

# Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale  
**SARDEGNA** Virtual Archaeology



## ■ Location of the site

The Phoenician-Punic necropolis of Sant'Antioco is located inside the present town, positioned about 90 km south-west of Cagliari. The parts of the necropolis which may currently be visited are those reused as Christian catacombs, whose access is located inside the parish church, named after the eponymous saint, and at least partially those which were reused up to the 70s of the twentieth century as an underground village. The portion of the necropolis at Is Pirixeddus is currently being excavated and arranged for a forthcoming re-opening to the public. Meanwhile it is occasionally opened for some events or exhibitions related to the Cultural Heritage entity. Sant'Antioco can be reached from Cagliari by taking the state road for Iglesias, and once the latter has been passed, by continuing along state road 126. Once in the village, all directions to the museum and the archaeological area are signposted.

## ■ History of excavations and studies

The first archaeological investigations at the Phoenician and Punic necropolis of Sulky date back to the mid-nineteenth century, when a few tombs were brought to light, as already mentioned by Canon Giovanni Spano who, in the Sardinian Archaeological Bulletin, clearly referred to the burials found on the western slopes of the hill where the Savoy stronghold of Su Pisu (1) now stands (fig. 1)





**Fig.1** - Savoy stronghold of Su Pisu (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Those same underground tombs were later reused during the Roman and early Christian ages and partly exploited, at least since the eighteenth century, as housing by the lower classes of Sant'Antioco which, as the oldest part of the town became repopulated, were dangerously exposed to the risk of pirate raids (2). No systematic and organised survey of the territory has been carried out as a significant part of the necropolis today lies under the modern town. On the basis of the knowledge deriving from a century of archaeological research, it is now possible to hypothesise that the original extension of the burial complex exceeded 6 hectares and that it included not many less than 1500 graves (3) (figs. 2-3).



**Fig. 2** - View from above of a sector of the necropolis of Is Pirixeddus  
(from <http://www.sardegna.digitalibrary.it/index.php?xsl=626&s=17&v=9&c=4461&id=29313>)

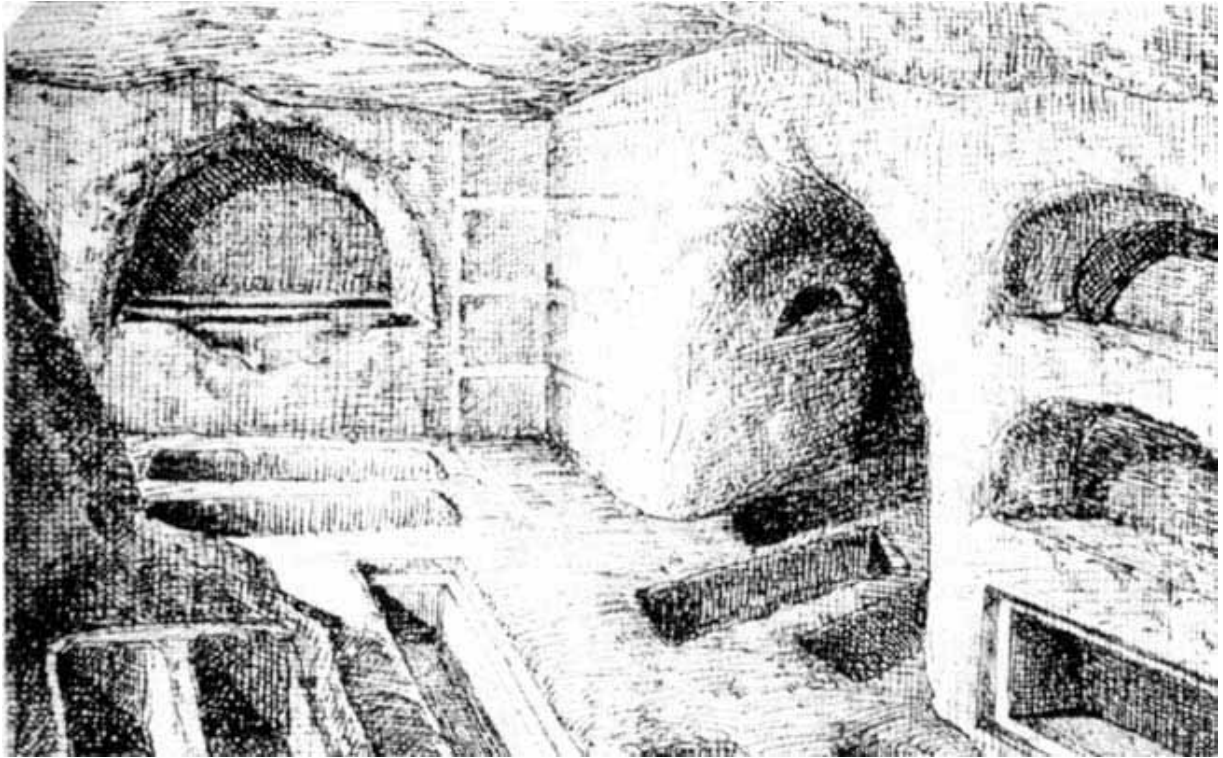
The graves may be dated back to the Punic period between the end of the VI and the late fourth century B.C., during the period that saw Carthaginian power assert itself over the island (4). We have already mentioned the Roman and early Christian reuse of the underground burial areas, whilst only sporadic evidence remains as concerns the previous necropolis of Phoenician age, among which it is worth mentioning the discovery, near the present Via Perret, of burned skeletal remains associated with a pitcher with extended lip which may be allocated to the mid-seventh century B.C. The location of the Phoenician necropolis identified to date would be about 400 metres from the archaic urban centre and about 100 metres from the ancient coastline (5).



