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Basilica of San Saturnino

Patrimonio culturale

SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Description of asset

The archaeological site of San Saturnino is located in the eastern part of the city of Cagliari, an area which in ancient times stood outside the city limits and was part of the necropolis extending east of the town, from today's Viale Regina Margherita up to the Bonaria hill. Here you can still see the surviving evidence of the necropolis and the Basilica dedicated to the martyr Saturnino (fig. 1).

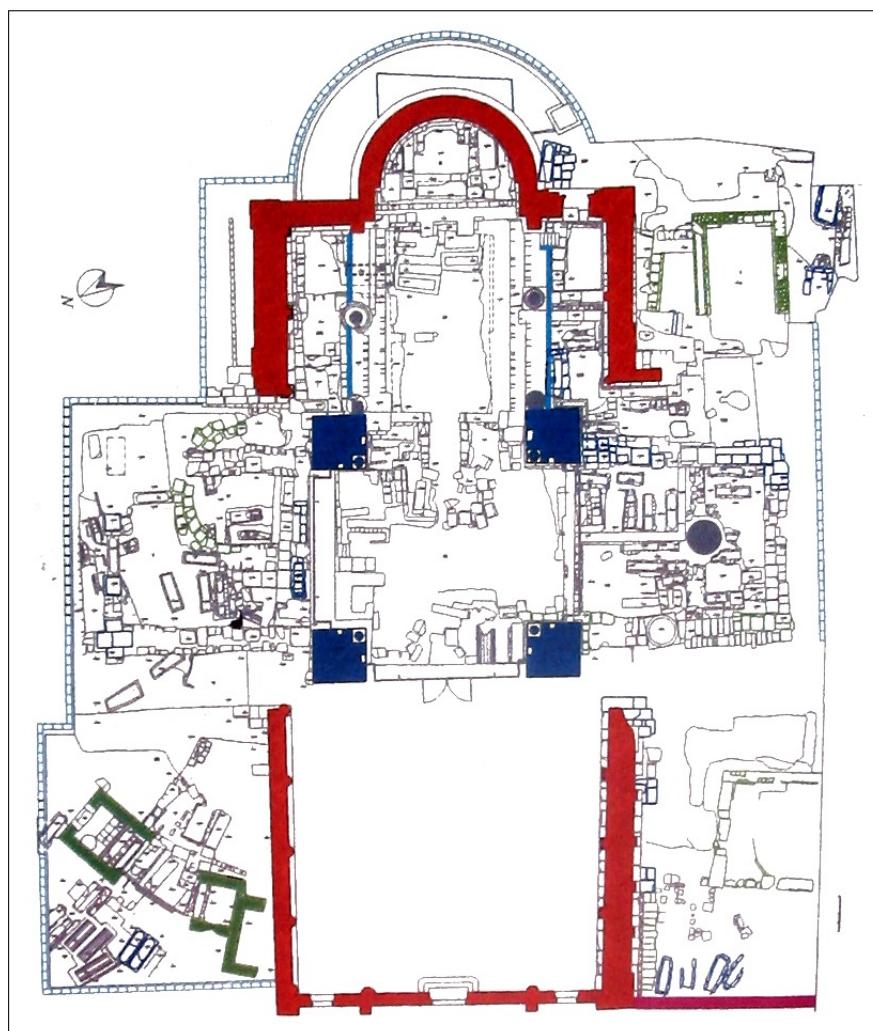


Fig. 1 - General plan (from Salvi 2002, p. 210).

The oldest structure identified so far in the area is a square building missing its western side, which does not yet have a clear identification of use. It stands in the south-east sector

of the necropolis . Also, under the foundations of the northern transept of the church, a stretch of wall with bosses in isodomic work, dated to the 4th-3rd century BC or late Republican era, was found. Tombs and remains of burial buildings from the Roman era and late Antique era are visible around the place of worship: the necropolis alternated open spaces with tombs of various types - pit tombs, 'a cupa' tombs, in ground sarcophagi (fig. 2) - with burial buildings of various sizes, made in limestone and brick ashlars, sometimes with mosaic floors (fig. 3); the tombs were placed inside, mostly *formae* covered in bricks and/or small stones, covered with flat tiles or slabs placed flat or more rarely '*cappuccina*' style. The layout of the internal roads, which the orientation of the buildings was connected to, is still unclear.



