bronze-brown in color, a tone closer to hippopotamus hide than elephant skin." Then: "They surround undulating hollows, covered in a citrine mantle mottled with jade green." And to conclude: "The view widens, the panorama fades, but the line of the horizon remains visible in the distance." Instead of *línea*, I should say *mountain profile*, because far off, one perceives, ashen gray, a spur of the sierra. How far away? Massimo did the math on his iPhone: "About twenty miles."

Behind the convent, a vast golden plain drops away steeply. It's the town square, lined by two opposing colonnades, painted white and sky blue, roofed with vermilion tiles, where the municipal offices (or rather, *office*) and schools are housed.

This morning the square was filled with a school assembly singing a lilting verse in unison, almost a march. It brought me back in time, to an evening in Manizales with my friend Santiago García, the theater director. We were looking for background music for a play in rehearsal (a *drama político*), and while considering options, we heard a children's chorus in the distance. It was a rhythmic, playful, yet melancholic tune, repeating endlessly: *"un, dos, tres, juega otra vez."*

With its flashes, memory dazzles the present and slows its flow, reducing it to frames and sounds. The schoolchildren's chorus emerged from silence and was surrounded by it; that's why it struck me.

Even the mass of the convent is enveloped in silence, not because trucks don't rumble or children don't shout, but because once the noise dies down, all returns to quiet. As if silence were the rule. But take note: while in the case of the Benedictine monks silence reflects ascetic discipline, in Mixteca it's more environmental and cultural than religious.

The stillness of churches here is not born of the sacred, but of the reserved temperament of the faithful, which in turn echoes the natural traits of the region. I say this because Mixteca doesn't put on a show and doesn't enchant, it simply *is*, harsh but not rugged, and never desolate.

The convent of Yanhuitlán arose from a typically Dominican missionary scheme: outsized, or at least far removed from the humble ethos of the mendicant orders.

A grandiose outpost built in support of the illusion of a new Christendom: the Iglesia Indiana of the Franciscans.

Today, the descendants of the Mixtec Indios have crossed the threshold of the convent and now move through the sacred hall, the scent of copal in the air, arranging multicolored flowers in dozens of glass vases. A white dog was gnawing an avocado pit beneath a kneeler. As we said goodbye, the caretaker said: *"Los perros ven muy bien de noche a las almas que salen de los cuerpos cuando éstos duermen, por eso aúllan."*

Giorgio Antei

A scholar and writer, G.A. is the author of numerous books on topics related to the Americas. He is a member of the Academia Colombiana de Historia. For Franco Maria Ricci and the Masone Labyrinth, he has curated editions and exhibitions. He is a regular contributor to FMR.

THE SIMPLE LUXURY OF DAILY BREAD

Stefano Salis

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Photography by
Roberto Bigano

