticized the habit of identifying objects with people, urging a more dynamic study of material culture. One way to achieve this is through the concept of practice (i.e. Barrett, 1997). Drawing on Giddens’ work on identity and social structures, Gardner (2007: 19) has defined practice as ‘what people do’. Understanding how things were used within human practices rather than simply identifying them with people via their formal features is an indispensable step for archaeological interpretation. However, the study of practice is not immune from risks of essentialism. Casella and Fowler (2004: 8) pointed out that ‘just as we cannot look to a form of material culture and attest the presence of a certain cultural group, so we cannot look to the adoption of specific practices and know the identity of the practitioners.’

The danger of identifying people with their practices is a concrete one and the tendency to a simple descriptive process has been flagged (Pitts, 2007). Although the knowledge of a certain practice can inform us of people’s actions, this does not much improve our knowledge of their identity, as it does not highlight its relational nature, and hence its logic. Nonetheless, ‘a certain slippage could occur between practices and identities’ (Pitts, 2007: 96), and the identification of the two happens often. The way to avoid such slippage, I maintain, is by defining identity through a solid theoretical apparatus that highlights its epistemological nature.

Identity is relational in its essence and cannot exist in isolation. It is temporary and mutable, as much as are human beings. Every action is performed with reference to prior knowledge and previous experience (Casella, Fowler, 2004: 8), either in continuity or opposition with

<sup>12</sup> For recent debate on the assemblage concept drawing on the theory

of Deleuze and Bennett see Hamilakis, 2014; Fowler, 2013; Alberti, Jones, 2013. See also session S(2) *Archaeology and Assemblage* held at TAG – Theoretical Archaeology Group – Manchester, December 2014.

them. My research adopts Remotti's (1996: 5) crucial idea that identity does not encapsulate an object's essence but rather depends on our decisions.<sup>13</sup>

If identity is determined by decisions, it is essential to understand the options from which a community can choose in negotiating its identity. Gardner's use of Giddens' structuration theory clarifies this. He defines identity as 'a key symbolic medium through which agency and structure interrelate' (Gardner, 2007: 18). Since Gardner uses agency as 'a capacity for acting in a particular, self-conscious way' (Giddens, 1984: 9), Remotti's *decisions*, then, can be seen as the product of agency put into practice. Agency – or decisions – determine both single individuals and the community to which they belong. They develop throughout their relationship with the wider world creating what Giddens (1984: 25-27) defines as the 'duality of structure.' This structuration framework puts agency and structure on the same interpretive level and tends to reduce decisively the risk of attributing ontological supremacy to one term only, avoiding viewing one as the fixed container of the other (*contra* Saussure; see Section 1.1.4.) - i.e. agency as the content of practices. Structuration allows us to see identity as the result of the mutually constituted relationship between agency – the capacity of people to act in this world – and structure – the world as it was framed by previous and others' manifestations of agency. Its biggest value for archaeology is that it does not allow straightforward representations of identity to emerge.

However, Giddens relies on a theoretical detail that constitutes a potential pitfall worth investigating in semiotic terms. For Gardner (2007: 18), identity comes onto the scene as a result of the interaction of agency and structure as a symbolic medium.<sup>14</sup> This definition of identity as a symbolic medium contrasts with Peircean semiotics on which this research draws. It has to be clear that identity can be seen as a sign itself, intended within a triadic structure. As such, it can also become a symbol, as symbols are a specific type of sign whose existence is mediated by means of convention. In providing a sign's typology,<sup>15</sup> Peirce defines symbols as those signs 'which have become associated with their meanings by usage. Such are most words, and phrases, and speeches, and books, and libraries' (EP 2: 5). Symbols are the closest type of sign to Saussure's theory: an arbitrarily justified one.

What makes a symbol so powerful is its use with a precise and fixed meaning. A symbol gives a sense of security and it does so when a community is aware

of its communicative properties, conventionally understands it, and agrees on its attributed meaning. However, in the large majority of cases, interpreters infer a meaning from gestures even if the person making them is not aware of their semiotic properties (Eco, 1975: 30-32). Unconventional behaviours are interpreted through middle terms – interpretants – by means of their physical origins, indexicality, and iconicity and so on: for instance, smoke is generally a sign of fire as it is in causal relationship with fire. It would be inappropriate to make smoke a perpetual symbol of fire, losing their causal connection. Likewise, Saint Augustin spent numerous passages defining signs as something that recalls something else in such a way that, when we see a trace on the ground, we think that an animal whose the trace is has passed that way (*De Doctrina Christiana* II, I, 1).

When a generic sign becomes a symbol, its meaning is fixed and hard to change if not through another symbolic event that will substitute the former with another fixed meaning. To improve the relational value of identity, we have to be clear that it cannot be a symbolic medium. Identity is a sign in the creation of which both agency and structure participate, each of them contributing to change the others in a constant, fluid, becoming.

What might seem just a theoretical elucidation is fundamental to getting the scientific framework right and avoiding confusion between fixed identifications and fluid identities. It has to be acknowledged that identities consciously held by communities can become symbolic, of which there are historical examples. Such examples though, need to be analysed within the particular historical circumstances that generated them and these will reveal that such identities arise often because specific social and political tensions created the conditions for their emergence. The perception of threat coming from outside is one of the circumstances that may engender the fear of losing one's identity<sup>16</sup> that is consequently sought and obsessively and constantly remarked. These identities are historically justified by a political agenda. Treating identity always as a symbol, though, would prevent us from understanding symbolic identities when they really become so and from inferring their historical causes.

If the distinction between sign – of which symbol is only one type – and symbol leaves us doubtful, the archaeological purpose of disclosing multiple identities and explaining their relational reasons through the study of material culture and practice will cease. The risk lying behind any hesitation in distinguishing

<sup>13</sup> 'L'identità, allora, non inerisce all'essenza di un oggetto; dipende invece dalle nostre decisioni. L'identità è un fatto di decisioni.' (Remotti, 1996: 5).

<sup>14</sup> See also Gardner 2002: 345-6.

<sup>15</sup> See Eco, 1975 on the necessity of updating and adapting Peirce's categorization of signs for modern times.

<sup>16</sup> The political campaign by Republican candidate for the US presidency Donald Trump is only the last famous example.

between sign and symbol is the confusion between identity and stereotype. Gardner's definition of identity built on Giddens' theory laid a bridge between agency and structure that contributes very importantly to the improvement of archaeological interpretation. However, it is paramount to underline that identity cannot always be dealt with as a symbolic medium. There is the need for a theorisation of identity as a proper sign in itself. The next section will attempt to develop such a framework.

### 1.1.7. A semiotic definition of identity

An archaeologically-detectable identity is a set of decisions that a community takes at a precise time. These decisions stand for the practices performed by its members in relation to both their past and practices performed by others.<sup>17</sup> Traces of such practices are materially visible on the site and have to be archaeologically justified.

This definition indicates that identity is not a fixed entity but something whose nature requires constant negotiation through decision-making and action. By identity negotiation, I mean a mutual influence involving the cooperation of at least three subjects per time: the choices of a community/individual, the past with which they relate, and the practices performed by both the community/individual under studies and by other surrounding agents. The confrontation with the past of a community creates a chronological account, historically embedded; that with other subjects produces a diachronic account rooted in social structures. This triadic relationship is never reducible to a link between pairs.<sup>18</sup> If it were, one would obtain precisely what archaeology is trying to abandon: a simple identification with either material culture or practice. What creates a social structure, within this definition of identity, is the constant relation with others, from which a new set of decisions derives.

The ways in which the members of a community engage with these structures are multiple. Among them is the physical, tactile, sight-involving engagement with material remains that recall practices performed in the past, in the sites used by the communities under study. The relationship with such structures, the resultant decisions of the community, and the practices performed accordingly, participate all together in the negotiation of the community's identity. The same relational procedure has to be followed archaeologically, starting from the material remains that their decisions and practices left in the ground. These material remains

also need to be accounted for in relation with what is not preserved: the materiality of absence (Denti, 2014). For example, in funerary sites, among the grave goods generally left alongside the deceased are vessels used to pour and serve drinks, and to prepare and serve food; sometimes though, only bottles, used to pour drinks, are present, whereas drinking vessels such as cups or glasses are not. This absence needs to be taken into account because it hints at social and economic circumstances.

The advantages of identity as a dynamic sign are twofold.