Fig. 2 - Covered pit graves and underground sarcophagus (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



Fig. 3 - Funerary building in the north-west area of the necropolis (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The remains of some mausoleums are also kept underneath the nearby church of San Lucifero, built during the seventeenth century as a result of the searches for the holy bodies and the discovery of the alleged tomb of Bishop Lucifero of Cagliari, the defender of orthodoxy and an uncompromising opponent of the Arians, who lived in 4th century: this consists of a structure originally made up of three funerary rooms known as "underground churches" or chapels of San Lucifero (fig. 4). The seventeenth-century chronicles allow us to trace the original shape consisting of a small quadrangular room connected to a rectangular room with pillars and arcosolia on the walls, which housed burial layers, while others were arranged over various levels under the floor and marked by inscriptions, including mosaics. The second church (fig. 5) is still fully visible - whose flattened barrel vault dates back to the seventeenth century and the floor to the 1950s – as is the access corridor to the 1st church (buried under the former Technical Institute) while the 3rd, profoundly altered, can be assumed was located where the chancel of the present church is.

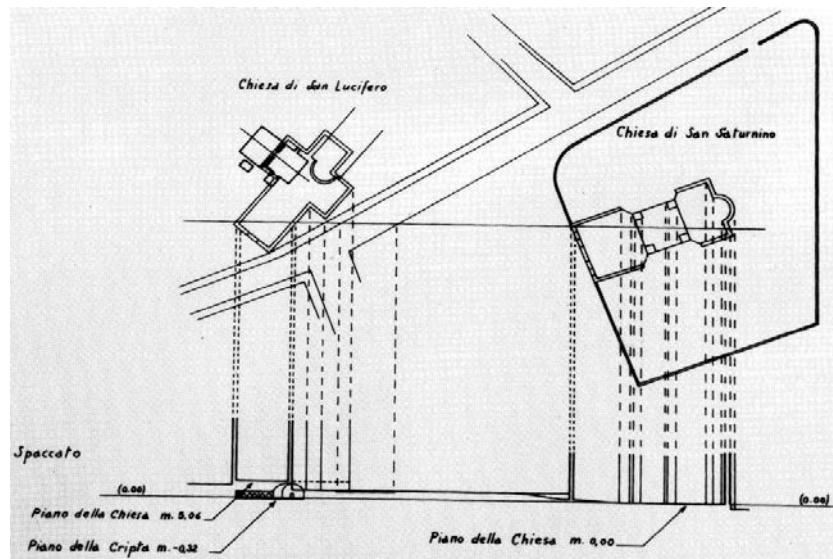


Fig. 4 - Plan of the rooms below the church of San Lucifero in relation to San Saturnino (from Mureddu et alii 1988, p. 156).



Fig. 5 - The inside of the so-called 2nd underground church (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

According to sources, San Saturnino was placed in the necropolis, probably at the start of the 4th century, in a “small crypt”, perhaps traceable to a large apse found in the northern area (fig. 6); some experts recognise the “basilica” in it as seen by Fulgenzio, bishop of Ruspe in exile in Cagliari in the first half of the 6th century: his biographer reported that *iuxta basilicam sancti martyris Saturnini, procul a strepitu civitatis vacantem reperiens locum, Brumasio Caralitanae civitatis antistite venerabili prius sicut decuit postulato, novum sumptibus propriis monasterium fabricavit*, where he had a monastery built, which is no longer identifiable today.



Fig. 6 - Apse located in the northern area (from Martorelli, Mureddu 2006, p. 24).

The church which can currently be seen is the result of the changes, restructuring and decline which occurred over the centuries: the first construction dates back to the Byzantine era, between the second half of the sixth and the early seventh centuries, with the domed body (fig. 7), cross plan and three nave transepts, of which only the central structure and residues of its square 'scarsella' apse remain.



