

Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Frescoes in the catacombs

The catacombs of Sant'Antioco are located next to the Basilica of the Saint and extend south east of it, in underground environments derived from the Punic necropolis. Inside there are arcosolium tombs (B/II C/VII, L/XXI) and a sarcophagus (E environment) which still have the remains of the frescoes with which they were decorated, although humidity has affected them. A fresco-painted arcosolium is also inside a hypogeum, largely used in the paleo-Christian era, in the nearby necropolis of *Is Pirixeddus*.

Tomb B/II has a decoration on a layer of plaster that involved the lunette, the intradox and the entire front of the arcosolium. The inside of the arch was damaged by diggers with a channel and hollows used for new deposits (fig 1).



Fig. 1 - Arcosolium B/II, in which the damage from reuse at a later stage can be seen (from Porru 1989 tab. XIVa).

The arcosolium is decorated with bands and plant motifs spread over the figurative field, without symmetry or single composition criteria; the left-hand intradox shows a robin sitting on a flower; the centre of the lunette shows the legs of a male person who is generally known as the *Good Shepherd* (fig. 2). This type of iconograph has a metaphorical

value: the plants and robin refer to Paradise, the Good Shepherd refers to Christ who guides the deceased to their eternal life. The fresco can be dated, according to stylistic elements, to the 4th century A.D.



Fig. 2 - Typical depiction of the *Good Shepherd* in the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome (from http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacombe_di_Priscilla#mediaviewer/File:Good_shepherd_01_small.jpg).

Tomb C/VIII has a larger fresco areas, that reaches the vault. The colours have been blackened and offer fewer interpretative elements, while the decoration, on a white background, has bands that describe the lunette, with three bands decreasing in size. The main colour is red. The profusion of flowers and garlands that Taramelli spoke of are no longer visible today. An important detail of the tomb is the remains of an inscription, the only one in the whole catacomb area, in capital letters: EVIBAS (...*in pac]e vibas [...*). The fresco can be attributed based on stylistic criteria, to the first half of the 5th century A.D., (figs. 3-4).



Fig. 3 - Arcosolium C / VIII, the remains of the frescoes, view from the right side (from Porru 1989 table XVa).



Fig. 4 - Arcosolium C / VIII, the remains of the frescoes. View from the left side (from Porru 1989 table XV b).



The decoration of arcosolium L/XXI is in a terrible condition. There are lines decorating the opening with three bands of decreasing width and different colours: the first, the widest, is bright red, the second is ochre yellow and the third is black. The latter rises vertically to intercept a similar triple band that decorated the top part of the front. To the left of the arcosolium, parallel to the black connecting band, there is a central strip with black and red dots. In the intradox to the right it is possible to see a ochre yellow stripe with red and green dots, that is a repeat of the external one with red and black dots, and divides two drawings: the outer one, with plant motifs with wide stems and green leaves ending in two big green leaves that enclose a red bud; only a few orange residual parts remain of the inner one. The fresco can be dated to 6th-7th century A.D. (figs. 5-6).

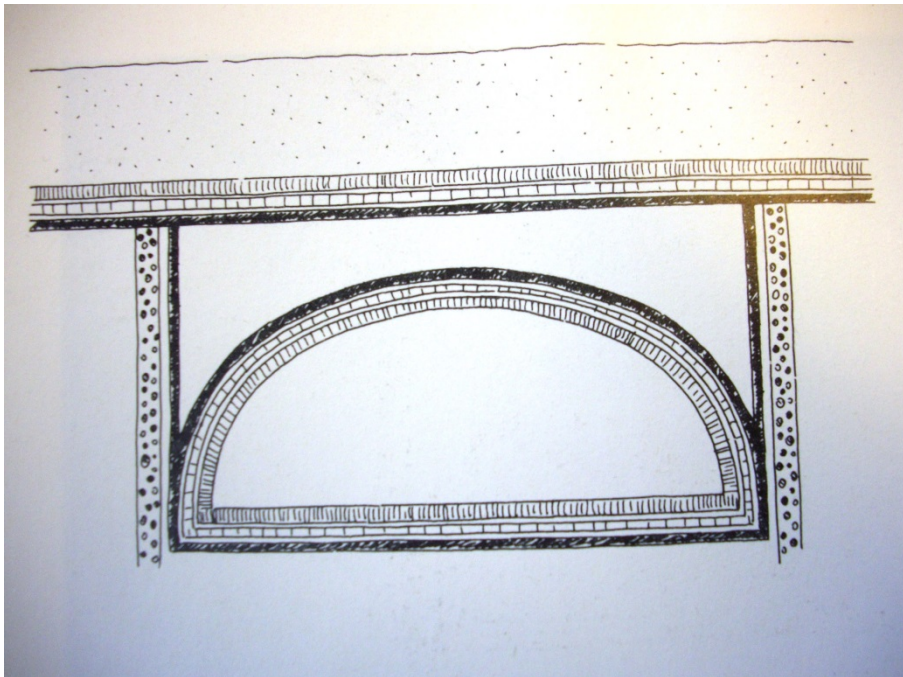


Fig. 5- Reconstruction drawing of the exterior decoration of arcosolium L/XXI, arch and front (from Porru 1989, table XVI a)

