

In Sardinia: An Unexpected Journey in Italy by Jeff Biggers. New York: Melville House, 2023. 354 pp.

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The fruit of extended stays in Sardinia, this well-researched travel book offers a fascinating overview of the history of the Mediterranean's second largest island, with particular attention paid to archaeology as well as literature, visual arts, and folklore. Readers with little exposure to Sardinia and "veterans" of the island alike will find the book of serious interest.

For newcomers, the book's main contribution is to dispel the widespread misconception that Sardinia is nothing but picturesque beaches and a holiday destination for VIPs and celebrities from around the world. Biggers tirelessly summarizes evidence of a sophisticated Sardinian civilization long preceding its Greek and Roman counterparts. As recent archaeological findings indicate, this Nuragic civilization—named after the megalithic towers, "nuraghe," dotting Sardinia in the thousands—played a far more central role in Bronze age trade networks in Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East, discrediting the conventional image of the island as the inward-looking periphery of the Mediterranean. Biggers also highlights the "Carta de Logu" code of law, which, with its provisions for inheritance by women, compensation for adultery, and severe penalties for sexual violence, set Sardinia in the late 1300s centuries ahead of most legal systems in terms of women's rights. Furthermore, he chronicles the achievements of individual Sardinians, such as Mario De Candia, one of the most famous opera singers of the nineteenth century; Grazia Deledda, the second woman and second Italian to win the Nobel Prize for literature; and Antonio Gramsci, co-founder of the Italian Communist Party and political theorist.

To readers acquainted with Sardinia (including natives, like the author of this review), the book offers a number of intriguing, little-known anecdotes about connections between the island and world-historic figures and events. Two examples will suffice: Antoine De Saint-Exupéry, who wrote the classic *The Little Prince*, spent the last months of his adventurous life in northern Sardinia, working as a reconnaissance pilot for the Allies during WWII. In 1861 the new president Abraham Lincoln offered a major-general's commission to Giuseppe Garibaldi, long-time Sardinia resident and the leading military figure in Italy's unification struggle, to fight in the American civil war. One of the reasons Garibaldi turned down the offer was Lincoln's reluctance to emancipate slaves.

Biggers' passion for Sardinia and its people is palpable throughout the book. Yet this passion may be at the root of the book's weakness—its occasional tendency to portray relations with the outside world as a morality play of noble and resourceful locals pitted against rapacious and ruthless foreign meddlers. This perspective is problematic for two reasons. First, it sometimes leads the author to paint the island's history with an exceedingly broad brush, which can lead to implausible conclusions. Thus, he frames the American and NATO military bases in Sardinia as the latest episode in a long series of foreign occupations, starting with the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, and the Romans—never mind the fact that those bases are part of and parcel of defensive alliances freely negotiated by the Italian state, to which most Sardinians pledge allegiance. Second, to locate all blame for the island's woes (e.g., youth unemployment) beyond its shores risks depriving Sardinian policymakers and voters of agency and responsibility. Yet it is precisely upon the decisions of those voters and lawmakers that solutions to the problems of Sardinia depend to a considerable degree, in particular given that Sardinia is one of Italy's five "autonomous regions."

In the end, these flaws do not seriously detract from the book's overall success in bringing much deserved attention to Sardinia with a pleasing synthesis of vivid storytelling and careful summary of interdisciplinary academic findings.