- First, it explicitly refers to material culture, demonstrating that identity has a material aspect. It results from a constant engagement – conscious and unconscious – of communities with the material traces of practices performed both in the past and by their contemporaries. This definition allows appreciating 'the centrality of objects to the definition of cultural identity [which] is essential if we are to understand the role of archaeology in western society' (Millett, 2012: 31).
- Second, its theoretical involvement of no less than three elements helps to reduce drastically the possibility of confusing identity with straightforward identifications established on the simple relationships between pairs of features.<sup>19</sup>

Considering this semiotic account, it is no surprise that one of the main outcomes of the Laurence Seminar mentioned in Section 1.1.2 was a heated discussion around identity in Roman archaeology. This is inevitable because identity discourses are inherent in archaeology. Archaeology should definitely not give up on identity as an interpretive instrument to enhance our knowledge of the past, but rather ought to engage more theoretically on how identities are constructed and how they are reconstructable referring to material remains only. This would allow archaeology to acquire an even more influential position in the modern political debate, disclosing the political agendas hidden behind the statement of supposedly exclusive and monolithic identities.

The next section will show how the debate on Romanization in England, Italy, and particularly in Sardinia, is founded on – often binary – notions of identity.

<sup>17</sup> Definition shaped on that of sign by C.S. Peirce (C.P. 2.228). See section 1.1.4.

<sup>18</sup> Discussion inspired to the further definition of sign provided by C.S. Peirce (C.P. 5.484).

<sup>19</sup> See the critiques to binary identification by Diaz-Andreu (2005); Pitts (2007); Casella-Fowler (2004); Gardner (2007); Insoll (2007); Gardner, Herring, Lomas (2013).

## 1.2. Romanization and *Romanizzazione* of Sardinia today: a question of identity

### 1.2.1. *Paradigm switches within Roman archaeology in the last century*

Since the origins of the discipline, at the end of 19th century, Roman archaeology has been widely influenced by the use of Classical sources. Their value for the knowledge of the ancient world, and impact on academia, were so powerful that they became the main subject of entire departments, of Classics, worldwide. Throughout the decades, Roman archaeology gained more space in these departments. It contributed to enhancing our knowledge of the classical world with a change of perspective, by integrating written sources with material culture studies. Particularly popular in the last decades have been postcolonial approaches to Roman archaeology (i.e. Gosden, 2004). By importing postcolonial ideas from critical theory (i.e. Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994), Roman archaeologists, particularly in Britain, have enhanced the role of archaeology giving voice to those people neglected by written sources and unaccounted for by the archaeology of monuments and art works.

In order to create alternative narratives to those produced from the perspective of people in power, archaeologists have given greater emphasis to material culture beyond texts and switched their focus from Rome to natives in the provinces (Millett, 1990; Webster, Cooper, 1996; Webster, 2001; Hingley, 2005; Mattingly, 2007, 2011; Jimenez, 2007; Revell, 2008). This attitude arose as a reaction to much scholarship of the first half of the 20th century that shaped the archaeological sources. These were founded on the cultural ideal of Rome's imperialism and on the political aims associated with the rise of European nations and empires. The latter were modelled on the Roman Empire's inheritance so much that 'the artefacts associated with the Classical past are deeply entrenched in the self-definition of the peoples of Europe' (Millett, 2012: 31).

The agenda of Roman archaeology was originally shaped by Rome's military conquests, her administration and the acculturation of the provinces (e.g., Hogarth, 1899; Potter, 1999; for Sardinia see Pais, 1923). Much of the debate around Roman archaeology has been influenced by this agenda for the last twenty years at least, and centred on the concept of Romanization.

### 1.2.2. *Romanization's origins and current debate in Britain*

Romanization has had different fortunes in Britain and in the Mediterranean countries. Theodor Mommsen (1886) was the first to use the term. It indicated the process of integration of the peoples in the provinces

under Rome. Francis Haverfield (1912) – who also worked under the influence of Mommsen – adopted this concept in the United Kingdom, followed soon after by Collingwood (1932), with different outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

The Romanization paradigm has its origin in the political and social contexts of European nations (Millett, 2012: 31), reminding us how the study of the past cannot be isolated from the context of the present (Hingley, 2005: 5). The Roman Empire worked as a model for understanding the interaction of people from different places, consolidating 'a sense of subjectivity and cultural integration' (Benton, Fear, 2003: 268). Interestingly, Mommsen also worked as a politician in Germany from 1863 to 1884, when he was asked to oppose anti-Semitic behaviours that were taking over in Germany at the end of the 19th century.<sup>21</sup> In particular, Mommsen thought that a solution to anti-Semitism could be a voluntary cultural assimilation by the Jews who could give up some of their special customs to better integrate in Europe.<sup>22</sup> This political background is extremely significant when one considers that Romanization was a model founded on integration of diversity.

The acknowledgement of the intertwining of past and present has often been distorted in the over-confident interpretation of the Roman world, with the result of making it 'seem perhaps a bit too easily comprehensible' (Gardner, 2007: 15), and hence too often dangerously unquestioned. This attitude has become common in every area of Roman archaeology, from population studies to ceramic analysis, funerary practice, and religion, with all these subjects becoming 'falsely familiar to the scholarly community' (Bang, 2008: 1).

For some of these reasons, together with the fact that sometimes it provided over simplistic paradigms of assimilations (Hingley, 2005: 26), Romanization has been harshly criticised, particularly in Britain, for the last twenty years. As designed by Mommsen, Romanization was underpinned by the concept of progress: change and transformations occurring in the regions controlled by Rome were a gradual effect of the diffusion of a top-down modern culture. This

<sup>20</sup> Haverfield's model is founded on a binary relationship between Roman and indigenous (Celtic) material cultures, corresponding neatly to Roman and Celtic civilizations – rather than 'people' as in the traditional culture-history approach – in a mutually exclusive way. Differently, Collingwood opposed this exclusive homogeneity (1932: 111) reinterpreting material culture in Britain as embodying a mixture of both Roman and indigenous features, anticipating in an embryonic way some key concepts adopted in postcolonial models: hybridization and creolisation.

<sup>21</sup> For Mommsen's pamphlet on the issue, where he invites the Jews 'to abandon their separateness', see Graetz's (2013) entry 'Mommsen, Theodor' in the Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>22</sup> Prof. Mommsen and the Jews, in *The New York Times* 8 January 1881.

model, politically motivated as demonstrated above, needs to be contextualised in 1880s Germany and 1910s Britain, France and Italy. Later, Millett redefined it in his *The Romanization of Britain*. This represents 'its most sophisticated expression [as it] did significantly shift attention to the 'Native' side of the Romanization equation, and – as an implicitly 'processual' work – focused more on socioeconomic aspects of the period than had many previous 'standard' accounts' (Gardner, 2007: 27).

Compared to the past uses of Romanization, Millett stressed the active role of natives in the building of Roman period society, finding that 'by the time Britain was invaded, the Roman army and administration were increasingly peopled by natives from other provinces' (Millett, 1990: 53). Millett added that natives 'had adopted Roman cultural values and trappings [so that] personal advancement was obtained through service in the Roman army or civil life' (Millett, 1990: 53). Often, this change has been considered 'a process that was carried out through imitation, "by osmosis"' (MacMullen, 2000: 128, 137), that is by passive adoption of material objects as well as social practices.<sup>23</sup> This shows that, rather than being criticised as a whole, Romanization should be looked at in the context of specific research questions.

Whether one criticises it or embraces it, Romanization still raises one permanent issue. It is entrenched in the opposition of homogeneous categories: 'Roman' and 'native' (i.e. Hingley, 2005: 87; Mattingly, 2011: 29). From this perspective, Gardner (2007: 27-28) has a point in underlining that only the adoption of a post-colonial critique of these essentialist ethnic categories produced a change of perspective (e.g., Barrett, 1997; Jimenez, 2007: 24, 25; Fincham, 2002; Freeman, 1993; Hingley, 1999; Webster, 2001; Webster, Cooper, 1996). But this did not produce the expected results. Although switching the focus from Rome to the periphery of the Empire and from works of art to ordinary material culture, postcolonial archaeology has struggled to overcome the duality – Roman *versus* local – introduced by Romanization. One example comes from the attempt to substitute the word Romanization with *creolisation* and *hybridity*. Webster argues that creolisation is 'a process of resistant adaptations' (Webster, 2001: 118), a principle that underscores 'the possibility for this bottom-up cultural development to take place' (2001: 220). However, the three principles on which creolisation is based – the process of negotiations in the Roman world, its material expression with new meanings in new contexts, and the influence on this of

asymmetric power relations – were already part of the Romanization paradigm (Pearce, 2013: 3).

