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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

Church and monastery of San Nicola di Trullas

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ History of Studies

The church of San Nicola di Trullas (fig. 1), built in the 12th century, is in the municipality of Semestene (SS), about 50 km from Sassari.



Fig. 1 - Aerial view of the San Nicola complex (photo by the Municipality of Semestene).

The area in which the building stands was subjected to several archaeological digs in the years 2002, 2005 and 2006, that have involved the area along the southern (fig. 2) and eastern sector of the church and later defined the size of the adjacent monastery¹.

¹ The digs were carried out thanks to collaboration between the Semestene municipal authorities and the Superintendency of Archaeological Heritage for the provinces of Sassari and Nuoro, under the supervision of Dr Antonietta Boninu.



Fig. 2 - The monastery digs along the south side (photo by Municipality of Semestene).

The first digs concentrated in the sector of the apse and brought to light some structure that still have an intact stratigraphic deposit, that bears witness to the final phase of monastery life. Subsequent investigations that expanded the area of the digs to the west, brought to light the monastery with its cloisters and courtyard and central well, with a rectangular covered walkway, and the various rooms facing onto it (figs. 3-4). The digs allowed about another ten areas areas in the monastery to be investigated, and their stratigraphic sequence to be studied, documenting the last phases of the building's life, that were destroyed after a big fire around the mid 14th century, that also caused the site to be abandoned. It was however frequented once more in the 16th and 17th centuries.



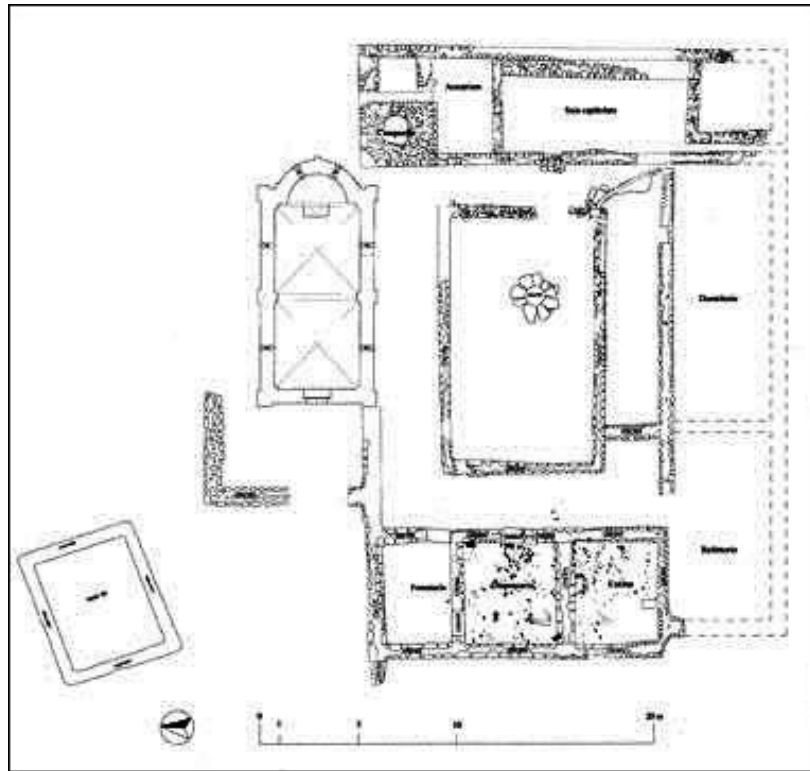


Fig. 3 - Layout of monastery (Author: L. Sanna, graphics M.A. Demurtas).



Fig. 4 - The rim of the well in the cloisters courtyard (photo by Municipality of Semestene).

Under the level of the collapse of the structures, large amounts of ash and carbon can be found, which enclose organic remains and various ceramic and metal items.

The materials found in the well were important for reconstructing monastery life during the 16th-17th centuries. The well was used as a waste dump and filled on some time after the fire, with materials that had collapsed from the cloisters and surrounding buildings (figs. 5-6).