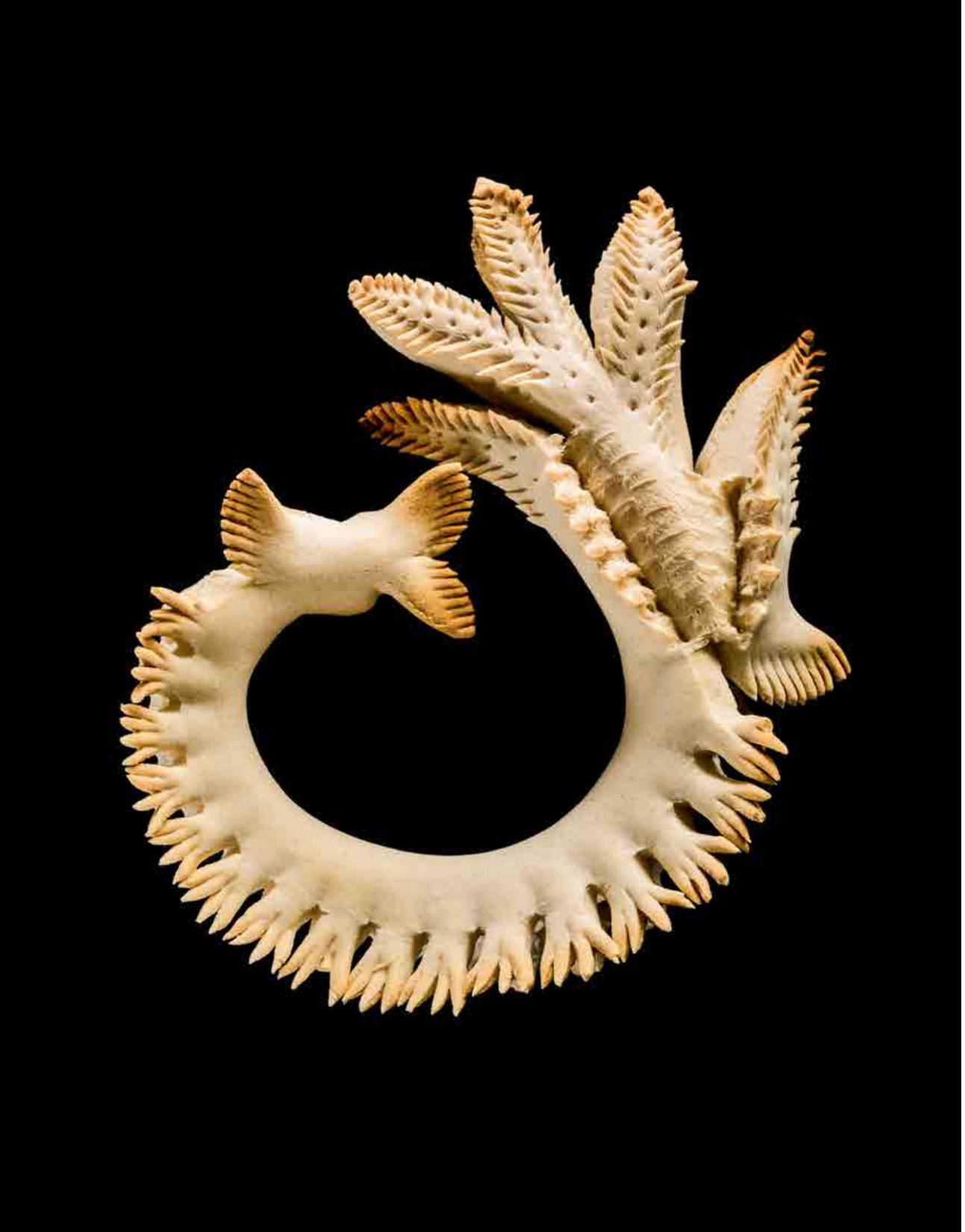
GODDESSES OF THE HEARTH

Stefano Salis

In his 1928 "Battle for Grain," Mussolini commanded his people to "love bread / heart of the home / fragrance of the table / joy of the hearth." Il Duce *was, after all, an advertising copywriter by vocation, and this piece of culinary doggerel was once standard fare in elementary school primers. Italian nonagenarians may still remember it. Bread, then, was the cornerstone of a virtuous, frugal, patriotic lifestyle. Start putting condiments on that bread, and it's a slippery slope to the outright sin of gluttony. Italy's cultural policies in those days drew upon venerable old strictures and sentiments of restraint. Name-checked in prayer, a loaf of bread was sacred, reverential, almost eucharistic. In all its previous issues,* FMR *has never before turned to the art of crumb and crust; now we have, and with great panache. Not even the poorest pauper has ever been satisfied with bare necessities. Ordinary bread could be elevated into intricately crafted and decorated loaves that adorned Sardinian tables for lavish feasts and special occasions. The necessary can become beautiful: and in traditional societies, loaves became ephemeral masterpieces of the highest female craftsmanship.*

