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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
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Church and monastery of San Nicola di Trullas

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Description of asset

The church of San Nicola di Trullas stands in the municipality of Semestene (SS), about 50 km from Sassari (fig. 1). It was probably built before 1113, the year in which it was donated by the Athen family to the Camaldolese monks.



Fig. 1 - The church of San Nicola di Trullas (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The layout of the building is in Romanesque style and is very similar to the nearby building of the Porto Torres Palatine church of Santa Maria del Regno in Ardara. A long of tradition of studies, not unanimously shared, has interpreted the name Trullas, as a reference to a previous place of Byzantine domed place of worship (*troulla* = dome), of which there is

no documentary or archaeological proof, however. In the Middle Ages, the church depended directly on the diocese of Sorres and news of its administration comes from the “Condaghe di San Nicola di Trullas” (12th-13th century). The vastness of their territory, that included lands as far as the Sedilo high plains can be seen in this information (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 - The church of San Nicola seen from the South (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Its single-nave plan is the juxtaposition of two cubes on which the apse in the east is built (fig. 3).





Fig. 3 - The south side of the church of San Nicola (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

Inside, the space is divided into two vaulted cross aisles separated by a under-arch. The apse has an end dual-line cornice, with twin-archivaults and a lesene that divides the surface into two parts, each open onto a stepped single-light window (figs. 4)





Fig. 4 - The apse (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The same type of arch can be seen under the cornice at the base of the gable and along the sides; there is a single-light window in each side, with the one opening onto the south-east having a geometrical bas-relief centring.

The façade has an architraved portal with a segmental arch, a false loggia in the top part, characterised by a number of small arches on columns. Each of them is topped by a corbel, decorated with engraving or bas-relief work with plant or abstract motifs. The crowns between the arches on the façade house a total of four painted ceramic basins that, like the ones along the eastern side, are of Islamic production, coming from eastern Sicily and dated to the second half of the 11th century (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 - Detail of the façade with ceramic bowls (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

In fact, during the restoration work carried out in 1997, following the removal of plaster from the interior walls, some frescoes emerged likely dating back to the early decades of the 13th century. The representations of Christ among the apostles are preserved in the apsidal vault, of twenty-four elders in adoration of the Mystic Lamb on the eastern vault and an angelic court along the western vault, in addition to various painted fragments with plant motifs (figs 6-7).



Fig. 6 - Frescoes in the apsidal vault (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



Fig. 7 - Reconstruction hypothesis of frescoes (visual by Unicity S.p.A.).

With doubt it is possible to refer one of the areas that has been dug, behind the church apse, to a bell tower.

The monastery was next to the south side of the church (or part of it), some of which still remains, bordered by walls that are still visible at foundation height. However, the layout can be seen, with a square cloisters and a well in the middle, surrounded by a covered rectangular walkway leading to some different-sized rooms used for different activities, that are not always easy to identify with certainty (fig. 8).



Fig. 8 - Reconstruction hypothesis of the monastery cloisters (visual by Unicity S.p.A.).

Based on the comparison with other monastery sites, there has been a proposal, with some doubts, of recognising: a possible capitular room on the east side, with other gathering rooms such as a visitors' area. There may have been a refectory on the side opposite the church, a garden in the centre of the cloisters and some environments usually placed along the cloisters corridors: a *scriptorium*, a reading area, a space for the abbot's seat and the prior's seat, and a space which may have been for the priors' tombs (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 - Reconstruction hypothesis of the church and monastery seen from the northeast (visual by Unicity S.p.A.).

The monastery must have been built in worked stone blocks, but probably covered by a trussed roof, as usually found in this type of building. It is likely that it had wooden floors, that divide the ground floor from the first floor (were the monks' cells probably were, if we compare to similar buildings) and perhaps a lower level along the southern side, that still slopes towards the valley below.

The reconstruction has several aspects that are not clear, regarding the development and function of the rooms along the south side of the cloisters, like the part north of the cloisters itself, that have not been investigated in a dig. Although important, the monastery had a small hermitage, as witnessed in documents, that was for the Camaldolese monks who chose to live the life of a hermit.

The extension and internal division of the rooms makes one think that the resident community was rather large, as the reconstruction of economic life of the priory by the

Condaghe di San Nicola di Trullas also suggests. The relations with the 12th century sources, closer chronologically to the donation of the church and monastery, is problematic, as no material has been found that proves the site was frequented in the 12th century. The areas still to be investigated (north side, in front of the façade) may help the reconstruction of the phases of monastery life between the 12th and 13th century and be verified in light of the written sources remaining (fig. 10).



Fig. 10 - Reconstructive hypothesis of the church and monastery seen from the northwest (visual of Unicity S.p.A.).

With current knowledge, it is not possible to reconstruct the order in which the two buildings (church and monastery) were built, and as the coenobium is not explicitly mentioned in the donation document in 1113, it can be hypothesised that the monastery was built immediately after this bequest, or that it was already under construction at that time. However, some experts believe that it was built at the same time as the church and that it is plausible to believe that, when the donation that meant the Camaldolese monks settled on the site, the donors (the Athen family) did not just offer a church with all ceremonial items (books, ornaments, liturgical furnishings), but also a full monastery, equipped with everything necessary for monastic life.

■ Credits

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