Fig. 7 - The domed structure seen from the north (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

The dome is joined to the square room by half-dome squinches, defined by round arches which rest on pillars with red marble cloisonné columns (fig. 8). The construction deeply changes the layout of the necropolis, which continues to be used, with the demolition of the previous funeral rooms located in the area identified in its construction and the levelling with the materials obtained from the demolition itself, also used for the church masonry. New burials therefore occur in the spaces thus created, whose position is affected by the transformation of the area: whilst late Roman graves are oriented according to the buildings which contain them, Byzantine and early medieval ones which are placed in open spaces are west-east oriented and arranged in relation to the domed body, which they sometimes rest against.



Fig. 8 - The dome with the squinches as seen from the inside (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

During the Giudicato era, as seen in some documents in the Cagliari clerks' office, the church was donated by the Giudice to the monks of San Vittore of Marseilles who, between 1089 and 1119, restructured it according to pre-Romanesque models, keeping the central domed body and reconstructing the four transepts, of which only the eastern remains intact, with three naves and on which perhaps the main apse was built, faced in limestone with hints of two-colour paint in the apse, a middle barrel vaulted nave and the cross-vaulted aisles (figs. 9-10). The Provencal workers used a great deal of reclaimed material such as capitals, columns, architectural fragments, inscriptions and memorial stones. All the burials and early Middle Age contexts were in turn obliterated by the flooring during the "Vittorina" period.



Fig. 9 - East transept of the basilica, with nave and side aisles (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).

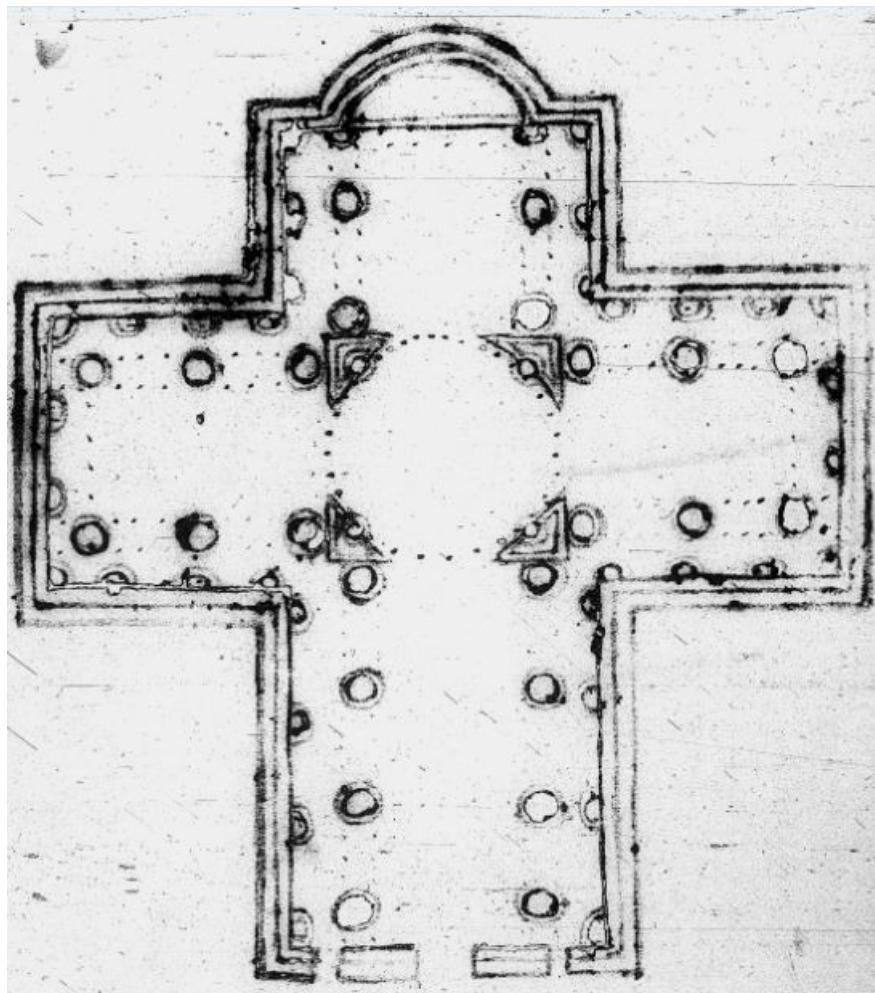


Fig. 10 - Seventeenth-century plan of the Basilica (from Carmona 1631, sh. 61ar).