"Once upon a time, in Sardinia, everything was harvested at home, processed at home, which is why there were little rustic cottages surrounding the courtyard, each one named for the gifts of the soil contained within: olive oil house, wheat house, fruit house, and of course, the bread house, a sort of altar or Etruscan tomb, with sieves and palm leaf baskets (small ones, *còrbule*, and large ones, *sas canisteddas*) hanging on the walls. "Neighborhood women would assemble to bake the bread; it was quite the undertaking. There was dough to knead and then roll out into broad sheets, handed one after the other to the woman seated at the oven's mouth, her headscarf tucked high and her face glowing amid the surrounding shadows. She'd lay the sheet of dough atop the blade of a thin, smooth peel: a model made in deep winter by the shepherds of Tonara. Snowbound, they'd carve the peels and, come spring, ride them down to Nuoro on their gaunt horses and sell them. She slid the wooden peel into the oven where the dough, if properly made, would swell in the heat into a great balloon. It was then handed to another woman sitting cross-legged before a small bench, who used a knife to cut it along its edges. Thence issued two steaming wafers that gradually hardened and turned crisp. Stacked high, they were ready to be placed in the sideboard."

This solemn description reflects the mournful and epic tone of the larger book from which it is taken, Salvatore Satta's *Day of Judgment*, and reveals the insights of a great jurist who captures, with literary clarity both anthropological and prophetic, the countless contradictions, many faces, and differing facets that form a certain variety of Sardinian narrative. There is something Caravaggesque about the depiction of this scene: faces emerging from deep darkness, dimly yet masterfully lit, not only because of the metaphysical preparation in which they're engaged, but also for the theatrical composition of a tableau



that, to our eyes as readers, repeats itself endlessly and sinks into the mists of time.
Each tool of breadmaking reveals a specific ritual. Satta describes shepherds from nearby villages who, snowed in by winter, devoted themselves to crafting the peels that were used to slide into the oven (note the word used, importantly, to describe that oven – *an altar*) that *ball* (a term that will return at this essay's end: a cosmos in the form of bread), a ball that women – of course *women*, the very backbone of Sardinian civilization – and only women, were expected to prepare.
And he continues: "From what depths of the millennia that bread had come, God alone knew: perhaps it was brought by the Jews who had been driven back from Africa, at the very dawn of time. The labor had the solemnity of a rite, in part because it lasted into morning, and the later hours of the night brought silence: the children would slip in through the narrow doorway, flushed by the heat, intoxicated by the scent of bread and the burning mastic wood, entranced by the flickers of flame on the sooty walls – but also a little intimidated by those industrious women, who were servants. They greeted their master's children with festive eyes, and like some sleight of hand, in seconds, they would prepare a round loaf of bread, shaped like a ring, which they dipped quickly in water, where it sizzled like hot iron, emerging glossy and bright as any mirror: *invetriato*, glazed, as they would say. It was a moment of joy, both for them and for the children, all united by that ineffable thing – free of masters or servants – that is life." Well then: perhaps there is nothing left to say. Satta captures the sacral quality of hard work and its products. The making of bread, or perhaps, the *miracle* of bread – which had come "from the depths of the millennia," fragrant, artfully shaped, practically a jewel at the moment it emerged from the oven (shiny and luminous) – was there to celebrate a moment of joy and perhaps, indeed *most assuredly*, the ineffable presence and essence of life.
Bread: all that is sacred. Bread: joy. Bread: life.
I personally recall interviewing Giulio Angioni, anthropologist and writer, in a public forum on the topic of bread: after we all viewed a short film, and following a long and perhaps tangled question from me, he glanced at me with that sly, intelligent gaze of his. And sure enough, his answer could only be – or rather, could only *begin* – with one of his characteristic expressions: "Eh… *il pane è il pane*."
Bread is bread.
Nothing tautological about that; nothing obvious either. This was a deep anthropological truth that, on the island of Sardinia, successfully captured the solid foundations of a culture that is more than merely culinary. The question of bread as a foodstuff – one that is fundamental to economic and social dynamics – easily transcends, through its own making, its outcomes. Moreover, the display of bread nearly always accompanies specific ritual moments, entering into the sacred domain of rite and veneration, which is, in fact, a word that Angioni himself used.
Here's a brief passage, taken from a volume (and in this case from an oral narrative) in which he attempts to catalogue the stereotypes that others – and above all Sardinians themselves – love (or perhaps unknowingly tend) to repeat about themselves (*Tutti dicono Sardegna*, or *Everyone Says Sardinia*): "...Here, nothing was more important than bread. Just look at the countryside: the largest plots were for wheat, wheat ruled everything, and everything revolved around wheat: pastures, vineyards, trees. The land was for wheat… If you have bread, you have everything. A glass of wine, if available, well, that's good, and better still if there's a slice of sausage or a bite of cheese. But there's nothing, if there's no bread. It has to be wheat bread, though, because bread must be made of wheat. And wheat is never wasted, nothing is