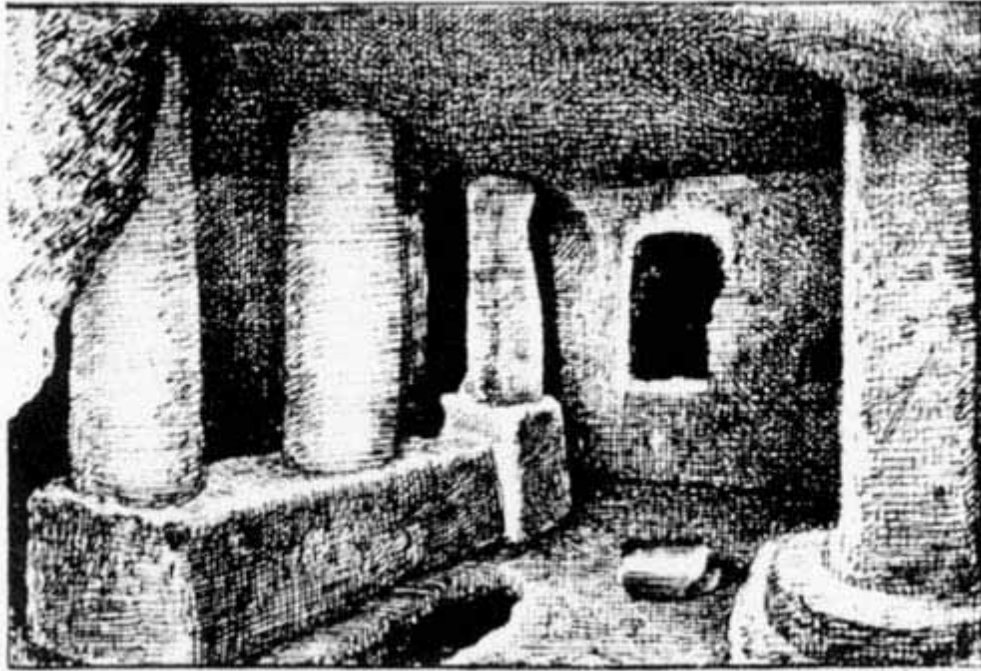
**Fig. 3** – South view of the necropolis of Is Pirixeddus  
(from <http://www.sardegna.digitalibrary.it/index.php?xsl=626&s=17&v=9&c=4461&id=29313>)

