Chapter 1 – Introduction

The local tradition is that when God had finished creating the world, He saw that a bit of mud remained. Looking at His creation, He noticed a rather empty area in what would come to be known as the Mediterranean Sea and decided to throw the remaining mud there, creating the island of Sardinia (Italian: "Sardegna"). The island, in the grand scheme of the creation, was therefore, not designed as a key component of the work, but merely an afterthought. This legend reveals both an element of self-deprecation on the part of the Sardinians, as well as an acknowledgement of the island's peripheral role in history. Located west of the Italian peninsula, it is both centrally located in the Mediterranean, but has also often been on the periphery of the many empires and kingdoms that have ruled the island over the centuries. From the mid sixth to the beginning of the eleventh century, Sardinia was on the western edge of the Byzantine Empire (Fig. 1.1). Given the paucity of sources that refer to the island during this period, it is not even certain how strong the connections between Sardinia and Constantinople even were.

Whatever the political connections may have been this setting, the ecclesiastical architecture that developed here was decidedly Byzantine in design and concept. Standing to this day are several churches scattered along the western side of the island that can be linked to fifth- and sixth-century developments in the eastern Mediterranean and in Constantinople itself (Fig. 1.2). These churches have been studied both individually and collectively to some degree, almost exclusively by local scholars in articles published in local journals and in books published by local presses, often difficult or impossible to find.[1] Although a few authors make important contributions about some of the churches and their possible connections to Constantinople, none of these studies considers the whole corpus of Byzantine churches on the island.[2] Little about these churches has been written in languages other than Italian. For example, only two studies have been published in English – Freshfield's account of three of the churches contained within his book on Christian antiquities in Italy and North Africa published in 1913 and a short conference paper by the present author published in 1988.[3] In other words, scholarship on these churches has mostly remained in the periphery of Byzantine architectural studies. What is lacking in much of the work published to date is a careful analysis of each building and a contextualization of where they fit into the larger development of early Byzantine architecture as a whole. The present study seeks to do just that.

Before examining the churches and their architecture, a brief overview of the general and ecclesiastical history will be given, which will allow for an understanding of conditions on the island during the period in which the churches were built. A brief summary

1 The notable exception would be Coroneo and Serra, *Sardegna preromanica e romanica*, part of the series "Patromonio Artistico Italiano" collected by many libraries worldwide.

2 See especially Coroneo, "Basilica di San Saturnino"; and "Chiese cruciformi."

3 Freshfield, *Cellae*, 62–75; Johnson, "Cruciform."

of church architecture on Sardinia before the Byzantine period will provide the setting in which the Byzantine builders worked.

History

A strong megalithic culture flourished on the island during prehistoric times. Eventually, the Phoenicians established colonies on the island, which Carthage annexed around 500 BCE. The Romans seized the island in 238 BCE during the aftermath of the First Punic War, and then worked long and hard to pacify the free-spirited people of the interior. Sardinia served both as an important granary for Rome and as a place of exile and banishment, with many criminals condemned to work in its mines. Among the exiles was the future pope, Callixtus (217–222 CE), sent to work in the mines of Sulcis (Sant'Antioco) at the end of the second century CE. For the most part, though, the island is rarely mentioned in ancient sources, maintaining its situation as a backwater province.

The fifth century CE witnessed the continued decline of the western half of the Roman Empire. In 455 the Vandals under King Gaiseric (died 477) sacked the city of Rome and at about the same time captured the island of Sardinia, adding it to their kingdom. Chaos in the Vandal government aided the Byzantine annexation of Sardinia. In 533, the governor of the island, Godas, rebelled against King Gelimer (ruled 530–534) and sent a message to the Byzantine emperor Justinian, asking for help. Justinian (ruled 527–565) had already decided to send an army, led by his general Belisarius, against the Vandals in North Africa. The Byzantine army landed near Carthage, and soon defeated the main Vandal army. Gelimer escaped and hid out in the hills near Carthage for a few months before surrendering to Belisarius in March 534, after which he was sent to Constantinople in chains. At this point a detachment of troops under the command of Cyril took possession of Sardinia as well as the nearby island of Corsica.

It appears that the Byzantines did not maintain a strong garrison in Sardinia, as Belisarius turned his attention to the conquest of the Italian mainland, capturing Ravenna in 540. The Goths, under their king Totila (ruled 541–552), put up a stiff resistance and in 551 took control of Sardinia.[4] Totila, however, was killed in battle the following year, leading to the complete Byzantine rule over Italy and its islands.