Opening page
Pane 'e sposos (Wedding Bread)
Paulilatino, Nuoro
On the occasion of a wedding celebration, Sardinian bakers – as well as the mothers of the bride and groom – give their very best, creating sophisticated forms.

Page 77 and facing page
Coccoi Pintau (Painted Bread)
Settimo San Pietro, Cagliari
This bread, shaped like fantastic animals, is made for everyday use. It is tasty, nutritious, and very digestible.

Pages 80/81
Pane 'e sposa (Bride's Bread)
Tramatza, Oristano
An intricate design that imitates the bride's crown.


Pfalz

ever lost, beginning with the stubble and straw for animals. It was on straw made of stalks of wheat that Our Savior was laid as a newborn in this world. And the passion of wheat resembles the Passion and death of Christ: both, once their torments are over, become bread for our hunger. That's why bread was once treated with reverence and love: it was considered something sacred. The expression to describe someone as truly good in Italian is 'as good as bread.' Bread was given all sorts of shapes: flowers, fruit, all things bright and beautiful. And every holiday had its own special bread. It was the ornament of the home, the pride of the lady of the house. The cleanest places in the house were where bread was made, starting from the table and utensils. And the place that dough was kept to produce a yeast for the next batch was very much like the cubby where a beloved child slept. It was touched only with clean hands. It was handled only with the greatest respect. Scraps weren't thrown away. And stale bread brought back in from the fields was always to be eaten first, because it was doubly sacred. That's what we said to children who pounced on the softer slices. There was utmost reverence for bread. One almost asked forgiveness of bread before eating it. And heaven help you if it fell to the ground – if ever it did, you had to kiss it the moment you picked it up."
Angioni describes with meticulous precision the ethical universe that surrounds and is carved out by bread: from cultivation – everything revolves around wheat, the crop that "commands" all the others – to the knowledgeable use of all its by-products (and immediately the narrator captures, through a logical but essential leap, the sacred nature of the straw upon which, in popular belief and countless representations, the newborn Savior "laid down His head"), the shapes of bread, which emerge in our stories, and the feast days associated with bread. And finally, a sacrality that is no longer displaced, but the very essence of bread's presence on the table – not bread as carved and decorated, not bread meant for nourishment – but the simple loaf, the first and perhaps only thing we encounter on the table. The extreme cleanliness of all that concerns bread, respect, the hardened crust, to be eaten with even greater intention, the kiss to fallen bread, the reverence.
You could assemble quite an anthology of "thinking about bread" in Sardinia, just to reaffirm what is already evident: breadmaking in Sardinia is far more than a simple gastronomic process. It is a ritual rooted in the island's millennia-old traditions, in its social and moral institutions, deeply intertwined (and here the word fits with braided loaves) with local communities, their culture, and their beliefs. Both public ones, I mean, and private: for in every household the bread ritual becomes a private blessing, one not taken lightly, and even transcending the "public form" it assumes in festivals and processions. If bread accompanies the Saint in his public descent through practically every village on the island, then within the home, the oven rises to the status of a small altar, the bread chest – decorated or not – a shrine; the act tells of a communion with something greater, something that bread "embodies," exactly as the Christian religion teaches us (founded as it is on the Bread of the Eucharist). Each step, then – from choosing the ingredients to shaping the final loaf – is laden with meaning and symbolism, to the point that the practice becomes a true expression of art. And if the essential ingredients of breadmaking in Sardinia (but also, of course, throughout the Mediterranean) are the simple yet characterful ones we know – durum wheat flour, water, natural leavens, and sometimes a pinch of salt – within each of them a practice solidifies that gives the bread's form a shared destiny. As anthropologist Giovanni Piras writes, "the selection of ingredients is a symbolic act reflecting the deep connection between man and his land."
The dough, then, kneaded by hand by

