



Basilica of San Saturnino

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ History of the Studies and Digs

A large area of the eastern necropolis of the ancient city has been identified around the churches of San Saturnino and San Lucifero in Cagliari; this was frequented from the Roman age until the early Middle Age and it is believed that the young Saturnino, martyred according to tradition during the early fourth century AD, was buried here. His alleged tomb became an object of veneration and was monumentalised with the construction of a church that, through various vicissitudes, has remained to this day.

The evidence relating to the necropolis and the sanctuary came to light over the centuries both through systematic but not scientific investigations, such as those carried out during the seventeenth century, and through sporadic discoveries during public interest work. Archaeological digs have only been carried out in more recent years in areas that were not disturbed by previous searches. These have returned unaltered stratigraphic sequences that are extremely important for understanding the modifications that the necropolis and place of worship underwent.

The first written source which documents the existence of a church dedicated to the martyr Saturnino is the biography of Fulgenzio of Ruspe, the African bishop, which states that the bishop himself, who arrived in Cagliari at the beginning of the sixth century exiled by the Vandals, obtained permission to found a monastery far from the city, close to the basilica of San Saturnino: *noluit plane iam beatus Fulgentius in priore domo, multis fratribus comitantibus, diutius habitare, sed 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.*

The next information comes from the end of the 11th century, when the church was donated by the Cagliari Giudice to the monks of San Vittore of Marseilles, who set up their Sardinian priory there, which remained until the mid-13th century. In 1324, during the siege by the Aragon, the area was seriously damaged; granted by the King of Aragon to the Military Order of St George de Alfama in 1363, which however perhaps never owns it,

it reverts back to archbishopric of Cagliari but, while the monastery was left to decay, the church was partially restored in the late fifteenth century.

Mentioned by Giovanni Francesco Fara, in the sixteenth century, as a building outside the city, the site has literally been totally ruined by the search for the "holy bodies" during the seventeenth century, within a historical and social context characterised by the Counter-Reformation and by the dispute with the bishop's seat of Sassari for the title of primate: the Archbishop of Cagliari Desquivel promotes a massive excavation work with the intention of unearthing as many relics of martyrs, or presumed such, as possible in order to increase the prestige of his own diocese. One of these tombs inside the basilica was identified as that of Saturnino, and another not far away, as that of Bishop Lucifero of Cagliari, who lived during the fourth century and was an uncompromising defender of Christian orthodoxy against Arian heresy. As a result of this discovery, between 1646 and 1682, the church of San Lucifero was built, with the chancel raised where the tomb is presumed to be. The materials for reconstructing the Cathedral in the Castello district in 1669 were obtained from the partly crumbling materials of the martyr's basilica. More or less fanciful reports concerning these excavations have reached us through works by clerics and prominent figures of that period (figs. 1-2).





Fig. 1 - Seventeenth-century plan of the Basilica of San Saturnino (from Carmona 1631, sh. 62v.).

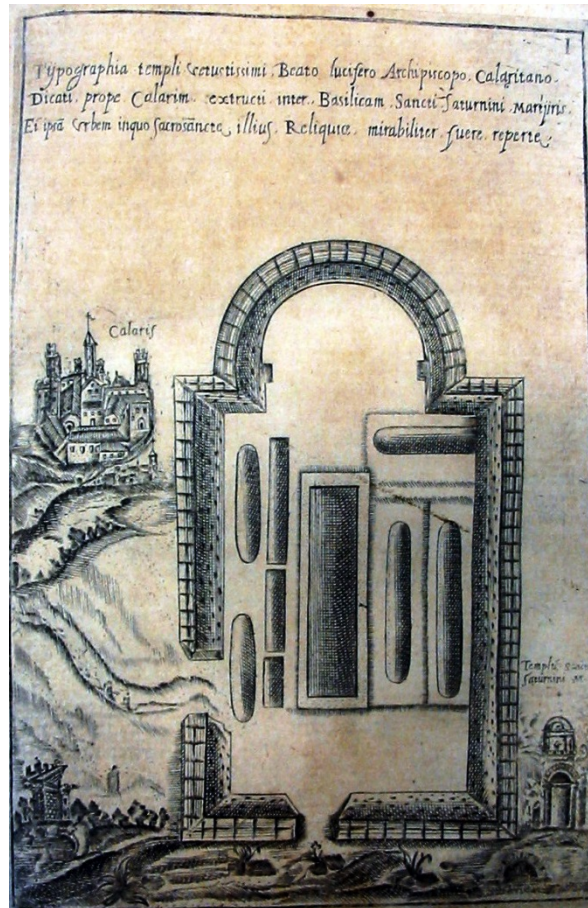


Fig. 2 - Seventeenth-century drawing of the sanctuary where the alleged relics of Lucifero were found (from Machin 1639, table I.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the church was assigned to the corporation of Physicians and Apothecaries, who name it after Saints Cosmas and Damian. During the nineteenth century it was believed that it had originally been a temple dedicated to Bacchus, subsequently consecrated as a Christian basilica in the days of Constantine, according to an inscription which was later proved to be false. Only general information and confused memories are known about the burial areas underneath the church of San Lucifero.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, excavations were carried out which brought to light graves and many fragments of inscriptions, mostly already known from seventeenth-century authors, whilst others lay abandoned in the backfill soil of the aisles and in the surrounding soil, disconnected from their original context, or had been used to raise the level of the ground when constructing the presbytery and the crypt in the seventeenth century.

During the restoration work carried out in the 30s and 40s, the spaces under the church of San Lucifero were found (figs. 3-4) and renovated to their current state.



Fig. 3 - Area underneath the church of San Lucifero in 1937 (from Mureddu *et alii* 1988, p. 154).



Fig. 4 - Area underneath the church of San Lucifero in 1947-48 (from Mureddu *et alii* 1988, p. 159).

Saturnino was damaged during the bombing of World War II and the subsequent restoration was entrusted to Raffaello Delogu, who also discovered intact areas and tombs. During the second half of the century, various scholars (Delogu, Kirova, Serra, Coroneo) reasoned and discussed the identification of the place of worship evidenced by sixth century sources, while excavations carried out from the 1980s by Letizia Pani Ermini have unearthed new knowledge concerning the various phases of occupation of the site. The last interventions, partially still in progress, have been coordinated by Donatella Salvi and have allowed further identification of the types and phases of the site attendance, both as concerns the necropolis and the tombs' relations with the vertical structures, once again highlighting the complexity of a site which was restored several times throughout the centuries, and subjected to numerous design changes. Recently, Piergiorgio Spanu and Rossana Martorelli have also dedicated part of their studies to the interpretation of the controversial data about the martyr and the place of worship dedicated to him, but the most important work of all is by Roberto Coroneo, who has pinpointed the historical-constructive coordinates, based on some structural and iconographic characteristics and the comparative examination with monuments in the Constantinople-ruled East, dating the Byzantine building to the end of the 6th-beginning of the 7th century, after the opening of the new *Apostoleion* in Constantinople and the restructuring of St John's in Ephesus, both on commission from the Emperor Justinian.

■ Credits

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