Postcolonial approaches are based on models created to account for precise historical contexts, such as the modern colonisation of Americas and Asia. The main issues with these models originate from their founding theoretical assumption: the rootedness of the term hybrid 'in its even more problematic counterpart: purity' (Stockhammer, 2012: 2). If we accept the existence of something creole, we must accept the encounter between two pure entities. By doing so, we incur in the paradox of getting rid of essentialist views on Roman culture by introducing essentialist models of native culture (Jimenez, 2008: 24).

Cultural purity has long been problematic. The risk of reviving it by applying certain models without an overall comprehension of the circumstances in which they arose – as with Romanization – is high. No culture was born pure, rather every culture was from the beginning the result of interaction, exchange, influence (Fabietti, 1995: 21; Geertz, 1973). Creolisation has impacted positively Roman studies by highlighting the unpredictable solutions that adaptations to the colonial encounters generated. But it refers to processes of linguistic and cultural mixing that originated from the encounter of cultures unknown to one another until the reality of slavery, plantation and colonization brought them together (Benitez-Rojo, 1996: 12; Hall, 2010: 28). Neglecting this particular context is risky at least as much as neglecting the context within which Romanization originated.

From this angle, the bilingualism and *codeswitching* model advanced by Wallace-Hadrill (1998, 2008) to understand the process of hellenisation is relevant. Understood this way, the interactions between Rome and the Hellenic culture provoked in people in Rome the capacity to switch behaviour, adapting to the context and identity of people they dealt with, just as one would switch language depending on the interlocutor. Wallace-Hadrill's model can apply to people in the provinces who likely had at their disposal one code to deal internally with people bearing the same history and social structure, and another to deal with Roman and Italic peoples (i.e. Jimenez, 2008: 26 on Corduba). Versluys (2014: 8-9) links his theory of hybridity of archaeological contexts to Wallace-Hadrill's code-switching theory, attributing to agents the capacity to choose which way to behave in relation to different contexts. This fits Woolf's (1997: 341) 'unity in diversity' concept applied to Gaul and can ultimately fit Millett's (1990) Romanization of Britain, and Torelli's (1999) *Romanizzazione* of Italy that will be exposed below. All these models are led by the principle that 'by no means, however, did Romanization lead to a loss of local identity' (Roselaar, 2012: 14). Material culture coming

<sup>23</sup> For a more complete account on Romanization as the diffusion of a Romanised lifestyle through local elites' mediation see Alcock, 1994; Brandt and Slofstra, 1983; Terrenato, 2005; Woolf, 1998; Whittaker, 1997.

from thousands of miles apart and used by people in the provinces might have not ‘challenge[d] their identity in any major way’ (Terrenato, 2005: 68). Nonetheless, the question of group identities and of their negotiations arises any time material culture is looked at, revealing the dualism Roman versus local.

Today, most scholars acknowledge that ‘ancient ethnic groups did not exist in isolation and cannot be defined only by their own cultures’ (Gardner, Haring, Lomas, 2013: 2). So, identity was constantly reshaped by interaction and negotiation with others. The same can be said for the adjective ‘Roman’, recognised not as an unchanging package but as an entity in constant fluctuation depending on time and place (*Ibid.*: 4) and hence something whose meaning – as the meaning of Rome (Revell, 2009; Keay, Terrenato, 2001: IX) – we should critically discuss (Versluys, 2014: 5-6). These insights go along with the certainty that, to highlight new interpretations of change and tradition, we should focus on ‘how things are made, used, exchanged and consumed and see what patterns emerge’ (Woolf, 2014: 48). Hence, scholars of the Roman world who refer to apparently very distant theoretical models of interpretation agree on some crucial points on Romanization. Nonetheless, different approaches to Roman archaeology developed in very distant agendas that deal with Romanization in opposed ways.

In fact, Versluys (2014: 14) and others argue for the recovery of the Romanization paradigm as a single cultural framework within recent theories as globalization. Conversely, postcolonial scholars urge us to focus on how present and past interact in the creation of past narratives (Hingley 2014: 23). Gardner and others see the future of Roman archaeology within the group identities debate, particularly by exploring the concept of human agency, with the aim of restoring people’s capacity ‘to exercise active cultural choices in appropriating, adapting or, rejecting aspects of Roman culture’ (Gardner, Herring, Lomas, 2013: 6). In opposition, material agency has recently become central for some scholars urging us to focus on the entanglement between objects and people (Versluys, 2014: 14), switching towards the former and its influence on people’s actions (Van Oyen, 2013). Romanization has not been so harshly criticised elsewhere outside United Kingdom.

### 1.2.3. *Romanizzazione* in Italian academia

The debate around the concept of Romanization developed differently in the Mediterranean countries, especially in Italy, where *Romanizzazione* is still used today, in a much less problematic way than in Britain, to describe the change the provinces underwent when annexed by Rome. One thing all archaeologists have agreed upon since the ‘90s is that the ‘Romanization

of Italy is the very unequal level of development found in the territories inhabited by peoples speaking Italic languages’ (Torelli, 1995:2). Diversity is at the core of such model. Conversely, in Portuguese academia, the concept of *romanização* was until recently still used to define a unidirectional process of Roman acculturation over indigenous peoples (Soria, 2013: 713), often resulting from a coercive and violent process (Fabião, 2001: 110). The interpretative trend in Portugal today leaves room for the interpretation of *romanização* less as a military imposition and closer to today’s globalization (Soria, 2013: 713).<sup>24</sup> Likewise, in French scholarship, the word *Romanization* is generally used in both historiographical and archaeological research, either as an analytical tool or as an historical process. Its use, though, occurs always with full consciousness of its partiality and awareness of the conceptual problems it implies.<sup>25</sup> It is often tested against the archaeological evidence filtered through postcolonial perspective,<sup>26</sup> focusing on a smaller regional level<sup>27</sup> than in the past. The same change has occurred in German<sup>28</sup> and Spanish scholarships.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, these are only trends, and even within these national traditions the use of the term Romanization may vary. Of course, it is worth remembering, with Le Roux (2004: 93), that the concept of Romanization has developed archaeologically to account for the widely observed increasing homogeneity of material culture in the Roman period.

Mommsen’s work on Romanization has permeated the vision of the Roman world in Italian academia, both in the fields of history and archaeology, even though a debate as heated as the one in Britain has not taken place in Italy. *Romanizzazione* is well known to students of Roman history and archaeology who prepare their theses (see section 2.1.1 for a personal account). Being the most widely applied paradigm – and the least discussed one – Romanization’s multiple meanings, often taken for granted by scholars, are rarely discussed. Some examples illustrate this.

The course of Roman archaeology (2008-2009) held by Lo Cascio at *La Sapienza*, Rome, discussed ‘the characteristics of the Imperial Roman model, the key points of the modern debate on Romanization, integration and homogenisation, Romanization as self-Romanization, persistence of different cultures within the Empire.’<sup>30</sup> In that course, Romanization is seen as an acculturation process, either imposed from top down

<sup>24</sup> See Gardner (2013), and Versluys (2014) *contra* Gardner for opposite visions on globalization.

<sup>25</sup> Janniard, Traina, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Lamoine, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Van Ossel, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Schörner, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Vigil, 1986.

<sup>30</sup> [http://scienzeumanistiche.uniroma1.it/guide/vs\\_moduli\\_orario\\_2007\\_8b.aspID\\_modulo=272](http://scienzeumanistiche.uniroma1.it/guide/vs_moduli_orario_2007_8b.aspID_modulo=272).

or spontaneously adopted. Another example comes from Rinaldi Tufi's influential *Archeologia delle Province Romane* (2000), where *Romanizzazione* is introduced without a definition. It is possible to infer that Rinaldi Tufi uses Romanization mainly in relation to cities, as a synonym for Rome's arrival in the provinces, and for the changes in architecture and urban planning that this brought about. Rather more energetically, Desideri holds that *Romanizzazione* is 'perhaps the greatest phenomenon in the history of human civilization, of reduction of a set of peoples submitted with the power, to a political unity and cultural homogeneity' (Desideri, 1991: 577). These examples show some of the different circumstances and agendas involving *Romanizzazione* within Italian academia.