Some time after the activities of Canon G. Spano, Antonio Taramelli describes the discovery of two underground graves near the parish church, during the excavations in June 1906 (6). During the years that followed, investigations concentrated on the catacombs under the same parish church which was built during the Early Christian age by reusing and readjusting the Punic tombs (7) (figs. 4-5). In 1942 Salvatore Puglisi publishes the results of the excavations carried out in three intact Punic underground tombs in Via Belvedere, about 200 metres south-east of the basilica (8). Research then continued over the following years with Gennaro Pesce (9): in 1954 the first underground grave came to light, located on the eastern side of the Hill of Mont'e Cresia in Is Pirixeddus, also reused in the early Christian era and known as the "Tomb with the fresco" and thereafter the area was affected by an uninterrupted investigation lasting around fifty years. This research is then given a further boost thanks to the Superintendence for the provinces of Cagliari and Oristano and thanks to the activity of Ferruccio Barreca between 1970 and 1986, who, in

addition to the excavation work, actively promoted annual maintenance work and conservative restoration (10).



**Fig. 4** - Inside the catacombs of Sant'Antioco with pits and arcosolium tombs obtained in the walls of the ancient Punic burial chambers (from TRONCHETTI 1989, p. 49, fig. 38).



**Fig. 5** - Cubicle F with ceiling supported by pillars, in the Catacombs  
(from TRONCHETTI 1989, p. 63, fig. 41).

During these years, precisely in 1982, the Superintendence expanded the excavation area to an adjacent private land, bringing to light an important area of the Punic funeral complex (11). During those years, Carlo Tronchetti and Piero Bartoloni undertake the excavation of the two tombs of this complex, no. 1 and no. 2 AR. In 1983, C. Tronchetti brings to light a new sector of the necropolis, which underwent restructuring and transformation works during the Roman Imperial period, including the construction of the amphitheatre (II century A.D.) (12).

During these new investigations, the statues of two lions crouched and carved in the round were discovered, which, supposedly, had been placed to guard a city gate of the Punic centre, or which could have been part of a sacred monumental production factory before being reused with a decorative function in the Roman amphitheatre (13) (fig. 6).



**Fig. 6** - The lions of Sulci now at the archaeological museum F. Barreca immediately after the discovery (from <http://www.archeotur.it/santantioco/immagini/category/3-museo-archeologico.html>).

Between 1985 and 1988, C. Tronchetti and Paolo Bernardini continued excavations in the same area of the necropolis, called AR, which had already been investigated in 1982-1983, and several Punic tombs were brought to light, including tombs 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 AR14.

Since 2000, research has continued under the direction of P. Bernardini by focusing on a further portion of the funerary complex, called Parco Geominerario (Geo-mining Park), adjacent to the already explored spaces, thus completing the investigation on the eastern hillside (15).

During the investigations in 2002, a tomb chamber with a central pillar was discovered, decorated with a high relief fresco depicting an Egyptian-style striding male figure with

skirt, bracelets, kluft and beard, similar to the one found in 1968, which until a few decades ago was proudly displayed at the old National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari (fig. 7).



**Fig. 7** - High relief of burial tomb no. 7 in the necropolis of Sant'Antioco, discovered in 1968 (From TRONCHETTI 1989 Fig. 3, p.10).

Very interesting burials have emerged during recent years from the same eastern sector of the necropolis, clearly belonging to individuals and families of the upper class. Among these, the tomb, one of the oldest known to date, discovered by P. Bernardini in 2004, in the lower via Belvedere, could form the southern border of the burial area (16). A second tomb was unearthed in two successive stages, in January 2007 and in 2008, by P. Bartoloni in Via Necropoli: the latter underground grave defines the western limit of the funerary complex (17).

# ■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas





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