Facing page
Puzoneddos de Santu Marcu (Little Birds of Saint Mark)
Lei, Nuoro
Finely decorated bread featuring doves, flowers, and leaves, as tradition dictates for the feast of the patron saint of Nuoro.

the women of the house, becomes a true work of art (we are speaking, obviously, of a society that had to produce everything at home, one that did so for millennia on end. Today the narrative may need revisiting, but that does not mean the deeper process has changed). Every gesture, every movement, is infused with history and tradition.
As anthropologist Alessio Farris notes, "bread is a symbol of life, an element of social cohesion. Its preparation is a rite that continues to tell the story of a people."
Unsurprisingly, the preparation of bread is often accompanied by folk songs or life stories, turning the process into a moment of sociability and sharing.
In this way, the shapes of bread take on a particular meaning. And if *pane carasau* – the thin, crisp flatbread which is now the best-known of Sardinia's traditional breads, served during celebrations and shared meals, of ancient origin and used by shepherds during long transhumances – has taken that form to enhance its shelf-life, it is special in more than its mere function. Even *carasau*, in fact, is often decorated with artistic incisions that are anything but random: they tell stories, legends, and local traditions.
Other types of bread, such as *pani de su sarrabus* and *pani pintau*, feature intricate shapes that challenge the imagination. *Pani pintau*, for instance, is decorated with geometric or floral motifs that require skill and creativity in shaping the dough. These forms are often created for festivals, weddings, and other ceremonies, underlining the importance of bread as a symbol of abundance and good fortune.
During festivals, bread takes center stage. Families prepare special loaves, which are duly blessed and bestowed as gifts. This practice is more than just an act of faith; it is also a way of strengthening community ties and preserving tradition.
Harvest festivals and grape festivals offer further occasions in which bread plays a prominent role. In many areas of Sardinia, bread festivals are also held, featuring dancing, music, and song, where bread becomes a symbol of gratitude toward the land and the labor of farmers.
In recent decades, traditional Sardinian breadmaking has drawn the attention of both tourists and scholars, becoming a key element in the understanding of our intangible cultural heritage.
Pani carasau and *pani pintau* are just two manifestations of this patrimony. There is a still-more powerful and meaningful aspect, symbolically speaking, which was shrewdly captured by Alberto Maria Cirese, founding figure of a school of anthropology devoted to Sardinian culture. In a series of foundational studies, he retraced the many paths of bread and its form. Particularly notable is the way he linked it, through a shared "ephemeral" nature, to poetry, especially the kind of improvised poetry still found in Sardinia's plazas and festivals:
"In both cases, the substance of the expression is fleeting; while the models that they follow or the images they create possess their own extended continuity in time, their actual realization – through material means that serve as substrate or vehicle of expression – is brief and essentially ephemeral: spoken words in the case of poetry, and dough, by its nature to be consumed, in the case of bread. Just as with ephemeral popular poetry, however, which can be revived at will, with or without variation, so too with the products of that truly ephemeral plastic art that is the shaping of bread: they too, with or without change, can be revived at will (though not as freely, given the lesser availability – and cost – of the materials).
"That is why, on the island, what elsewhere remains episodic and less clearly indicative becomes something distinctive: in Sardinia, the modeling of bread makes plastic representation into something almost as commonplace as verse or the construction of verse.
"And for those who know how much the dizzying play of poetic construction has mattered, and still matters, to Sardinian

