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REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA  
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

# The area of the Cornus basilicas

Patrimonio culturale  
**SARDEGNA** Virtual Archaeology



## ■ Description of the site

The area of Cornus was used since the prehistoric era: the first data goes back to the Eneolithic age up to modern times.

The town centre is ancient: in the final decades of the 6th century B.C. The Carthaginians built a town probably situated on the plateau of Campu 'e Corra, as a step towards conquering the island. It was a military outpost for controlling Montiferru, to stem the incursions by the natives into the flat land of Campidano. The most obvious remains from this period are the architectural structures and the materials regarding the living quarters in the area around the Corchinas hill; a plateau where the acropolis stood, defended by a wall. One of the particular characteristics of the territory that affected the choice of site to build the town on, was the proximity to the sea and the possibility of using a safe harbour, the *Korakodes Portus*, for trade: the strategic location together with this characteristics made the town particularly important. In a moment of uncertainty like that of the Punic Wars, Cornus became the banner of the anti-Roman revolt in 215 B.C. following the commander Ampsicora.



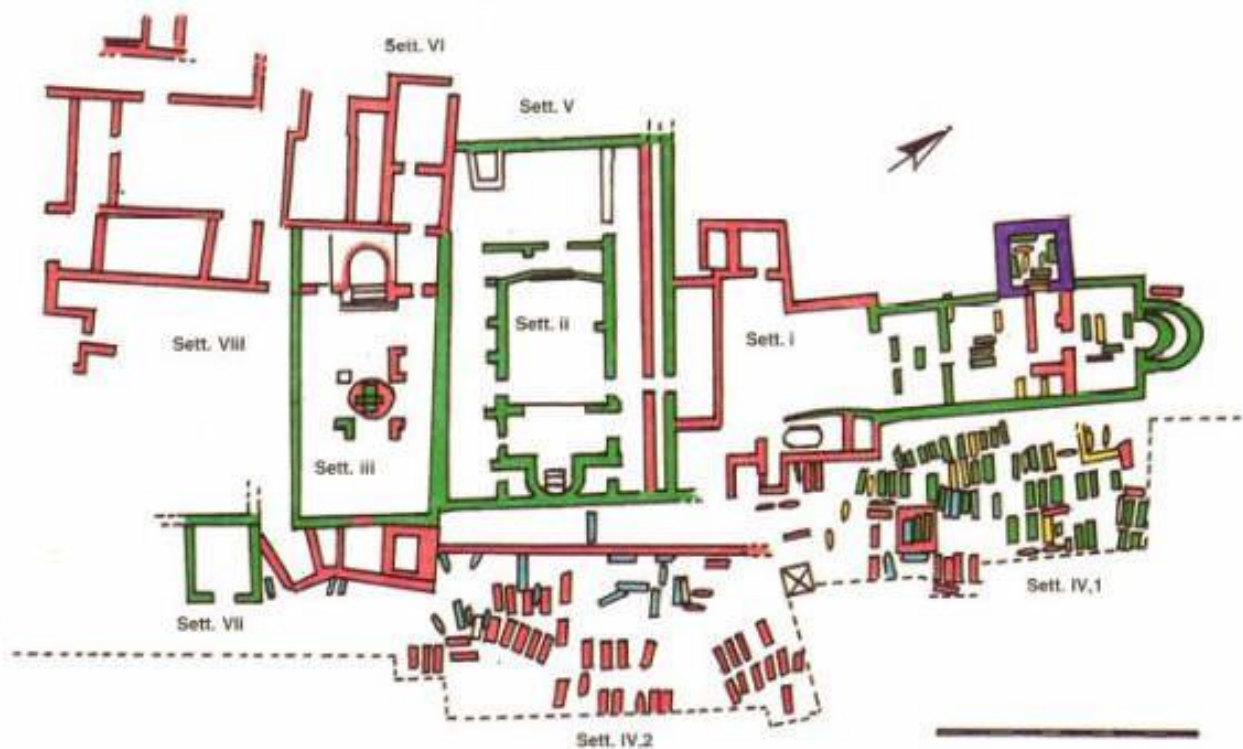
**Fig. 1** - Hill of Corchinas (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The defeat was a prelude to the conquering of Sardinia by the Romans, that took place in 238 B.C. And was ratified in 227 B.C. with the establishment of a province that included Sardinia and Corsica. During Roman rule, the town imposed itself on the previous one and was raised to the rank of municipium at least from the Flavian or Trajan era. Villas sprung up in the surrounding area, in the Imperial age, as in Sisiddo, Lenaghe and perhaps Columbaris. In this latter region - in the northern suburb of the town and served by a *diverticulum* for connecting Cornus and *Gurulis Nova* (fig. 2) - the finding of a waterproof structure with hydraulic and *opus insiginum* linings gave rise to the hypothesis of the existence of a thermal bath complex, probably linked to the suburban villa. 4000 m<sup>2</sup> of this area were brought to light through digs that continued for twenty years, that revealed ruins of a *insula episcopalis* structured as burial and worshipping sectors, perhaps part of the ancient diocese of *Senafer*.



