



**IRON HORSE**  
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The essay (counterintuitively) starts here —>

Corsica—the most mountainous of the Mediterranean islands—has stretches along its coasts where steep, rocky slopes slip straight into the crystalline sea. Most famously, near Piana, the orange rock of the Calanches Cliffs shoots out of the clear green-blue water.

In high tourist season, cars circle and fight for parking spaces everywhere that affords a view of the cliffs. And narrow roads wind their way down switchbacks to the shore where the cliffs can be seen up close.

Most visitors devote themselves to the beaches or the mountains and gorges—if not, then to the restaurants and cultural attractions.

So a place like Filitosa is easy to overlook, despite its accessibility.

## The Stone Knows the Form

Geoffrey Babbitt



Filitosa is an open-air megalithic site—only about fifteen minutes up the coast from Propriano and another fifteen minutes inland.

The earliest archaeological evidence dates back to the late Neolithic Era, around 3300 BCE. It was probably inhabited until the early Bronze Age. Sometime around 1500 BCE, the inhabitants erected over twenty menhirs, great slabs of stone anywhere from a foot and a half to three feet wide and four to six feet tall.

Some of the megaliths have been sculpted to showcase swords and weapons in relief, but most have been transformed into faces, into standing stone people.



Filitosa is a stony *locus amoenus*, nestled in a lush green valley, amid an olive grove.



It's obvious why ancient people settled just there. While dense trees cover the high surrounding hills, it's bare and grassy around the site. Water runs nearby, and the settlement hugs a small hill, from which one would have the perfect vantage point for spotting potential threats. In fact, some speculate that the menhirs were meant to ward off attackers, but we don't know their purpose for sure.

A little downhill from the settlement, five megaliths surround an olive tree that is more than two thousand years old.

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Other than the menhirs, one of the most striking features of the site is how the Filitosans apparently lived with stone—stone stacked to form domiciles and walls, stone laid out into steps, stone rounded and worn smooth, stone burrowed into for a dwelling or hollowed away for storage.

The stone accommodated them, so it looks almost malleable.

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Many other sites from the same period have survived, of course, but Filitosa feels older than it is.

The palace at Knossos in Crete, for instance, was built roughly around the same time the Filitosan menhirs were erected, and yet Knossos feels much more modern. It would be too easy, however, to attribute Knossos's modernity to its restoration efforts. Knossos was sophisticated for its time.

Filitosa, by contrast, feels much more basic—which is by no means a pejorative. Filitosa offers a clear return to something early, something fundamental.

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Look at those faces!

A quick image search will show the striking stone faces of the menhirs, which seem to look out at us from the stone.



There's that old story about Michelangelo that's become a cliché for thinking about sculpture: "When asked how the great master was able to bring something as beautiful as the David into existence, Michelangelo replied, 'It was simple. I just cut away everything that wasn't David.'"

One gets the opposite impression, however, while looking at the far cruder Filitosan menhirs. The sculptors didn't eliminate the inessential; theirs was a process not of removal but of salvation. It's as if the sculptors had to go *into* the stone to bring each human face out of it, the way a rescuer dives *into* the sea, wrapping an arm around the drowning person to drag him up, up toward the light and surface, buoying his head above water, pulling him shoreward.

The sculptors drew likeness out of stone.



There's something of ourselves we encounter in the menhirs.

The desire to pull human faces out of stone echoes something in ourselves—something mental or psychological, maybe even something spiritual. The stones, in all their weighty substance, hint at something insubstantial and ethereal.

We shouldn't make too much of it, but the Filitosans were not so unlike us.

The menhirs aren't slabs of stone. They are mirrors.