Fig. 5 - The digs along the south side of the church (photo by the municipality of Semestene).



Fig. 6 - The digs along the south side of the church (photo by the municipality of Semestene).

Several ceramic and metal items, such as nails of various shapes and sizes, probably from the beams of the roofs that then collapsed during the fire, a scythe, a hoe, an axe, a lock, a loop and hinges from monastery doors were found. The archaeozoological and archaeobotanical items found are also important.

Most of the studies on the San Nicola di Trullas site concern the church's architecture and the documentation regarding the monastery settlement.

*Condaghe di San Nicola di Trullas*² is fundamental for learning about the monastery's economic activity. The donation document, copied and published by Eduardo Blasco Ferrer³, was recently studied by Andrea Pala in the most general context of the text sources that are useful for reconstructing the liturgical fabric of medieval Sardinian churches⁴. There are ecclesiastical ornaments that the church of San Nicola di Trullas was supplied and that are mentioned in the donation document in 1113, but which have unfortunately been destroyed. These ecclesiastical elements also provide a comparison with the inventory of items belonging to the Trullas priory, drawn up in 1279, contained in a document studied and published (together with other documents pertinent to monastery life between in the 12th and 13th century) by Ginevra Zanetti⁵ and more recently by Valeria Schirru⁶.

The church's architecture, considered to be one of the basic witnesses of Sardinian Romanesque architecture, due to its closeness of construction modes with the church of Santa Maria del Regno in Ardara has been present since early works on Romanesque art in Sardinia, among which we can also remember that of Dionigi Scano in 1907 and Raffaello Delogu in 1953 and also in more recent studies by Renata Serra in 1989, Roberto Coroneo in 1993 and the recent volume written by Coroneo with Renata Serra in 2004, in which the frescoes found in the 1990s were also published⁷.

The ceramic bowls, studied and published by Michelle Hobart and Maria Francesca Porcella, have also provided important data about the reconstruction of the ecclesiastical building⁸. On the same subject, the recent intervention by Giuseppe Padua, in his essay

² MERCI 2001.

³ BLASCO FERRER 2003.

⁴ PALA 2010; PALA 2011.

⁵ ZANETTI 1974.

⁶ SCHIRRU 1999.

⁷ Cfr. Scano 1907; Delogu 1953; Coroneo 1993; Coroneo, Serra 2004.

⁸ HOBART, PORCELLA 1996; HOBART 2006; HOBART 2010.

dedicated to the San Nicola di Trullas site, the settlement and the results of the archaeological dig campaigns carried out in 2002, 2005 and 2006⁹.

With regards to the site's settlement, an article by Giovanni Lilliu in 1959 published in the *Archivio Storico Sardo*, with the title "Trulla cupola in Sardegna", was the origin of interpretation of the name Trullas as "domes" and the hypothesis of a pre-existing Byzantine hermits monastic settlement belonging to a domed church; an interpretation that is no longer favoured by critics¹⁰. Lilliu mentions the appearance on the site of traces of a Roman villa, that can no longer be identified.

These pre-existing Roman buildings mentioned by Lilliu, also mentioned in the cited article, cannot be referred to systematic digs, for which documentation can provide further details on the human settlements in the area in which the church and the Camaldolese monastery of San Nicola di Trullas was built.

The recent digs carried out in the monastery were published in a 2010 volume by Antonietta Boninu and Antonella Pandolfi¹¹ and represent the most recent publication, at present, about the site of San Nicola di Trullas. The information in this publication about the digs in the last decade have allowed a reconstruction of the most recent phases of life at the monastery before it was finally abandoned. Further digs could also reconstruct the monastery life in the period between 1113 and the second half of the 13th century, when the priory of San Nicola di Trullas enjoyed its most flourishing and wealthy period, and the earlier phases of the Camaldolese settlement, and to solve some doubts as to the nature of the pre-existences on the site prior to 1113.

⁹ BONINU, PANDOLFI 2010.

¹⁰ Cfr. Soddu, De Santis 2009.

¹¹ BONINU, PANDOLFI 2010.

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