**Fig. 2** - Joining sheet of the tables of the De Candia cadastral registry (Cuglieri):  
The roads to Bosa are shown (from Cagliari State Archive).

Here on a hill going down from East to West, there was a large burial area that extended southwards. The oldest funeral use was in the first half of the 4th century, with the creation of tombs dug directly out of the rock, part of which occupied a square cistern dated to the 3rd century A.D. Later, a new era of organising the burial area brought about the monumentalisation of the place: the northern burial sector (Sector IV - fig. 3) was organised into terraces sloping west to east, and occupied by sarcophagi. The small cistern welcomed new corpses too: four sarcophagi were placed over the ancient tombs covered by stone slabs, that made this space a patrician burial place, prerogative maintained for the entire duration of the complex.



**Fig. 3** - Map of the Columbaris-Cornus complex with indication of stages and sectors (Graphic reproduction by L. SALADINO, M. C. SOMMA, from *Cornus* I.1, p. 200, table II).

At the same time, an apse funeral basilica was created (figs. 4, 6 B-L) of which the main elements can still be seen; single-nave plan, due concentric apses to the north - result of a narrowing by static problems and five adjacent rooms. Between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century A.D., the basilica underwent changes that brought

about a different arrangement of the spaces: a short cross corridor was created that gave access to the square mausoleum, while a room with a tub was created in the south-east corner, that was oval externally and rectangular internally, which was the smaller baptismal font. A closed wall was built on the northern side that was covered after a sarcophagus was introduced. The funeral basilica was connected to the bishop's complex that was further south by a wide courtyard; it was probably arranged in a path in order to guarantee connection between these areas and the necropolis that rose to the east, in a point that was affected during research activities in the 1960s.



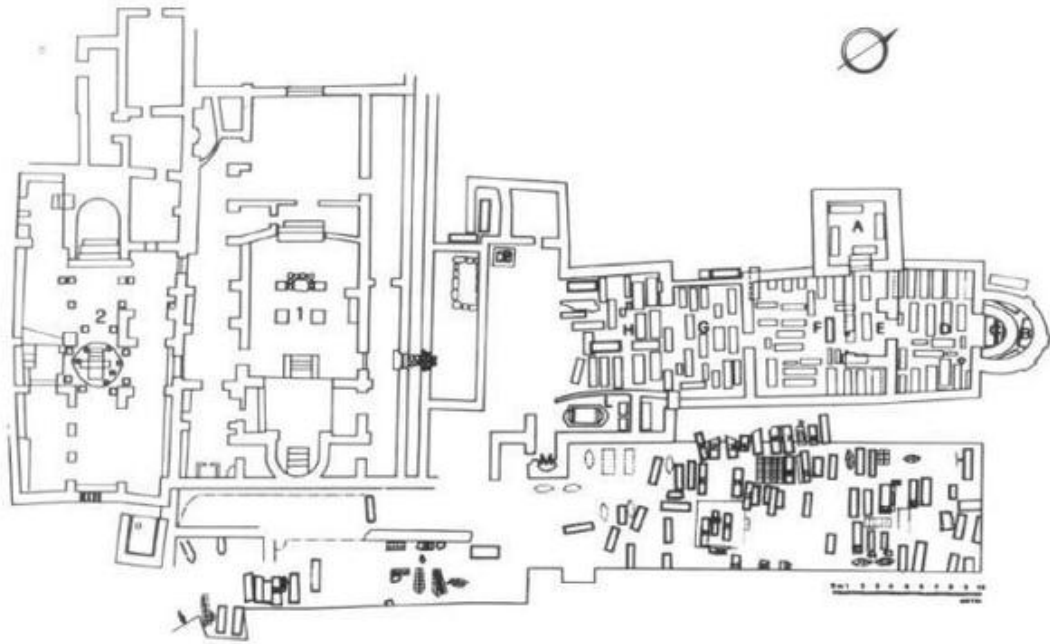
**Fig. 4** - Cemetery basilica, apse area, North-East view of the area (picture by C. Cocco).

