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REGIONE AUTONOMA DE SARDIGNA  
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# Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale  
**SARDEGNA** Virtual Archaeology



## ■ The basilica of Sant'Antioco Martyr

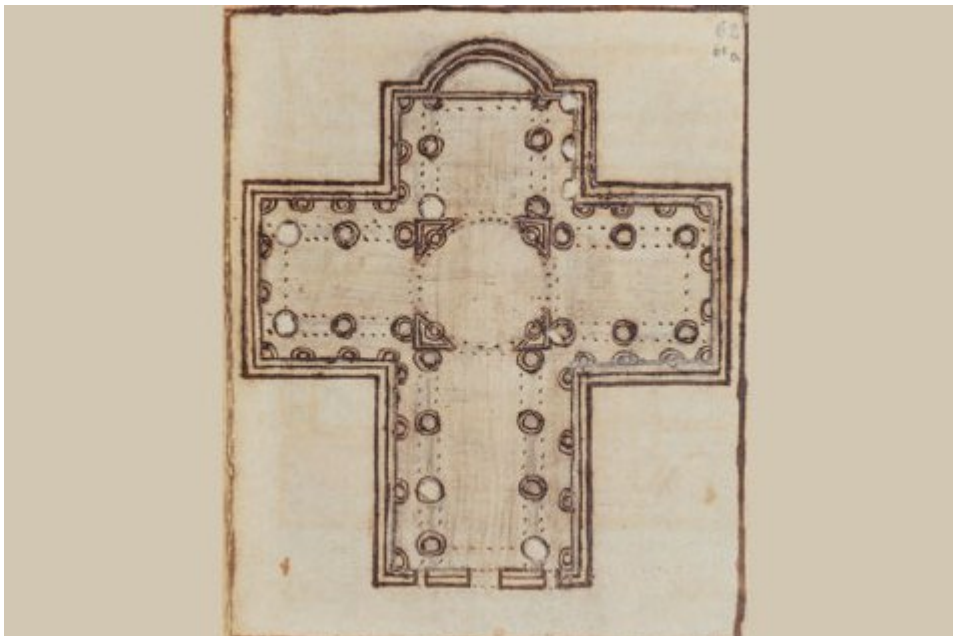
The basilica of Sant'Antioco has a long history and is mentioned in the archive documents right from medieval times. In 1089, the *monasterium sancti Anthioci* was donated by Giudice Constantine II of Cagliari to the Vittorini monks of Marseilles, together with the church reconsecrated by Bishop Gregorio of Sulky in 1102. The island of Sant'Antioco remained almost uninhabited until the 18th century, due to incursions by the Saracens, although it did survive as a centre of worship. A rather important moment marking the history of the island and the sanctuary was in 1615, when the archbishop of Cagliari, Francisco De Esquivel, ordered a reconnaissance of the catacombs, to confirm the proclaimed finding of the remains of Sant'Antioco in Porto Torres and prove the tradition according to the *inscription by bishop Peter* which stated they were located in the sarcophagus-altar in which the *inventio* took place (fig. 1). This and other news can be found in hand-written and printed works from the 17th century to modern times that unfortunately do not describe the building or buildings of worship that were dedicated to the martyr saint.



**Fig. 1** - The altar-sarcophagus of Sant'Antioco (from [http://www.antika.it/003801\\_sulci-catacombe.html](http://www.antika.it/003801_sulci-catacombe.html)).

Not knowing the topography of the post-Classic town, unfortunately, there is no certain knowledge that the *martyrium* is also the first cathedral or if this was situated in another place. Some ruins near the Roman bridge, not yet clearly identified, may indicate the presence of a church, but there is not enough proof of this to state it with certainty. Instead, the discover of a paleo-Christian baptism font in the second aisle of the northern side nave supports the substantial identity of the cathedral-*martyrium*, although the presence of a baptistery is not sufficient to state that a church was actually a bishop's seat. The fact that lies most in favour of the theoretical identity between the two buildings is the huge and rich Byzantine and high medieval documentation referring to the *martyrium*, that leads one to think that the building held great importance, to the point that if it was not an original bishop's seat, it was probably transferred there quite early on, perhaps from the 7th century.

From an architectural point of view, the basilica of Sant'Antioco was originally a "Greek cross" building: a "dice" with a dome in the centre from which four arms depart, all with vaulted ceilings. The pattern is typical of the so-called *quadrifida* (divided into four sections) *Martyrium*, similar to the late ancient plan of San Saturno in Cagliari and similar to the Byzantine structures of the church of San Giovanni di Sinis (figs. 2-3)