A valuable attempt to bridge the gap between Italian academia and the debates held in Britain comes again from Lo Cascio (1999). Commenting on Woolf's (1998) critique of Romanization as too wide a concept, unable to cover the cultural and ethnic variety it deals with, Lo Cascio invites us to investigate the causes for such variety. He questions whether this unfinished cultural standardisation is either a sign of respect for and acceptance of diversity by the Roman authorities, or of the inability to promote approval, or rather of disinterest by the Empire in the homogenising the surrounding cultures to theirs (Lo Cascio, 1999: 163). The divergence is evident. Where Woolf engages critically with the definition of Romanization as a problematic concept, Lo Cascio assesses the value of Romanization as an historical phenomenon.

The work of Mario Torelli helps clarify this blurry picture. Archaeological evidence for change in the provinces is agreed, both by British and Italian scholarship, to be 'the adoption of Roman material culture' (Van Dommelen, 2001: 71). For Torelli (1995: 1) 'the study of material culture (...) provides a detailed picture of the main transformations which occurred in the production process.' He qualifies *Romanization* as acculturation, calling for attributing to archaeological evidence the capacity to reflect historical reality, structures and ideologies (*Ibid*). He also argues that the mid-90s state-of-the-art of material culture studies 'provide[ed] an overall view of the ruling classes' (Torelli 1995:1), depicting Roman society as the product of class struggle. Economic development and agricultural production acquire a central role in Torelli's studies of Roman Italy (1995: 9). Torelli also faced the Roman-locals divide, holding that this reflects academic priorities: on the one hand, scholars of the indigenous world, mainly archaeologists – 'Italicists' – who concentrate on local cultures, and on the other, scholars of the Roman world, usually historians, who focus on the political and military dominion of Rome. This picture of Italian academia was the object of further reflections by Torelli few years later, when

he defined the Romanization of Italy 'the problem of denied history' (1999: 1), adding that

'The young Italian liberal middle class tended to identify itself with the pre-Roman peoples (...). They deliberately put the Greek presence and contribution into the shade and pointed to the Romans, frequently guilty of outright genocide, as being responsible for the tragic decline of their regions, of their peoples, and of the civil life of Italy itself. The Risorgimento, for patriots such as Andrea Lombardi, meant the rescue from a decadence begun with the Roman conquest.' (Torelli 1999: 1).

This passage demonstrates two things. First, that disentangling the interpretation of the past from the beliefs held in the present is impossible, with Torelli's Marxist ideas applied to both academia and the Roman world. Second, that some topics central to today's debate in Britain – the ethics of the Empire (Hingley, 2000; Mattingly, 2006) – were discussed in Italy decades ago even if unrelated to postcolonial theory. The allegedly parallel paths of Britain and Italy on Romanization did not prevent the two traditions from sharing similar views. The attribution of the role of intermediary between Romans and locals to native elites, argued for by both Millett (1990) and Torelli (1999), is one. Another similarity is the vast specialization in material culture morpho-typological studies. This positive aspect is not risk-free. Referring to Maghrebi archaeologists, Mattingly expressed his concern over an excessive specialization trend in well-established traditional fields of study, like Latin or Greek epigraphy, Roman mosaics, Roman cities, Roman army, and more. The risk, extendable to Italy and Britain, is that there are very few archaeologists 'with expertise in less traditional aspects such as rural archaeology or the ancient economy' (Mattingly, 2011, 66). Accordingly, Roth (2007: 8) has highlighted an unnatural separation between identity and economics in Roman studies.

This account shows both the variety of forms taken by Romanization, and that a generic *romanizzazione*, problematic in Britain, applies also in Italy to uneven episodes of change.

#### 1.2.4. Sardinia within *Romanizzazione*

The paradigm of *Romanizzazione* has acquired several connotations in Sardinia, and it has often been countered by a paradigm of resistance to Romanization. Before facing the archaeological problem of *Romanizzazione* and Sardinia, it is worth discussing briefly the role of Sardinian Academia within the Italian one.

Dyson and Rowland (2007), authors of an influential study on Sardinian archaeology, believe that the results of archaeological studies developed in Sardinia reflect

the structure of Sardinian academia, separating it from the Italian one. For them, Sardinian academia 'has been dominated by Sardinians who have made their careers in their native land' leading 'to a certain level of cultural and intellectual isolation' (Dyson, Rowland 2007: 11). These assumptions, that might be founded on some true elements, have the ironic effect of attempting fighting the isolationist paradigm of resistance, popular in the island, by applying a simplistic model of cultural and intellectual isolation to modern Sardinia.

It is true that many archaeologists focusing on Sardinia were born and raised in the island. However, is the same not true for British scholars studying Roman Britain, Spanish scholars working on Punic Spain, Dutch ones investigating colonial Netherlands and so on? It is vital to remember this to have a balanced approach to Sardinian scholarship, avoiding the dismissal of its conclusions based on its alleged isolationism from national and international scholars. It is also worth underlining that some key scholars of Italian and international archaeology have worked in Sardinian universities. Among its teaching staff, the University of Cagliari had Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli (1929-30) and Mario Torelli (1969-73), Simonetta Angiolillo, and Peter Van Dommelen, certainly not Sardinian themselves, but with a high role in the universities of the island.

A partial explanation for the academic isolationism that Dyson and Rowland attributed to Sardinia derives from the prominent academic figure of Giovanni Lilliu. A renowned politician, who long stood for the island's independence, and also a leading archaeologist, Lilliu contributed to outline an historical and archaeological vision of an island that, 'often articulated in the popular press, has been shaped by pro-Sardinian and anti-colonialist views that emphasized the resistance of the Sardinians to the outside influences and outside conquerors' (Dyson, Roland, 2007: 12). This point helps to reveal the main interpretive paradigms applied to Sardinia, which often acquired the shape of 'a complex combination of conservative, empirical archaeology and Sardinian identity politics' (2007: 13).

Dyson and Rowland's account should be carefully considered and contextualised. I have referred already, in Section 1.2.2, to the deep contribution that modern political ideas held by Mommsen in Germany had in the shaping of the Romanization paradigm, and to Torelli's insights about the way Risorgimento's values were entrenched in the making of Roman history in Italy, in Section 1.2.3. But as in the case of Mommsen and Torelli, acknowledging the influential role exercised by the current political debate in the shaping of interpretive ideas of the past does not undermine their outstanding research; on the contrary, it contributes to understanding better their credibility and to pinpoint

the influential factors that brought some ideas on the past to arise.

In order to understand Sardinia historically and archaeologically, one needs to break free from an account that sees Sardinian archaeology as a unique case in world academia, where politics contaminated the results of academic research and vice-versa. Sardinia's past was interpreted, and still is, according to contemporary perspectives, as is the archaeology and the past of any territory in the world. In fact, be it not for the political postcolonial movement that arose within the intellectuals of Britain who criticised the recent past of their nation, we would have never had a harsh postcolonial critique of the Roman Empire in archaeology.

From this angle, in addition to understanding Sardinians under the Roman rule, this research aims to follow in the steps of Edward Said's (1978) postcolonial theory, by avoiding essentialism and exposing it when it is found. The study of Sardinian archaeology passed through the interpretative lens of scholars from Sardinia and overseas, and both benefited from and was affected by their biographies and political questions in the same way as the study of Britain was by British and overseas scholars.

From this, it follows that a model of academic isolationism, due to a fixed attitude to isolation entrenched in the past of the island, cannot and should not be applied to Sardinia. This would be the most orientalist of interpretations, and it is imperative to call it that way revealing its historical falseness and essentialism.

Once the essentialist model applied to Sardinian academia has been dismissed, it is easier to contextualise Roman studies in the island. The paradigm of *Romanizzazione* has not been applied uniformly to Sardinia. A neat distinction between a Romanised coastal Sardinia and a non-Romanised inland emerges from historical and archaeological studies<sup>31</sup> (Mastino, 2005: 168-172; Meloni, 1990). Dyson and Rowland (2007: 14) noticed that 'an historical model of two Sardinias developed, with a coastal region that had been much influenced over the centuries by foreign invaders, and the "true Sardinia" of the interior that largely resisted those outside influences and clung to its traditional culture.'

Such a binary paradigm applied to Sardinia recalls the model of the reservoir where the indigenous tribes of the new colonised lands of Americas had been isolated in

<sup>31</sup> *Nella Sardegna romana vanno nettamente distinte (sul piano geografico, ma anche sul piano culturale) due grandi regioni, la Barbaria interna e la Romania costiera, con realtà economiche e sociali nettamente differenti.* (Mastino, 2005: 168).

the 18th and 19th century. This vision of a split Sardinia applies not only to Roman but also to prehistoric and medieval periods of the island. For instance, Punic-period archaeological remains are framed within the imperialism that led Carthage, from the 7th century BC, to control the majority of coastal settlements but only few parts of the interior, sometimes depicted as resistant to outsiders' penetration (Tronchetti, 1988: 101-11; Perra, 1997; Tronchetti, Van Dommelen, 2005). This binary paradigm will be looked at against the archaeological evidence collected in this study.