During the seventeenth century, the already partially decrepit area inside and outside the church was devastated by the search for the bodies of saints, following which a crypt was built along the longitudinal axis of the church, now partially preserved, which was originally accessible by a staircase (fig. 11). These excavations, conducted without any scientific method, but simply in order to bring to light the largest possible number of alleged martyrs' relics, have irrevocably altered the oldest layers, thereby creating considerable difficulties for modern scholars to understand and reconstruct the site.

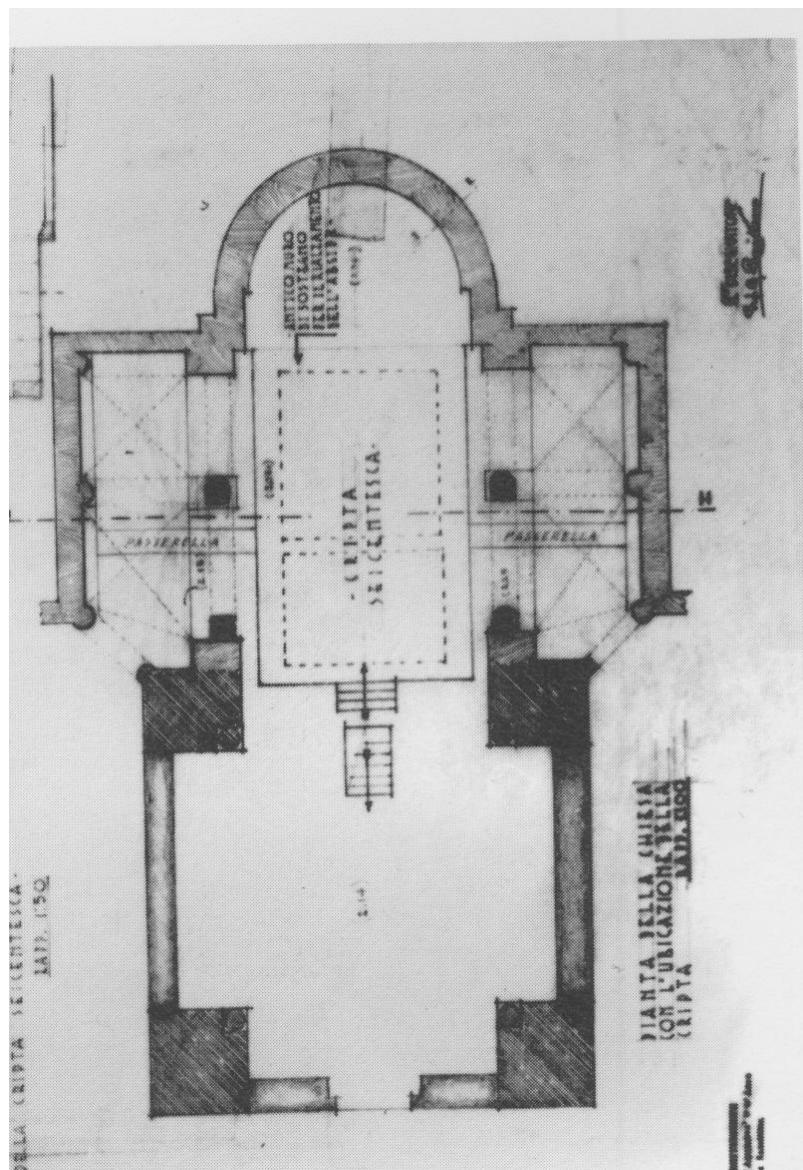


Fig. 11 - Plan of the basilica with the crypt (from Mureddu et alii 1988, p. 175 tab. 31).

■ Credits

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