Between the second half of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century A.D., during the Byzantine rule, a dualism was created inside the Cornus centre, which was enjoying its greatest development: on the one side, it is possible that the town, with its settlement

autonomy; on the other, establishment of the episcopal seat and its own burial area (fig. 5). In this moment, south of the funeral basilica, two parallel, communicating rooms of worship were built, but facing in opposite directions: the greater, the “episcopal” (fig. 6, no. 1, fig. 7) was the place for ordinary worship, while the southern one (fig. 6, no. 2, fig. 8) was smaller and was used only for baptisms.



**Fig. 5** - Reconstruction hypothesis of the Cornus-Columbaris complex (from Cornus I.1, table III, p. 202).



**Fig. 6** - Detailed plan of the area undergoing dig at Columbaris-Cornus  
(from GIUNTELLA et al. 1985, p. 16, table II).

The path inside the cathedral went through the narthex to direct the flow of worshippers towards the three naves; they ended on a few steps that raised the apse pointing east, included in a straight wall with two *pastophoria*. The seat was on the back wall from the same era, also raised (fig. 7).



**Fig. 7** - Cathedral church (photo by F. Collu).

The altar (fig. 8), was located in a middle position of the central apse and originally had a canopy over it.





**Fig. 8** - Altar in basalt rock with side plinths, seen from the west (photo by C. Cocco).

The baptism church (fig. 9) has an apse to the west, with three aisles, an entrance to the east which was then blocked up and a baptism font.



**Fig. 9** - Baptistry basilica, view from the East (photo by C. Cocco).

The structure underwent important changes when, between the end of the 5th and the first half of the 6th centuries, not just the episcopal complex but also the living spaces was built on again. The finding of a Vandal coin in the filling between the first cross-shaped tub and the second, created on renovation, gave rise to the hypothesis that renovations were determined by the increased importance of the religious centre of Senafer and therefore to be related to an African presence.

During these activities, the basilica apse was supported by two *pastophoria*: the right-hand area (*diaconicon*) had an opening that ensured entrance to the church for people being baptised, after the rooms to the west; new rooms were created, the baptismal font became a polygon, served by a cistern built after the eastern door was removed. A new path was created for the novices, into the larger basilica. At the same time, the funeral area was expanded to the south.

A set of dwelling and craft rooms extended from the south side of the baptismal basilica, where it was possible to recognise the bishop's residence with its annexes. A workshop for chisels has been identified in these structures, inside which materials were stored as a probable element for the altar and architectural fragments of a similar taste to the ones found in the baptistery (fig. 10).





**Fig. 10** - Pair of cuff links (from *Cornus* I.1, p. 44, fig. 27).

Between the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century A.D., the sarcophagi were re-used after the remains of the previous deceased people were placed inside an ossarium in the same tombs, next to the newly buried person: this took place above all in the southern funeral area, while in the eastern sector, east of the worshipping spaces, anthropomorph tombs were used.

The first damage to architecture was by fire in the episcopal basilica, that then collapsed on the eastern wall around the end of the 7th-8th century. The ruins were arranged on the adjacent funeral area, covering it: this event meant that first the basilicas and then slowly the burial areas were gradually abandoned.

## ■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Claudia Cocco and Dr. Francesca Collu

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