Two models have been applied to Roman-period Sardinia: Romanization as acculturation of the island (i.e. Sirigu, 2012a: 83; Nervi, 2015; Zucca, 2008: 13), and the cultural, rather than military, resistance to the former (Angiolillo, 2008: 86; Mastino, 2005: 173). Romanization is generally viewed by highlighting the adoption of material culture from Italian peninsula. Resistance to Romanization is archaeologically underpinned by the survival of sardo-punic material culture throughout the Roman period (see Chapter 3 for a different interpretation).

Sirigu and Nervi have recently highlighted that such paradigms take different forms in different areas. Sirigu, focusing on the terminology used, stated that Romanization is an heterogeneous acculturation process that sometimes follows a unidirectional stream, with only one group influencing the other/s, although often it is characterised by reciprocal exchange and modification (2012a: 83). Nervi (2015), analysing 4th century BC-1st AD Nora and its hinterland, dismissed the idea of a single Romanization process homogeneously applied; there were, though, different ways of adapting to the Sardinian substrate, and 'the inhabitants of Nora became Romans despite being Punic and staying Sardinians'.<sup>32</sup> This is not far from Woolf's (1997: 341) account of 'unity in diversity' in Roman Gaul. By contrast, Salvi (2015) addresses the funerary practices of Karales considering material culture of Roman or Italic provenance as a secure indicator of the presence of specific people on a site, assuming that funerary practices move together with people, and hence were used to express consciously their identities and ethnicities. This assumptions will be analysed further and, to some extent, challenged throughout the book.

The accounts given in the last two sections, highlighting the diversity with which the concept of Romanization has been applied by international scholarship, show that Romanization is primarily a question of identity and it will be addressed as such in the rest of the book.

### 1.2.5. An archaeological agenda on identity: continuity *versus* structural space

The interpretive models seen so far – a Romanised coast *versus* an indigenous interior, Romanization, creolisation, resistance – applied strenuously to the archaeology of Sardinia and of the Roman world at large, have created a series of structured fields within which human groups bearing a monolithic identity move and act: these are nothing but hierarchic, branched, cut and divided interpretive spaces (Paolucci, 2010: 288), generally mutually exclusive.

Romanization, which answered important questions on change and local administration in the provinces, has proven to be less valid a model when it comes to understanding community identities that derived from the local interaction between Rome and people in the provinces. The strenuous defence of either Romanization, resistance, or creolisation models seems destined to keep producing homogeneous identities that do not contribute to advancing our knowledge either of the Roman world in general or of Sardinia. But if these models have created that divided and hierarchic space mentioned above, the opposite process must also be possible. The synechistic process inspired by Peirce reintroduces heterogeneous and non hierarchic continuities, reconnecting what was divided by process of analysis (Paolucci, 2010: 188, on Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) by accounting more thoroughly for incoherent data. Searching for continuity between elements that have been separated by previous interpretations – i.e. Romans *VS* locals – is the way proposed here. The central role of the interaction of three elements as material culture, practice-agency, and social structure, will help to overcome the often emerging homogenising models. This triangulation should help to avoid the risk of confusing identity with identification, key to the advancement of identity studies.

As the concept of practice is fundamental to the semiotic explanation of identity provided so far, this book will focus on a specific type of collective practice: the care and disposal of the dead.

## 1.3. Archaeology of funerary practice in the Roman world

### 1.3.1. Funerary archaeology theory and burial studies: a state-of-the-art

The dead were a recurring presence in the lives of Roman-period communities. Care of the deceased, their burial, funerary customs, the spaces where these took place, and the gathering of community members are practices that left numerous material traces that sometimes we intercept within the limits of archaeological sites. Through the analysis of such traces,

<sup>32</sup> See Trow, James, Moore, 2008.

the collective activities thoroughly reconstructed can be the vehicle for interpreting the decisions taken by the communities under scrutiny, and hence the key to grasping their identities.

Despite the central role that burials have always had in the archaeological understanding of the Roman world, these actions have generally received little attention except in relation to 'the adoption of Roman practices, and to social status' (Pearce, 2013:8). It is to the detailed analysis of such practices that this study is committed. Before doing so, a comprehensive review of the main interpretive models applied to burials is required to understand how the semiotic approach suggested here can contribute to an advancement of the field.

### 1.3.2. *Theories of funerary archaeology*

When considered interpretable,<sup>33</sup> the dead, their grave goods and variability<sup>34</sup> were put at the centre of identity-discourses as a reflection either of the social status,<sup>35</sup> ethnic affiliation or economic status held by the buried individuals when they were alive. The latter are part of what can be defined a positivist approach, preferred by processualists from the 70s, and still applied today.

In contrast, post-processual archaeology holds a hermeneutic approach, which denies that burial customs reflect society. D'Agostino (1985), Hodder (1982a), Shanks and Tilley (1987) derived these assumptions from the textual analogy, by attributing the value of text to the archaeological settings and material culture, treating each piece of it as product of symbolic behaviour contextually interpretable. D'Agostino (1985), along with Hodder (1989) and others, was among the first to deny any possibility that the necropolis could be seen as a mirror of social structure, maintaining that the former is rather a metaphor of the latter. Within this framework, grave goods would become the way through which specific codes can be disclosed, some of which were aimed to change the identity held in life by the deceased.

Although funerary archaeology has largely changed in the last 70 years, some core ideas have remained central or have re-emerged, after a period of neglect,

sometimes incorporated in different theories from the original ones.

Early funerary studies relied widely on ethnographic comparison. Their aim was 'to widen the horizons of the interpreter' (Ucko, 1969: 262) and boost the understanding of archaeological data. The ethnographic approach was a reaction to the nihilism of the very first burial studies, imbued with scepticism about the possibility of finding reliable criteria for understanding the society to which the deceased belonged (Lull, 2000: 576). The ethnographic interest, which is still part of funerary studies today, brought archaeologists closer to ethnographers and anthropologists who were developing new ideas about burial rituals in the '60s and '70s. Arnold Van Gennep became one of the most influential figures thanks to his theories on liminality and rites of passage (1981), later reinterpreted by Victor Turner and Maurice Bloch. Central to Van Gennep's theory was the idea that before embodying another role, or status, within society, the member's previous self would disappear.

Childe (1944, 1946), certainly aware of Van Gennep's ideas, proposed a functionalist interpretation of burials and religious rituals as social mechanisms for the maintenance and renewal of the social structure. Functionalism characterises the work of Radcliffe-Brown too, for whom social actions performed by small groups of large societies are necessary for the survival of social systems, without individuals being necessarily conscious of it (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952: 178-187). Many anthropologists and archaeologists have made this assumption central to their work, including sociologist Giddens (1984). The idea of the relevance of unconsciously performed actions for the identity of human groups is also central to semiotics and will reappear throughout the book (see Chapter 4).

Radcliffe-Brown's and Childe's ideas were integrated into Binford's belief that mortuary practices are conditioned by social organisation and hence the complexity of funerary rituals grows proportionally to the complexity of society (Binford, 1971: 235).

Later anthropological studies framed funerary rituals in relation to conflict and power struggles (Geertz, 1973: 142). The same attitude is in Saxe's 'hypothesis 8', where the variability of a burial site is attributed 'to consciously selected distinctions which are in keeping with the social identity by the deceased throughout his or her life' (Lull, 2000: 577). Lynn Goldstein (1976) reformulated and tested hypothesis 8 against thirty ethnographic case studies, concluding that 'the maintenance of a permanent, specialised and bounded disposal area was one means by which a corporate group, seeking to legitimize its rights over scarce

<sup>33</sup> Traditional archaeology originally considered funerary activities as a domain of impenetrable religious beliefs (Piggott, 1973).

<sup>34</sup> Saxe (1970) assumed that the variability in the treatment of each deceased in a cemetery was a conscious choice of the society. Hence, for him, a thorough analysis of each burial would yield insights into social organization.

<sup>35</sup> By 'reflection', I mean the attribution of a fixed value to the quantity and quality of the energy expenditure (grave goods, treatment of the dead, burial architecture). I refer to the approach that maintains that burial rituals are directly proportional - or inversely proportional (see Childe 1944, 1946) - to the class and economic possibilities that the deceased individual held in life (Goodenough, 1965), reflecting 'form and complexity of the organisational characteristics of that society' (Binford, 1971: 235).

resources, might ritualize such relationship' (Pearson, 1999: 30).