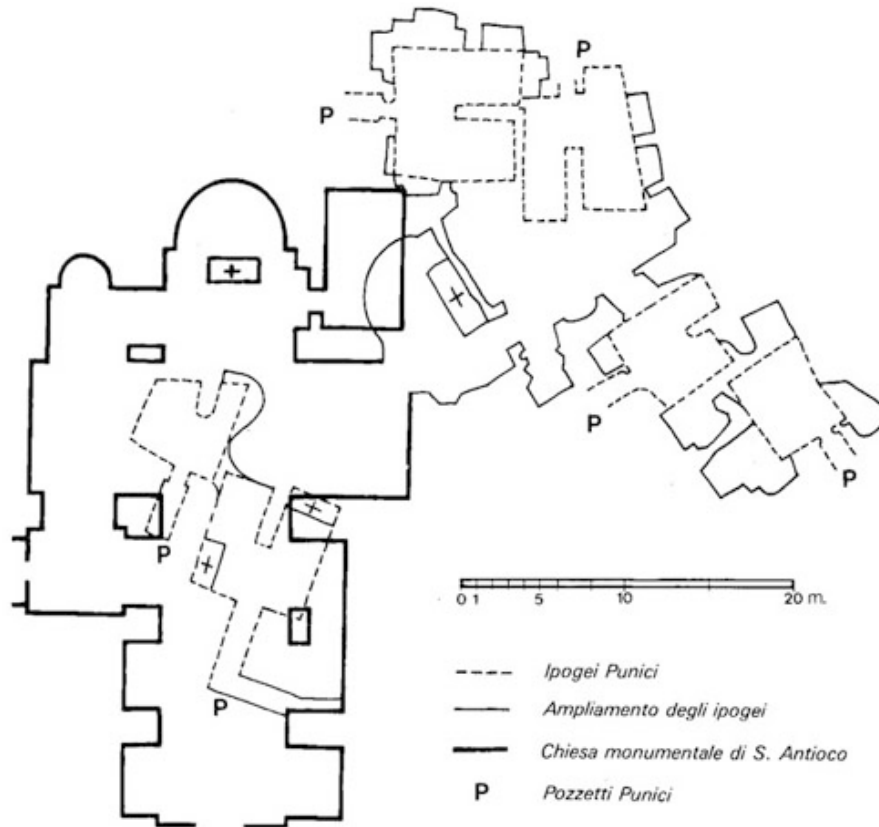


**Fig. 2** - Plan of San Saturno in 1631.



**Fig. 3** - Church of San Giovanni di Sinis (<http://www.sardegna.cultura.it/j/v/277?s=7&v=9&c=2488&notizia=18065&pic=7>).

The original building was totally incorporated into the bodies of buildings of different ages, architectural shape and type of use. The outside of the church is currently difficult to interpret as it has been covered by other buildings on all sides apart from the facade. The basilica currently has a longitudinal layout, in Latin cross format, with an entrance to the west and the altar to the east. It is possible to enter the church through two entrances: one is the portal opened in the seventeenth century along the north flank of the medieval church, the other the portal on the façade (fig. 4).



**Fig. 4** - Plan of the Basilica of Sant'Antioco with its Catacombs (from [http://www.sant-antioco.it/Info%20Sant%27Antioco%20e%20Calasetta/Sant%27Antioco/paese/santantioco\\_martire/](http://www.sant-antioco.it/Info%20Sant%27Antioco%20e%20Calasetta/Sant%27Antioco/paese/santantioco_martire/))

The first aisle of the church was an extension of the medieval room, probably built between the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century. The facade was designed perhaps by the Piedmont engineer Saverio Belgrano of Famolasco (1761-1769) with its sober design and soft original colours (pale green, light blue, pink and yellow), which were replaced in the recent renovation by colours that are too bright and contrast the overall design (fig. 5).



**Fig. 5** - Facade of the Basilica of Sant'Antioco (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The medieval facade was built on an older wall, not fully perpendicular to the main axis of the church, and perhaps belonging to the Phoenician-Punic or Roman walls of *Sulky*. This masonry is in fact made up of large ashlar trachyte blocks identical to those of the fortification structures of the ancient city.

The room that was the medieval church is laid out in a design with three apses. On the one hand, the irregularity is also due to the need to use pre-existing walls and on the other large blocks of volcanic rock, which enforced some structural solutions, for example the rather small width of the left hand nave (fig. 4).

The most important part of the building is the central domed part: the dome is supported by an octagonal curtain wall and is connected to the square shape using corner wells with arches that stand on pedestals that are sculpted in the shapes of tortoise shells (two pairs to the west) and lion's paws (two pairs to the east) (figs. 6-8).



**Fig. 6** - Sant'Antioco, the dome of the basilica (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



**Fig. 7** - Sant'Antioco, the dome's corbel shaped as a lion paw (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).





**Fig. 8** - Sant'Antioco, the dome's corbel shaped as a tortoise shell (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

In Christian iconography, the lion takes on a dual significance, both positive and negative; more frequently, it plays an apotropaic role, i.e. guarding the entrance to the holy place, but inside it can also represent the figure of Christ. The turtle is an ancient symbol of Indian cosmology, but also the animal which fights against a cock in the mosaics of Aquileia, the latter figure alludes to Christ. The opposing use of tortoise-lion may be a reference to the opposition between west and east, darkness and light, the Devil and Christ and clearly hints at the struggles between heresy and orthodoxy.

Towards the east is the larger apse, with a smaller one alongside, that faces into the north-east corner chamber, while the south-east corner chamber does not have one, an unusual factor due to the fact that the floor level is raised because of the crypt underneath, which hindered the building of any wall structures (fig. 4). Today it is possible to access from this side of the presbytery that was part of the sacresty.

## ■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas

## ■ Bibliographic abbreviations

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Progetto cofinanziato dall'Unione Europea  
Programma Operativo FESR 2007-2013

FESR - Fondo Europeo di Sviluppo Regionale - Asse I, Linea di Attività 1.2.3.a