Facing page
Cruxi quarésimale (Lenten Cross)
Settimo San Pietro, Cagliari
On every occasion, even religious ones, Sardinian bakers reveal their talent and creativity.

popular life (with few equivalents elsewhere), it becomes clear how versification and the ephemeral plasticity of bread constitute two characteristic 'cultural specializations' of Sardinia – between which there are subtle but undeniable connections: it suffices to recall that in both realms, beyond the techniques of execution, there exist specialized terminologies, broadly familiar, that categorize with rigorous precision the processes, products, images, figures, etc."
The artistic forms of bread, shaped over centuries of tradition, tell stories of communities, landscapes, and cultures. And yet Cirese himself, drawing once again upon the parallels with poetry, identifies a fundamental difference. While poetry remains a communicative function, "in the case of shaped bread, the expressive material – dough – does not in itself serve the communicative or expressive purposes that it fulfills after being modeled: in shaping it, something different and heterogeneous is added to its basic purpose or destination. What is added is the value of a 'sign,' whereby bread, which by nature should be only 'good to eat,' becomes also 'good to communicate' – that is, capable of conveying images or, more precisely, meanings that are distinct from the simple, elementary meaning of being bread, and therefore, to eat. And these meanings, for which figuratively modeled breads become the signifiers, are complex – not only because, alongside the representations we might call naturalistic (such as depictions of herds and shepherds), there are those I'd call metaphorical (like the *bastone di Dio*, or staff of Christ) but above all because the various figurations, beyond conveying the image of what they represent, also signify or embody the specific occasions for which they are made: New Year's, for example, or weddings."
The classification of daily bread in Sardinia roughly identifies three zones, "one characterized by large loaves and two by flatbreads: the broad southern area, which produces large, crumbed loaves in many varieties (*civraxiu*, *moddizzosu*, *pan'e Seddori*, *tureddu*, *lada*, *coccoi*, *tunda*, etc.); a central zone producing flat, sheet-like bread (rectangular, oval, circular), from which two crisp, thin baked layers are obtained (*pane carasau*, *pan'e fresa*, *pistoccu*); and a northern zone that makes soft circular flatbreads, divisible into two layers (*ispianadda*, *pane d'Ozieri*, *pane fine*, *pan'e poddine*, *pistoccu lensu*, etc.). A separate placement in this geographical distribution seems to belong to *su zichi*, the crisp flatbread not divided into layers, traditionally made in Bonorva, in the island's north." This classification is taken from Giannetta Murru Corriga, who notes at the outset that it remains an empirical and non-exhaustive division.
But it is in *pani pintau*, the decorated bread, that the specializations multiply. Impossible to list them all here: cross shapes, serrated *coccois*, "saints' staffs," circular and heart-shaped forms – the decisive carvings that elevate the bread's decoration through aniconic codes typical of certain Mediterranean cultures – little roses, wildflowers, myrtle berries: a triumph of forms.
As Murru Corriga writes: "Blessed breads were distributed to neighbors, relatives, and friends, and were believed to protect homes, fields, and livestock from danger and evil influences.
The symbolic bond between wheat and bread, home and field, was also expressed plastically by shaping ceremonial breads with scenes of agricultural and pastoral life and decorating them with grains of wheat, like *su pane de cabuannu* (Noragugume), *sa tunda* (Busachi), *sa mandra e s'arzola* (Sedilo). A magical use of wheat, flour, and bread was linked to the cyclical rites of winter. Interwoven with Christian symbols, guarantors of well-being, fertility, and abundance, these goods were sought as gifts by children and also by women in need, in the name of Jesus. On the last two days of the year, in Campidano, people went door to door: on the