The use of hypothesis 8 within post-processual thoughts is consistent, and exemplifies the thick intertwining of ideas belonging to different theories. This is inevitable: ideas of power, consciousness, struggle, land control, display of wealth and belonging are central to many hypotheses on funerary rites, and contribute to blur the solid distinction between processual and post-processual theories. Even Hodder (1982a, 1982b, 1989), although distancing himself from processual approaches, still made use of some processual ideas within post-processual theory while developing the theory of material culture as text. The meaning of material culture is, for Hodder, symbolic, and only contextually interpretable. These approaches are particularly valuable as they help discussing the archaeological problem of the complex relationship between the cultural horizon – material culture – and ethnicity, already faced by Childe in 1930s.

In contrast to Hodder, D'Agostino's study (1988) of Pontecagnano introduced ways of interpreting a funerary site by focusing on formal aspects of material culture, on its typology, particularly of pottery, without any hope of identifying the function of an item used in such practice. For D'Agostino, a classification centred on the function of objects, accessible to an ethnologist observing individuals handling objects, but inaccessible to archaeologists (D'Agostino, Gastaldi, 1988: 13), who are excluded from witnessing such actions. D'Agostino argues that the function of a vessel, for instance, is graspable only in those rare cases where it shows traces of its precise use, for example as a cinerary urn. He notes that, as the use of an item is likely to change, such use ought to be looked at inside a codified system. For Hodder, such a codified system has to be the ultimate object of archaeology, attempting to put symbols back into action (Hodder, 2003: 162-166). For D'Agostino (1988: 13-14), formal analysis and the production of a reliable typology and an interpretation of society through it only is the solution, leaving aside the arbitrariness of uses of objects. Despite attributing the same principles to material culture, Hodder and D'Agostino reached completely different conclusions.

Not only processualists renounced meaning, but also some post-processualists such as Barrett did so (1997), maintaining that only dominant meanings should be sought (Hodder, 2003: 164).

The difference between past approaches – mainly processual – to mortuary archaeology and more recent ones – mainly post-processual<sup>36</sup> – is the concept that,

for the latter, material culture does not passively reflect pre-formed social structures, but is rather something used dynamically by the communities to condition, drive, manipulate and even create people's perceptions. From this point of view, one of Eco's essential definitions of sign links this account to the semiotic definition of identity provided in Section 1. For Eco, a sign is 'anything that can be used to lie' (Eco, 1975: 14), because a sign is deceiving, and can drive to erroneous conclusions depending on what elements are taken into account in the interpretation process. This reveals once more how the debate on funerary archaeology – as that on Romanization – revolves around the understanding of sign and its capacity to signify people's actions. Hence, it is dealt with as a semiotic debate here.

Hodder approached funerary archaeology in explicitly semiotic terms. Nonetheless, his work addresses only a specific set of signs, the symbol, and actions linked to it. These are signs resulting from acts of conscious communication rather than unconscious signification (See section 1.1.4.). Referring back to Eco's (1975: 14) definition of sign as 'anything that *can* be used to lie' (my emphasis), it is as if Hodder's approach modified it in 'a sign is anything that *is always* used to lie'. Such fictional definition of sign helps us to understand the difference between a world made of signs, ours, and one made of just symbols.

Human beings did in the past, as we do today, signify with the aim of communicating something – delivering a message not necessarily corresponding to reality or truth – and did it consciously. It is likewise clear that the large majority of signs people produced in the past, as we do today, are a product of unconscious behaviours. Signs left from shoes on the sand, crumbs under the benches in the parks, stains on the kitchen's walls, pen marks, the shape of a body on the mattress, and many more signs, are potentially there for an interpreter to make them signify but were in no way left with the intent of communicating something to someone.

Signs are in the majority of cases unwillingly produced and yet still potentially meaningful. This semiotic framework applies all the same to funerary archaeology. There is no doubt that certain gestures are symbolically mediated and that the presence and absence of some objects was meant to communicate something precise. Nonetheless, even within symbolic behaviours, individuals leave other signs unintentionally. For example, the attempt to deposit a body (see Chapter 4) inside a narrow pit-grave resulting in the dislocation of the shoulders has no symbolic aim, but offers a series of signs that reveal details about the treatment of the dead within a particular community – i.e. lack of care for the deceased and likely absence of its beloved. For Lull, 'funerary practices, offerings and rituals, denote the material conditions of the society and provide

<sup>36</sup> Until the latest suggestion by John Robb (2013), who notes that funerary archaeology has looked at everything but death.

information on the forms taken by it' (Lull, 2000: 579) beyond the potential message signified by those practices.

Ian Morris' observation that 'the angry differences between 'new/and 'postprocessual' archaeologists seem to be more about form than content' (1992: 163) is shared here. One of the possible consequences of much post-processual archaeology is to be overwhelmed by symbols that it are impossible to codify without the cultural keys of interpretation. This attitude is not far from the nihilism, stressed by Piggott (1973), resulting from the assumption that intangible religious beliefs are inaccessible to archaeology.

### 1.3.3. *Funerary studies within Roman archaeology*

Both processual and postprocessual theories have been applied to Roman archaeology, even though less a theoretical debate has taken place within it in comparison to the archaeologies of other periods and regions of the world. This has created a less organic discipline.

Often, burial remains are framed within Romanization, used to understand the degree of cultural proximity to Rome of the funerary customs in the provinces. In the early '90s, Jones (1993: 432), reflecting on Hodder's (1982; 1986) idea on symbolic behaviour and death, underlined the difficulties of understanding symbols due to the use of concepts such as culture, society and Romanization without sufficient reference to social theory. Jones suggested that the example to follow is Morris's (1992) work *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity*, where he links funerary practice to an understanding of social structure. Morris is also one of the few archaeologists of the Classical world to engage openly with the theoretical debate on funerary practice, testing the Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis 8 within a postprocessual perspective. Despite considering hypothesis 8 – highly criticised in the 1980s – as a typical product of normative processual archaeology (Morris, 1992: 163), he demonstrated in his case studies the functioning of its central idea, that a community could also use a funerary area to legitimise its rights over resources. Through the use of ethnographic examples from Taiwan and Kenya (Morris, 1992: 152-156) applied to Athens and Rome, he confirmed the validity of hypothesis 8, while urging its contextualisation within each case study and warning against using it as a general law for a 'scientifically observed social reality' (1992: 163). Morris instead advocates a role for agency.

Millett focused on a contextual approach too. He provided a diachronic comparison between cemeteries by assessing the average number of grave goods in burial samples during early Roman-period Britain, which showed a pattern of decline in grave furniture

after Rome's conquest of Britain (Millett, 1995: 123-124).

Seven years after Jones' invite to follow Morris' example, the volume edited by John Pearce, Martin Millett and Manuela Struck, *Burial, Society and Context in the Roman World* offered a systematic and multidisciplinary account. In line with postprocessual concepts of material culture and contextual meaning, the central idea of the book is 'how 'Roman' material forms were adopted in different contexts, including burial' (Pearce, 2000: 1) rather than focusing on the degree of their intrinsic Romanness.

There, Pearce (2000) warns against the risk of translating funerary habitus in a discourse about explicit and conscious ethnic affirmation, traditionally applied in the past. Polfer (2000: 37) too warns against 'the dangers of interpretations and conclusions based on the grave goods' alone, aiming at studying cremations not as a finished product – as traditionally seen – but as a long process made of stages that it is possible to reconstruct (2000: 32). Another central issue raised by both Polfer (2000: 32) and McKinley (2000: 39) is the terminological inaccuracy within funerary studies, especially concerning cremations. The volume gives space also to more traditional approaches. Marie Tuffreau-Libre's (2000: 60) acknowledged that pottery studies offer important information on funerary ritual in both social and economic terms, but she warns against allowing these approaches to dominate chronological interpretation, vital to Roman studies.

Since the end of the 1980s, several authors dedicated greater attention to the systematic analysis of funerary contexts (Ortalli, 1988), producing relevant data usable for comparisons between Roman provinces. A valuable example is Jimenez's comparative work (2008) on three necropolises of Hispania Baetica through the long term, with the aim to account for change and tradition. Interpreting funerary practice as the result of a bilingual symbolism deriving from the encounter between a 'local language' and a 'Roman' one between which the users of the three necropolises were able to switch, Jimenez (2008: 353) concludes that material culture witnesses a process of intense hybridisation. This study did not allow Jimenez to define social groups and identities as either Roman or native, but rather as hybrids, resulting from generations of interaction between local populations and Italic migrants. Despite bringing other problematic concepts such as cultural purity (see Section 1.2.2) into the identity question, hybridity has had a positive impact on the Romanization debate, by discarding deceptively essentialist ideas from culture studies (Jimenez, 2008: 353).