Under Justinian, Sardinia was designated as one of seven provinces of Africa administered by a Praetorian Prefect based in Carthage. A *praeses* administered the civilian government of the island from Cagliari, while the military was commanded by a *dux* who resided at Forum Traiani (modern Fordongianus).[5] A series of fortresses were constructed on the island, both to protect the coastal cities from external threats but also for protection from the tribes of the island's interior, known collectively as the

4 Procopius, *Wars*, 8.24.31–33.

5 Boscolo, *Sardegna*, 33.

"Barbaracini."[6] The fortification of Forum Traiani is, in fact, the only building project initiated by Justinian on the island mentioned by Procopius, his biographer.[7]

To what extent the government of Constantinople controlled Sardinia during the next few centuries is a matter of debate. An inscription written in Greek found in Porto Torres at the north end of the island dates to the reign of Constans II (641–68) or Constantine IV (668–85) and praises the emperor for his victory over the Lombards.[8] Carthage fell to the Arabs in 697 during their conquest of North Africa, further isolating Sardinia as an outpost of the Byzantine Empire. Literary sources rarely mention the island rarely over the next few centuries, but that is more an indication of the paucity of sources rather than evidence of the strength of ties between Sardinia and the capital. Many scholars have characterized the level of control on the part of the government as being "minimal" or "nominal" with Sardinia being "virtually independent" until the eleventh century.[9]

There are some strong indications that Sardinia was still a part of the empire in the tenth century. In his description of Byzantine court ceremonies, Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos included an account of a contingent of Sardinian bodyguards to the emperor.[10] Coins from the reign of John Tzimiskes (969–76) have been found on the island. Inscriptions from Assemini, Decimoputzu, and Sant'Antioco are written in Greek and date to the tenth century. Their formulas for the invocation of God are typically Byzantine. That from Assemini refers to a certain Torkotorios as the "archontos Sardenia (sic)" while the same Torkotorios is referred to in the inscription found at Decimoputzu as the "basilikos protospatharios", a title that he must have received from Constantinople.[11] Guillou explains that the use of the title "archon" was equivalent to "governor", the head of a region or of an administrative entity, concluding that the archon of Sardinia was the "head of a region formally considered Byzantine."[12] Constantine Porphyrogenitos also included a formula regarding the archon of Sardinia in the *Book of Ceremonies*, demonstrating that the title was not self-imposed by Sardinian rulers.[13]

Another indication of the island's links with Byzantium is the widespread use of the Greek language on the island. Evidence of the use of Greek is found in onomastics, toponomastics, and in terms used in the rural economy. The dedications of the 53 churches known on the island before the end of the eleventh century reflect the Byzantine origins of many: fourteen were dedicated to Mary, others to Anastasios, Basil,

6 Perra, "Organizazzione," citing fortresses at Cagliari, Sant'Antioco, Tharros, Cornus, Porto Torres and Olbia. That of Sant'Antioco survived into the nineteenth century; see Coroneo, *Arte*, 153–55 and 190–94 for the evidence concerning its form.

7 Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, 6.7.13. For the possible remains of this fortification see Dadea, "Consistenza;" and Vacca, "Forum Traini."

8 Mazzarino, "Iscrizione"; Guillou, *Recueil*, no. 235; Pani Ermini, "Ancora sull'iscrizione."

9 See, for example, Kazhdan, et al, "*Sardinia*," 1842–43.

10 *De caeremoniis*, 2:43, ed. Reiske, 513; see Cosentino, "Byzantine Sardinia," 348, who places a date on the event of ca. 915.

11 So Cosentino, "Byzantine Sardinia," 349.

12 Guillou, "Lunga," 347–48.

13 Constantine Porphyrogenitos, *De Cerim*., 2.48; ed. Reiske, 690.

Barbara, Constantine, Elias, Helena, George, Demetrius, Theodore, Mercury, Nikolas, Sergius, Bacchus, Sophia, and Procopius.[14]

Arab raids of Sardinia began in the second half of the seventh century and continued in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, resulting in their brief subjugation of the island in the early eleventh century. Pisan and Genovese navies defeated the Arabs in 1016, with Pisa taking control of the island at that time.

Ecclesiastical History

The earliest mention of a bishop on the island is found in the report that Bishop Quintasius of Cagliari attended the synod of Arles, called by Constantine, in 314.[15] Another important Sardinian ecclesiastic was Eusebius, a monk who later became the Bishop of Vercelli in northern Italy and was sent together with Bishop Lucifer of Cagliari to meet with the emperor Constantius II in 354 to convince the emperor to call the synod that was held in Milan during the following year. The cults of Gavinus at Porto Torres and that of Luxorius, substituting a cult of Aesclepius, at Forum Traiani were firmly established by the mid fourth century.[16] Two fifth-century popes, Hilarus (461–68) and Symmachus (498–514), were Sardinians.

