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## Sassari Experience and Sardinian Hercules September 6, 2012

The piazza is alive with generations of families, clusters of teens and packs of young adults on a Thursday night. Commercial retail is just shuttered for the evening, about nine, and cafes are very much in business. A large herd of bicycles just begins circling the fountain blowing whistles and ringing bells cheerfully. The fountain is ringed by sitters, just looking and chatting. The children are exuberantly running and playing.

My personal clock operates all day, so during mid-afternoon I am walking and musing, ready to engage, yet the shops here and Olbia generally close at 1 for the afternoon, reopening at 6. The museums and grocery stores were open. The winter must be done differently.



Prison in Sassari, just like Folsom

Sassari is not a tourist town, there are few hotels, three according to reception at Hotel Emmanuel. For the first time in five trips it took an hour to find a hotel, just find one. There was not "turista ufucina" at the rail station or within walking range. The streetcar ride showed no hotels or information and the middle aged guys could not help. (An approachable demographic profile for me) Unlike mainland Italy, virtually nobody speaks

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English that I can tell. The pharmacy person was helpful with broken questions while I work with single Italian words and hand gestures. The woman at the fruit store knew, "figs", with a lilt, was a question. The weights and transactions are fairly easy, kilos and euros, the fresh figs indescribable.

The Ethiopian immigrants are wandering and pestering about selling their wares. No apparent skills to offer the economy they wander about hawking trinkets, leather goods and elephant figurines throughout town. A legacy from IL Duce.

### Sardinian Hercules

September 9, 2012

An arms length wood club crusted with lumpy knots dangled from his right hand. The reddish body standing tall, over six feet, barefoot, one heel raised as if walking. Dark curls crept from under the headdress. The gaping mouth of lion hung low over his brow, the nostrils just above his hair line, fangs intact, lion eyes menacingly peering out above the lifeless dark eyes of the Herculean statue. The lion skin body hung down his back, fore paws with claws tied around his neck, the lion skin tail and back legs hanging low down his back, dangling.

A North American Indian was my first impression upon entering the gallery I avoided the piece thinking some kind of gimmick. Perusing the gallery of Roman artifacts of exquisite ancient glass, bronze tools and weapons I came to the bronze head of Hercules in a glass case. It took a minute to realize this was a human head, crusted with a lion head all covered in green patina. Both the lion and human eyes are empty space, holes in the bronze mask. Not a sculpture in the round, the Herculean head is a three-quarter mask open in the back. The bronze is part of the Olbia Museo Arcologica collection.

The "aah-haa" moment arrived as I glanced to a standing, larger than life, terracotta figure, alongside the case holding the bronze head. The bronze Herculean head is from the period of Republican Rome.

The Duomo San Nicolas in Sassari, completed in 1805, portrayed the most surprising Hercules in a vast ceiling fresco. The composition portrayed the passion of Christ in crucifixion on the left, with his mother, Mary Magdalen and other women inconsolable on the right. Dividing the composition, and central to the viewer, was Hercules in three quarter profile gesturing toward the women with his back toward Christ. The same look with knarled club and lion skin headdress, now with one arm raised toward the women.

So profoundly interesting thought I. The central figure is Hercules and in primitive dress while all others wore cloth. Roman soldiers were shown rolling dice over the garments worn by Jesus in the foreground. He looked and gestured not to Christ, but the living.

The Sanno Museum in Sassari consists of an extensive collection of ancient art and paleolithic objects representing the known history of Sardinia. The Nuraghic civilization

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is well represented from the late stone age through the iron age when the people were conquered by invaders. Various cases held obsidian tools, pottery and stone figures with only one case storing iron objects. Few iron objects survive the passage of time, most rust away to metal flakes lost to history.

The Hercules figurine was clean, without visible decay, as if stored with care. The primitive iron figure with club and lion skin predated the Roman bronze head by one thousand years. The Nuraghic civilization predated recorded history, their history and arrival to the island unknown, yet Hercules was already at least a hero to these people, perhaps a deity. There is no record or evidence of lion in the Sardinian literature or museums, yet here is Hercules, at least a powerful, if not heroic figure, wearing lion headdress.

Evidence from three sources spanning over three thousand years reveals Hercules to be a person of great importance to the inhabitants of Sardinia. The earliest civilization portrayed Hercules in iron despite their limited means. The Romans, famous for incorporating local gods and deities for propaganda and subjugation, created a larger than life Hercules one thousand years later. Almost two thousand years later the Catholic church incorporated Hercules as the primary figure in the most famous Christian image, the crucifixion, as a protector.