Today, emphasis of funerary studies is on practice, that is the way in which material culture defined as

Roman was used in different contexts (Pearce, 2000: 1), and on comparative approaches. These attitudes have contributed to broadening the debate from questions of elites to others around gender and local customs. When dealing with burials in Roman archaeology the question 'is not the attribution of status labels to particular burial types, problematic both in principle and in practice, but rather the investigation of how difference is articulated' (Pearce, 2013: 10). Pearce's (2013: 10) twofold objective, aimed, on one hand, at studying burials not just as interments, but as part of a broader archaeological evidence, and on the other, to compare different funerary sites to obtain a better account of diversity, is adopted here.

This work springs from these concepts to reconstruct funerary practice as a dynamic social process that produced an apparently static feature: the burial. The next section will introduce the topic of funerary studies of Roman-period Sardinia, where the case studies analysed in this book belong.

#### 1.3.4. Tradition of funerary archaeology in Roman-period Sardinia

The conference on Roman archaeology held at Sanluri in 2011<sup>37</sup> provides important insights into the state of funerary studies in Roman-period Sardinia. This was summarised by Tronchetti's (2013) paper presented at the same conference, where he underlines several problems:

- lack of completely excavated cemeteries;
- lack of information on the spaces between burials, due to the primary focus on grave goods;
- absence of a reliable overview of the graveyard, causing a disconnection between individual finds;<sup>38</sup>
- too general a level of documentation and terminology that characterise the majority of the excavations carried out at least until the 1960, making it hard to infer secure information.<sup>39</sup>

For these reasons, Tronchetti believes it is more appropriate to talk about a tradition of studies of groups of graves rather than of necropolises, when it comes to Roman-period Sardinia. At least until 1960, information reported on cemetery excavations – rarely published – centred on three elements: the number of graves, their internal disposition, and the typology of grave goods (Tronchetti, 2013).

Likewise, Sirigu underlines that insufficient attention has been given to the most common and humble burial types – simple pits and graves *alla cappuccina* (covered in tiles) – or to the most common grave goods in them – *ceramica comune*/coarse ware (Sirigu, 2003: 111-113). He noted a discrepancy between the small number of elite burials and grave goods that attracted the greatest among scholarly interest, and the large majority of non-elite ones, mainly neglected, indirectly supporting the aim of Gramsci to look at the history of the subalterns, pursued here. Sirigu, like Tronchetti (2013), addressed the issue of the definition of the necropolis. He maintains that the number of graves in a site, their spatial organisation, and a chronological understanding of the burials are necessary conditions for the site to be a proper necropolis (Sirigu, 2003: 116). This definition, although problematic as it springs from a textual analogy and tends to exclude from the site elements that do not fit the textual model (Sirigu 2005: 21), helps to define the theoretical agenda of funerary studies in Roman-period Sardinia.

Sirigu (2003) and Tronchetti (2014) describe Sardinian funerary archaeology as a discipline with a long tradition specifically focused on morpho-typological analysis of grave goods, on social differentiation (Tronchetti 2014) and on change brought about locally by Roman influence (i.e. Carboni, 2005).

Despite such issues, there are also many positive aspects. Several excavations have been published in the last ten years, and in some of them, multiple detailed publications provide an excellent typological overview of grave goods, allowing a valuable comparative work. Such data come from both northern Sardinia – Olbia, Sassari – central Sardinia – Ortacesus (Arru, Cocco 2009), Sanluri (Paderi, 1982) – and southern Sardinia – Cagliari (Locci, 2012), Quartucciu (Salvi, 2002a, 2005). In a few cases, relevant studies were carried out on specific classes of grave goods, in some cases previously neglected and hence even more important – i.e. Sirigu (1999) on coarse ware. In addition, even though not widespread yet, contextual archaeology of funerary remains has been boosted by the work of Salvi (2002b) on Cagliari and its hinterland (1990, 2005, 2012), tracing an important trend in this study.

The main legacy of this tradition of studies is the availability of a vast database on material culture, particularly pottery, diffused throughout numerous publications. These data are fundamental for the comparative work attempted here, and constitute a solid foundation to this study.

<sup>37</sup> *Società dei vivi, comunità dei morti: un rapporto (ancora?) difficile. Atti del Convegno di Studi 2013.*

<sup>38</sup> For instance, the number of funerary inscriptions is relevant in Sardinia, but there is not, in the majority of cases, evidence for the relationship to any grave or even of their exact provenience.

<sup>39</sup> Particularly concerning material culture typology, many vessels were often described just as 'typical Roman small vessels', 'coral glass vessels' and 'red vessels.'

### 1.3.5. *Communities, burials, and rhizomatic identities: a semiotic theory beyond the textual metaphor*

The last four sections have provided a threefold account of funerary archaeology in relation to archaeological theory, to the Roman period, and to Sardinia as a Roman province. This section reconnects the aim of this book to the tradition of Sardinian funerary studies, with which shows both continuity and discontinuity. Continuity with such traditions is pursued giving an important role to the chrono-typological analysis of grave goods. Discontinuity emerges because the focus of this book is primarily on contextual interpretation of each burial within the necropolises, that only afterwards are compared with broader funerary practices. It aims at filling the gap highlighted in that tradition of study. All elements of the archaeological record will be looked at in relation to one another. Information on the position of grave goods in relation to the body of the deceased will be central, as much as their relative position within the group, without neglecting their formal qualities. This will combine the typological approach, of which the tradition of Sardinian funerary studies abound, with a semiotically informed contextual approach, largely neglected in the same tradition, with a few exceptions (i.e. Locci 2013; Salvi 2005, 2012). The contextual-analytical approach adopted here is justified by the semiotic framework of identity outlined in Section 1.1.

Reconstructing the sequence of the practices held by different contemporary communities over time is key to the success of this study and will result in a multidimensional account. This will reveal the full semiotic potential of the archaeological record and will allow me to hypothesise which decisions were central to each community, in relation to their historical tradition, their neighbouring communities, and to the social and economic structures.

The rest of the book will be structured as follows. The contextual details of each site will be analysed, without neglecting the formal properties of each item – class, type, and chronology. This method is required to avoid the emergence of essentialist ideas. Funerary practices obtained from the contextual study of the archaeological record will be then compared with the traditional picture of a Sardinia framed by the split model of a homogeneous, Romanized coastal area and a consistently un-Romanized inland (i.e. Mastino, 2005: 168).

Funerary practices across the book will be treated neither as simple reflections of the communities' social organization – as maintained, broadly, in processual terms – nor as impenetrable symbolic behaviours only individually graspable – as held within post-processual beliefs. Both approaches are imbued in an understanding of signs that has been explained

here as essentially binary, static, and hence hard to relate to the understanding of dynamic identities. The processual methodology springs from the systematic application of a binary sign to material culture. The items introduced in each grave are assumed to reflect, through both their formal features and economic value (i.e. imports, material and so on), the role held by the deceased in life. The post-processual method is entrenched in a symbolic reading of human behaviour and archaeological remains as a text. This approach generates numerous issues,<sup>40</sup> some of which have been acknowledged by its supporters (Hodder, 2003: 204; Sirigu, 2009: 1232), despite having been systematically applied at least since the early 2000s.

The main issue with applying textual analogy to material culture – refuted systematically here – is that one must assume that a site/material culture has the same structure of a text,<sup>41</sup> which is a 'concrete group of signs, delimited by precise extra-textual boundaries and structurally organized' (Sirigu, 2012: 1231 based on Lotman, 1970: 69). Attributing precise boundaries and internal cohesion to a necropolis as the textual analogy requires is not always, if ever, feasible. Necropolises rarely have precisely delineated boundaries, often blurred to the archaeologist's eye. For instance, Carroll suggests that cemeteries are often nearby 'suburban houses and shops', evidence that helps 'to break down the boundaries between the dead and the living and to foster the intimate connection between the spaces inhabited by both' (Carroll, 2006: 1).

Blurred limits, unacceptable within a thoroughly textual approach, are the most likely to correspond to the reality of funerary practice, especially when looked at with an archaeological approach. Although useful to the advancement of material culture studies, a textual approach is highly problematic as it excludes all signs that are part of a site although far from having a symbolic, codified, and coherent significance.