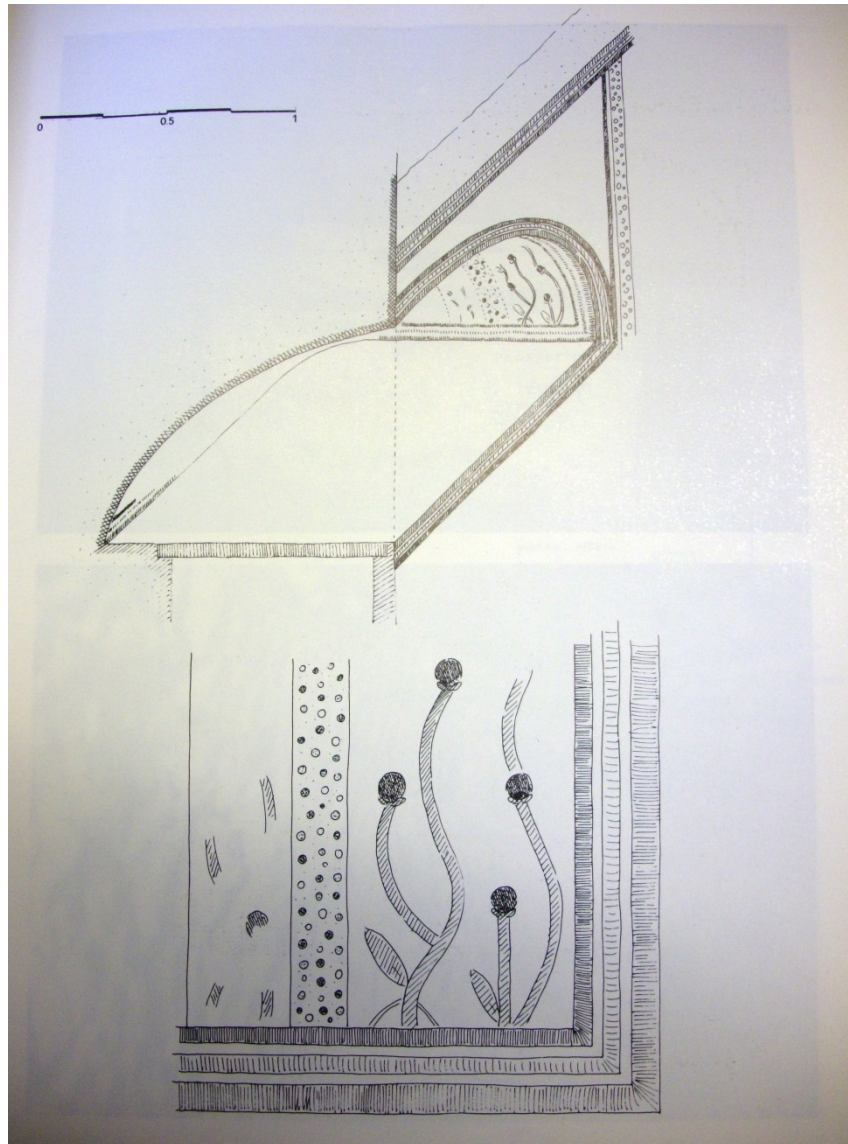


Fig. 6- Reconstruction drawing of the exterior decoration of arcosolium L/XXI, section and enlarged view of the floral decoration (from Porru 1989, table XVII a)

The last arcosolium painting was found in the necropolis of *Is Pirixeddus*. What may now be observed on site is a reproduction of the original fresco which contains the idealised portrait of the deceased man or woman (unclear), under a sort of canopy, flanked by baskets filled with pomegranates, a symbolic fruit in Christian iconography, connected to the resurrection. The opening of the arcosolium is decorated with a red band that rise vertically from the two ends of the arch towards the top part of the façade, framing a plant pattern with laurel (or palm?) branches in the centre and rectangular decorative elements to the sides, while the lower part is filled with the enlarged reproduction of pomegranate

seeds (fig. 7). Given the manner of the fresco and some stylistic elements, this could date to the 6th-7th century A.D.



Fig. 7 - Reconstruction of the arcosolium found in Is Pirixeddus (from Bartoloni 2007, p. 50 fig. 31)

The last painting known inside the Sant'Antioco catacombs is that of the sarcophagus in room E, the only remaining one of four that were known about. This is a geometric decoration divided into squares defined by strips of alternating colours (green, yellow, red), painted in a hurry. Only a head is readable, while traces of the same motifs remain along the long side. The cover was also painted (fig. 9)





Fig. 9 - Painted sarcophagus in E chamber, view of the entire head (from Porru 1989, table XXII c)



■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas

■ Bibliographic abbreviations

- BARTOLONI 2007 P. BARTOLONI, *Il museo archeologico comunale "F. Barreca" di Sant'Antioco*, Sassari 2007
- PORRU 1989 L. PORRU, *Riesame delle Catacombe (nuove osservazioni e rilievi)* in L. PORRU, R. SERRA, R. CORONEO, *Sant'Antioco. Le Catacombe, il Martyrium, i frammenti scultorei*, Cagliari 1989, pp. 15-51.
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