In 484 the Vandal king Hunneric (ruled 477–484) called for a church council to meet in Carthage. Five bishops from Sardinia attended: Lucifer II of Karales (Cagliari), Felix of Turris (Porto Torres), Martianus of Forum Traini (Fordongianus), Vitalis of Sulci (Sant'Antioco), and Boniface of Senafer (Cornus).[17] The Vandal rulers were followers of Arianism, which led to some discord in their kingdom and leading King Trasamundus (ruled 496–523) to issue an order in 507 exiling a number of north African orthodox bishops to Sardinia, including Fulgentius of Ruspe and Felicianus of Hippo, who brought the remains of Augustine to the island.[18] The exile was lifted in 515, but imposed anew in 519, ending at the death of Trasamundus in 523.[19] While in Cagliari, Fulgentius built a monastery that housed at least forty monks.

The western church also sought control of the church in Sardinia. Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) took an active interest in church affairs on the island, with 39 of his surviving letters dealing with Sardinia. One letter, written to Januarius, the Bishop of Cagliari and dated July 599, explains how he had heard that an image of Mary and a crucifix had been placed by Christians in a synagogue on Easter and ordered them removed.[20] In another letter, Gregory the Great listed bishops at Cagliari, Sinis (Tharros), Senafer (Cornus) Torres, Phausiane (near Olbia), Chrysopolis (Forum Traiani)

14 Turtas, *Storia*, 171–72.

15 *Concilium Arelatense*, in *Concilia* Galliae, ed. de Clercq and Munier, 15. For an overview of the period see Mastino, "Sardegna cristiana;" for an overview of ecclesiastical history, see Turtas, *Storia*.

16 In general see Spanu, *Martyria*, for these and other cults on the island.

17 Boscolo, *Storia*, 19.

18 Gastoni, "Reliquie." For the events of this period see Martorelli, "Vescovi."

19 The exiles are reported by Victor of Vita, *History of the Vandal Persecutions*, 1.51 and 2.23, tr. Morehead, 23 and 32.

20 Gregory, *Registrum epistularum*, 9.196, ed. Norberg, 750–12; comments on the letter in Dilley, "Christian Icon Practice;" and Pala, *Arredo*, 84–96.

and Sulci (Sant'Antioco).[21] In the first half of the seventh century the Byzantine writer George of Cyprus listed the same sees as did Leo the Wise in the following century.[22]

A letter composed in ca. 655 by a monk named Anastasius, who was a disciple of Maximos the Confessor, to monks in Cagliari was written in Greek.[23] Funerary inscriptions written in Greek from the late sixth or early seventh and eleventh centuries refer to monks and nuns.[24] Eusthatios, bishop of Sulci (Sant'Antioco), wrote his profession of faith in Greek towards the end of the seventh century.[25] At about the same time the bishop of Cagliari was a Greek named Citonatos, who attended the Third Council of Constantinople, which was the sixth ecumenical council of the church, in 680–81, signing the acts in Greek.[26] All three versions of the *Vita* of Theodore of Stoudios (d. 826) preserve a passage referring to Greek monks from Sardinia.[27] A seal, now in the Foggart Museum at Harvard, depicts the Virgin and Child and bears the inscription: "Theotokos, protect Arsenios, archbishop of Sardinia."[28] Even as late as the fourteenth century, a document refers to a monk named Paul of the "Basilian order" who lived on the island.[29]

The exact nature of the Sardinian church is somewhat obscure; the rites practiced on the islands seem to have been Latin, and just as Pope Gregory I had done previously, Pope Leo IV (847–55) also felt empowered to write letters demonstrating his perception of controlling the church on the island. In a letter to John, bishop of Cagliari, for example, Leo ordered that an altar in the church dedicated to the Archangel [Michael] be destroyed and replaced by another as he believed that it had been dedicated by a heretic.[30] The authority of the pope was not, however, universally recognized on the island and the influence of the Byzantine church is evident in the aforementioned church dedications, in baptismal customs, Pentecostal rituals, and art.[31] Most of the known bishops from the seventh through the ninth century were Greek. Thomas II, archbishop of Cagliari, delegated the deacon Epiphanios of Catania to represent him at the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787.[32] With the arrival of the Pisans in the eleventh century, the Sardinian church went firmly into the Latin tradition.