Facing pages
Pani de s'Assunta (Bread of the Assumption)
Bread in the shape of a fantastical animal. All across Sardinia, it is customary to get creative with different shapes for the Feast of the Assumption, celebrated on August 15th.

thirtieth, asking for raw wheat (*dì de su trigu cru*), and on the thirty-first, for cooked wheat seasoned with *sapa* (*dì de su trigu cottu*). In Orgosolo, on the last day of the year, children would go house to house asking for *su coccone 'e sa candelaria*, a bread made of semolina and lard."
Festival bread is recognizable by the unique shaping that identifies the occasion: a certain bread belongs to a certain celebration.
Widespread throughout Mediterranean cultures, the modeling of ceremonial breads in Sardinia reaches, in both craftsmanship and variety, the level of a true – though ephemeral – figurative plastic art, as Cirese emphasizes. Decorated breads – *pani pintau* – elaborate, yet austere, are often thin; they are marked by stylized figurations and carved, perforated compositions, and they often include glazing (*pane ischeddau*) and the use of tools beyond scissors and knives: tweezers, serrated wheels (*sarrettas*), stamps, and punches.
There it is: in the fusion of daily life and ceremony, in the constant redefinition of a sacred dimension through the ephemeral sculpture that bread invites, in the enduring presence of decorated bread in many forms (girls with eggs for Easter, little birds, anthropomorphic figures, even a number of toy-like loaves), Sardinian "artistic" breadmaking remains a living legacy (for how much longer, we don't know) that offers the joy of experience and evokes ancient memories. But perhaps it's to an even greater degree that the anonymous *smallness* of this artform speaks, in particular, the essence of a place and its people: a minor art, probably, yet one capable of stirring aesthetic wonder when observed closely – like so many other expressions that, when viewed through an anthropologist's lens, reveal complex cultural landscapes mirrored in objects we too often overlook.
In that marvelous collective volume *Pani* (published by Ilisso), the full richness of this repertoire is laid out.
The few pages we've devoted here to this topic, along with the stunning beauty of these forms and the photographs capturing some "witnesses" of this extraordinary "ephemeral" (but no less lasting) culture, are meant only as a taste – for those who wish to sample more.
Bread is bread – but in Sardinia, this is even truer, more mysterious. More sacred.
Bitter Honey by Salvatore Cambosu (1954) gathers and condenses a thousand meanings in just a few lines gathered on the island – in a hymn to life that triumphs over death, that bread embodies and fulfills. In its simple narration, the cycle of existence: an eternal return of hardness and softness, of bread and life that still binds us tightly to these lands, these bodies of knowledge, these flavors:
"On the eve before baking, at sunset, my mother would secretly bury a ball of dough the color of earth in flour soaked with warm, salted water. Then, tracing a cross atop the mound with the tip of her finger, I don't know what words or prayers she whispered, her lips barely moving – as one does before a burial. But within moments she would cover it all with woolen cloths, just as she did with us children when we fell ill and, in order to heal, needed to sweat...
When the first rooster crowed, work would begin in the kitchen. Already they were shaping birds never seen in flight; moons with no eyes or mouths but crosses and candelabras instead; they shaped ploughs and hunting horns; the wounded hands of Christ or Saint Francis; symbols of fertility. Still, most of the dough was turned into great wafers for daily bread; wafers that, in the oven's heat, would puff up like wineskins. The lit oven continued to exhale from its mouth the good smell that drives off death and disease.
They say that smell can even awaken the dead. Certainly, it makes women sing, and speaks of their younger years, of the loves they hoped for, and how they came, and how they made them wait in vain." Bread, life.

Stefano Salis

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HIS CRIMSON EMINENCE

Cristina Nuzzi