Different behaviours from coherent habits occur in the necropolis. They are driven by change, economic possibilities, material availability, cultural belonging, whose signs need to be investigated relationally, that is contextually, without necessarily disclosing a symbolic value. Of course, one should not forget that 'material culture was generally placed in the grave to have an effect – on the onlookers at the funeral, on the 'gods' in the present, on the dead person in the afterlife' (Garrow, Gosden, 2012: 196). Nonetheless, traditional actions like laying goods with the burial, being often repeated for centuries, tend to lose their potential originally

<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the semiotic implications of material culture as text and archaeology as reading practice, see Preucel (2006: 131-146).

<sup>41</sup> Puddu, 2016.

codified meaning, and their value stands instead in the repetition of the action itself, in the traditional way of doing things in an un-reflective way, beyond the meanings originally attached to them.<sup>42</sup> Doing things in a certain way is placing oneself into the social structure to which communities are bound. Practices come hand-in-hand with being part of a group and any different decision involving them taken by individuals/communities are expression of their identity.

An alternative approach to the processual/post-processual divide is the recent shift of focus towards the careful reconstruction of the sequence of actions performed by people around a burial, both during the funeral and during commemorative acts. This approach, invited by Tronchetti (see 1.3.4) for Sardinia, has been brought forward by Scheid (2008) and applied successfully to the excavation of the cemetery of Porta Nocera, Pompeii, by Van Andringa, Duday and Lepitz (2013), underlining the infinite multiplicity of contexts and micro-contexts present in funerary sites (See also 3.2.5). Their work is highly taken into account here as it is the closest framework to the semiotic approach attempted in this study, being the reconstruction of each stage of practice fundamental to interpret the identity of communities in relation to their actions, particularly towards ancient burials.

In line with Van Andringa's practical framework, but holding a more explicit theoretical perspective, this work tests the thesis that archaeologists ought to look at any remains from the past and at burials in particular not as a text but as a rhizome (Paolucci, 2010: 60-61; Deleuze, Guattari, 1980). By definition, the rhizome is a multiple non-hierarchical entity in constant ramification, and is the constitutive unity of the encyclopaedia: an open, contradictory, and not cohesive system that Hjelmslev represents with the image of a net (Hjelmslev, 1985: 47). The rhizome is what eventually would emerge from C.S. Peirce's theory of signs as the product of his chain of interpretants or *synechism*.

The understanding of the necropolis as rhizome should allow deeper insights into the semiotic definition of identity provided in Section 1.1.7: a set of decisions taken by a community and standing for the practices performed by its members in relation both to their past and to their contemporary neighbouring communities. Both definitions are based on the relational value of things and actions, and help implementing the contextual possibilities of archaeology.

<sup>42</sup> Compare for instance, as suggested personally by linguist Caterina Tsirodimitri, with the practice to exhume the dead after three years of their burial and washing their bones with wine before re-depositing them in cists in today's Greece. Likely, no one in their 30s/40s would attach any specific meaning to this action today, if not the will to keep alive a traditional practice.

The previous sections have made clear what is meant here by identity, which archaeological and social theories have been applied, and how these relate to other theories that are not applied here. It remains important for the reader to understand how these theories apply to the data in practical terms and how the interpretation of funerary practices is linked to the definition of identity patterns. Making this clear is the task of the next and last section of Chapter 1.

#### 1.4. Theory and data: a practical guide to the emergence of different identity patterns

Central to the identity interpretation sought here is the relationships between the gestures made by the individuals and groups responsible for the funerary practices of Roman-period Sardinia, and the material conditions inherited from the past within which such individuals and groups operated. This relationship, between the materials available to the communities, their actions, and their effect on the material world surrounding them through time, is the key to access their identities dynamically. This will be crucial to avoid fixing identities in a static frame. Some practical example will help explain this concept.

Let us take Chapter 3, on the cemetery of Sulci, Southwest Sardinia. This will show that numerous vessels and burial types – chamber graves – used during the Punic period were still used in the full Roman Imperial period, when cremations and single inhumations were introduced alongside new objects. These elements offer the opportunity to test different conceptions of identity, material culture, and practice, explained above at a theoretical level. Drawing a very synthetic scheme, four main interpretative directions can be followed:

1. a culture-historical one – from Gordon Childe onwards: the objects found in the cemetery of Sulci, together with the grave types, would be at the centre of identity statements, those artefacts being 'expressions of cultural norms' (Johnson, 2010: 17);
2. a processual one: finding behavioural patterns that could be interpreted in terms of cultural evolution, allowing to define underlying social systems beyond the similarities/differences of material culture;
3. a mostly post-processual one: the reconstructed practice and the role of agency would acquire a central role in such interpretations, and hence the way the dead were deposited in the graves at Sulci would be the main focus;
4. a post-processual inspired approach followed here: giving centrality to the gestures performed in relation both to the dead buried at a specific point in time, and to the material world

surrounding them – i.e. previous burials – which they contributed to modify, intensify, enlarge, reduce, each time they interacted with it.

Applied to the data of Sulci, these approaches could result in four possible range of identities:

1. the culture-historical approach would give to material culture the value of ‘signatures’ of archaeological cultures, assigning a chamber graves and the early pottery to the Punic identity, whereas the African Sigillata dishes and the local products coming along with them a Roman identity;
2. the processual approach would attempt to find any repetition of actions interpreting them as signs of a cultural evolution process as is Romanization (see section 1.4 for a discussion of its concepts), leaving us with two polarising identities: Roman and local;
3. a generic post-processual approach centred on practice would also result in a neat distinction of identities: a Punic one based on the practice of burying the dead in the chamber graves during the first phase of the cemetery; a Roman one based on the practice of burying the dead in an open space, particularly with the use of cremation. Despite the more complex approach focused on what people do, this too risks making practice become a signature of a particular social group, just as seen for point 1;
4. the approach pursued here, inspired to post-processual ideas, takes into account both material culture types and the reconstruction of the funerary practices focusing on those signs that hint to gestures of interaction with the remains of funerary practices performed in the past.

Following the example of Sulci, it would be necessary to look not only at their practices and at their material culture, but also at their relation with the material remains from the Punic period and from the earlier Roman period. This will eventually show a continuity in the use of space established in the Punic period, but it will also expose important differences in its use. On the one hand, this shows that by 1st century BC the community of Sulci had no intention to detach themselves from structures – both architectonic and social – used mainly in the Punic period. On the other, the members of this community were happy to use the same spaces in different ways without feeling constrained to follow the same practices performed over the previous centuries. As it will be seen in detail in Chapter 3, chamber graves designed for the use of no more than 5 or 7 people in the Punic period, were filled with bodies a few centuries later, in the Roman period.

Such actions may be more or less consciously undertaken, but the group identity revealed can relate the communities who made them to their past, to the history of the territory in which they operated, and hence with a sense of belonging to – or detachment from – them.

Examples of the types of evidence sought in this work are:

- the continued use of the same graves or their reuse after a chronological gap;
- the bodies contained inside them;
- their associated grave goods;
- the signs of a wide range of interactions with them: disposal, refuse, breakage, conservation, manipulation, and so on.

Any gesture that hints at an interaction with the past, is here considered important to understand a community’s social identity fluidly, accounting for both change and tradition. This approach will clearly give the best results only when comparisons are made between sites of a similar period and with a similar archaeological background. For instance, comparing the Punic-period chamber graves of Sulci with those dug in Karales in the same period will be a very significant one in Chapter 7.2.a.

Such an approach, that seeks detailed evidence to reconstruct interactions between the members of a community and the remains of the past, raises issues of assigning labels to identities – be they Roman, Punic, or local. Such tags are mainly used, and fairly so, to indicate broad chronologies; but they do not provide answers to the questions on identity raised here. Such broad ethnic categorizations are generally the result of essentialist approaches that end up creating dualisms such as Punic/Roman, Roman/Local that this work seeks to avoid. Put simply, if in the 3rd century AD a community is still burying its dead in exactly the same way as two centuries before – as it happens, for example, in Masullas, Chapter 4 – one can infer a cohesive sense of identity and collective belonging to the past of the site. However, such cohesiveness can only be inferred if detailed data reveal a precise re-enactment of the same specific actions through time, not just generic practices – inhumation, cremation, type of grave – and objects used.

These data are the ones that will be sought more carefully in this work. Many of them will be analysed and underlined, where possible, in the following chapters.