21 Gregory, *Registrum epistularum*, 9.203, ed. Norberg, 760–61.
22 *Georgii Cyprii Descriptio*, ed. Geltzer, 35; Leo the Wise, *Notitiae*, PG 107: 344. In general, see Spanu, "Sedi."
23 Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum*, XI, cols. 12–14; PG 90: 133–36.
24 Morini, "Monachesimo," 43–45.
25 In Motzo, *Studi*, 71–81; see also Turtas, *Storia*, 146–47.
26 Turtas, *Storia*, 152.
27 PG 99: 103.
28 Turtas, "Chiesa sarda," 34.
29 Schena, "Note basiliani," 77; Morini, "Monachesimo," 47; the document dates to July 1335.
30 *Epistulae selectae*, ed. de Hirsch-Gereuth, 602–3, no. 32. Other letters written to Johannes and to the *judex* of the island are nos. 17, 18, 45, and 48, pp. 596–97, 609, 611–12.
31 Rowland, *Periphery*, 146.
32 Schena, "Note Basiliani," 82; Guillou, "Diffusione," 374.

Church Architecture

A limited number of Early Christian churches are found on Sardinia, with most known through archaeological exploration. These are basilicas, some single naved, others with nave and side aisles, several of which were constructed in cemeteries.[33] Excavations at Tharros have uncovered a baptistery and a small basilica thought to have been the cathedral of the city.[34] Not far away to the north at Cornus (ancient Senafer) an impressive episcopal complex, the largest on the island, has been excavated.[35] It began as a small cemetery around a private tomb, perhaps that of a wealthy landowner, datable to the second half of the third century. As the cemetery expanded it eventually came to be partly covered by a funerary basilica in the fourth century and, in the fifth century, a larger basilica with side aisles that served as cathedral was built next to it. A third basilica, known as the "South Church" and located near the cathedral, was converted to serve as baptistery sometime in the late fifth or early sixth century at which time a cruciform font was placed in the center of its nave and apparently covered with a dome supported on four large L-shaped piers.

Remains of early Christian churches have also been identified at Porto Torres under the Romanesque church of San Gavino, where a small single naved church with a horseshoe shaped apse was built in the late fourth century and replaced in the sixth.[36] The remains of a large three-aisled basilica measuring 33 by 22 m with its apse on the west end, dating to perhaps the mid fifth century, lie at the coastline at Nora.[37] Various finds from the Early Christian period have been made under later churches in Cagliari.[38] Evidence of a martyr cult and its attendant buildings have been found at Fordongianus (Forum Traiani), where under a Romanesque church, investigations have shown that the ciborium cover of the tomb of Saint Luxorius was later incorporated into a small single naved basilica.[39] Although a few basilicas were built or remodeled during the Byzantine period on the island, the Byzantine architects and builders on the island clearly preferred to follow the trend of building domed churches current elsewhere in the empire.

The study of the Byzantine churches of Sardegna originated as a part of larger studies of medieval architecture on the island. Raffaele Delogu's book on the topic, first published in 1953 was the seminal study, though by no means exhaustive for this period. Articles published by Renata Serra in the 1970s added churches to the corpus of Byzantine churches on the island. Roberto Coroneo provides a good overview in his book on the church at Iglesias. The on –again – off – again excavations at San Saturnino in Cagliari demonstrated the importance of that building to the understanding of the

33 Coroneo, "Basiliche" gives a survey of these churches.
34 Zucca, "Battistero"; idem, *Tharros*; Coroneo, Arte, 161–62; Martorelli, *Tharros*.
35 Addis, "Complesso;" Farris, *Aree*; Pani Ermini, "Note;" Pani Ermini and Giuntella, "Cornus;" and "Complesso;" Coroneo, *Arte*, 156–61.
36 See F. Romana Stassola in Pani Ermini, et al, *Indagini*, 100, who dates the second church to the late fifth century, and below, 85–86.
37 Bejor, "Basilica;" Coroneo, *Arte*, 98, 162–63, noting the resemblance in plan to the mid-fifth-century church of St. John Studios in Constantinople.
38 Recent studies on these churches are found in *Insulae Christi*, ed. Spanu.
39 See Zucca, "Centri," 113; Oppo, "Santuario."

architecture of the period but scholarship has been hampered by the lack of thorough published reports of the finds.

Any study of these buildings is affected by the lack of documentary or literary evidence in most cases. Very little in the way of decoration – and the evidence of date and patronage such decoration can provide – survives in the churches apart from some liturgical furnishings that may or may not have some connection with their original foundation. Archaeological work is lacking in most instances. There are cases when opportunities for such work have been missed and in some cases when such work has been done, it is poorly published. Detailed architectural surveys do not exist for any of the churches. Several of the churches have been the object of rather heavy-handed "restorations" that have strengthened the buildings, but drastically changed their appearance.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is time that the churches be examined both individually and as a group, and thereby brought into the conversation about Byzantine architecture as a whole. There is much that can now be said about issues of design, construction, and chronology. The question of the development of the cruciform plan used in many of these churches, is an interesting one and bears scrutiny for in no other geographical region can one find such a concentration of curches of his type.