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Sacred Wells: Pagan Survivals and Christian Worship

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This study examines the relationship between the pagan cult of water and Christian architecture in Italy, with a particular focus on the survival of sacred sites such as ritual wells, which were either integrated into churches during the Middle Ages or served as focal points for the construction of Christian buildings. In pagan traditions, natural elements were imbued with sacred significance, later reinterpreted and adapted to align with Christian beliefs. Archival records attest to the persistence of ancient rituals well into the Middle Ages, as well as the Church's efforts to suppress superstitions associated with the pagan world. Over time, these beliefs underwent a process of transformation: wells once dedicated to pagan deities were frequently repurposed for the veneration of Christian saints. In some instances, these structures were either replaced or reinterpreted within a new religious framework while preserving their symbolic and spiritual significance. Even today, certain aspects of ancient customs endure through popular folklore, contributing to the preservation of historical memory and intangible cultural heritage. Through an analysis of historical sources, architectural evidence, and liturgical practices, this study explores the continuity of pagan worship sites during the Middle Ages, emphasizing the central role of water. As a spiritual element common to diverse religious traditions, water played a crucial role in ensuring the survival of pre-Christian sacred structures, fostering continuity between ancient and emerging forms of spirituality.

Key Words: sacred well, pagan culture, Christian architecture, Middle Ages, Italy

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INTRODUCTION

This study aims to explore the relationship between the pagan worship of water and Christian architecture in medieval Italy. Specifically, the research examines the centrality of water as an element of integration between different religious traditions (Casiraghi 2004, 11–

40). Sacred wells, which played a significant role in pagan religious practices, continued to be revered through their strategic relocation near churches from the medieval period onwards. Their function became closely linked to Christian liturgical celebrations, highlighting
[348] the adaptability of pre-existing sacred spaces within a new religious framework (Concu 2023).

Several archival records provide valuable insights into specific ritual practices of pagan origin that persisted into the Middle Ages, as well as the Church's systematic efforts to suppress superstitions associated with ancient religious traditions. Over time, pagan beliefs underwent a gradual transformation in their sacred attributes: while sacred wells were originally dedicated to ancient deities, they were progressively adapted to Christian devotional practices, often in honour of saints. In some instances, wells previously associated with pagan gods were replaced by analogous structures reinterpreted within a Christian context. Although the theological principles of different faiths evolved significantly, the physical elements essential for ritual celebrations frequently remained unchanged.

Even today, traces of these ancient traditions persist in popular folklore, which continues to serve as a means of preserving historical memory and intangible cultural heritage. This research seeks to analyse the enduring evidence of water worship through the study of architectural heritage and ethno-anthropological traditions, with particular attention to Sardinia (Lanternari 1984; Vidale 2004).

Italy presents numerous examples of the preservation of the religious identity of sacred wells despite processes of cultural transformation. By examining historical sources, architectural structures, and liturgical rituals, this study aims to explore how pagan places of worship were maintained throughout the Middle Ages through the symbolic role of water – a spiritual element shared by different religious traditions, which facilitated the continuity of pre-Christian sacred spaces within a Christianised landscape.

ATTEMPTS TO TRANSFORM PAGAN WORSHIP: DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

While significant architectural structures associated with pagan worship have been preserved across the Italian peninsula, documentary research often proves challenging due to the limited number of surviving written sources. Nevertheless, certain valuable records provide insights

into the coexistence of different spiritual traditions during the transition from paganism to Christianity in the medieval period, as well as the challenges the Church encountered in regulating these cults. Pope Gregory the Great played a particularly active role in implementing disciplinary measures to curb the persistence of pagan practices, especially [349] in rural areas, by promoting the construction of new churches and sanctuaries on sites previously occupied by temples. This strategy was intended to erase the memory of these places and accelerate the transformation of religious worship.

In the *Liber in gloria confessorum,* Gregory of Tours recounts that near a mountain called 'Elario' in Gaul, a lake served as a site of spiritual rituals, where the local population would cast agricultural offerings into the water as prayers for divine favour. To eradicate these pagan customs, the local bishop promoted and enforced the construction of a church on the lake's shores, dedicating it to Saint Hilary (Tosco 2009, 185–6).

> Nolite, filioli, nolite peccare ante Deum! Nulla est enim religio in stagno. Nolite maculare animas vestras in his ritibus vanis, sed potius cognoscite Deum et amicis eius venerationem inpendite! Adorate autem sanctum Hilarium Dei antestitem, cuius hic reliquiae sunt conditae! Ipse enim potest pro vobis Domini misericordiam intercessor adsistere.[1] [Krusch 1885, 299–300]

The inhabitants were allowed to enter the sanctuary to present devotional offerings, ensuring continuity between the sacred site's pre-Christian past and its Christian reinterpretation. The mountain and waters of Lake Elario, once associated with ancient spiritual beliefs, were thus integrated into Christian ritual practices through the construction of a church dedicated to Saint Hilary. Notably, the saint's name bore phonetic similarities to the pagan term, which may have facilitated the transformation of religious traditions.

A similar case is documented in Provence during the late medieval period. In a 1443 report, the Dominican friar Ugo Nigri informed the bishop of Saint-Papoul that in Plachens, near a chapel dedicated to

[1] Do not sin, sons, do not sin before God! For there is no religion in the pond. Do not stain your souls with these vain rites, but rather know God and pay reverence to His friends! Instead, worship Saint Hilary, bishop of God, whose relics are kept here! For he can stand as an intercessor for you, pleading for the God's mercy.

Saints Basilissa and Julian, a miraculous spring had become the site of ritual practices suspected of heresy (Schmitt 2004, 118–9).

Another analogous case to Elario can be found in Italy at the Clitunno springs near Perugia (figure 1). Located at the foot of Pissignano
[350] Hill along the Via Flaminia, these springs were a significant centre of pagan worship (Camerieri 2018, 3–10). The presence of water defined the sacred landscape, facilitating spiritual ceremonies devoted to the river deity. Pliny the Younger, in a letter to his friend Romanus, provides evidence of the site's religious significance, mentioning various temples dedicated to pagan gods, including one consecrated to the local deity Clitunno:

> Vidistine aliquando Clitumnum fontem? Si nondum (et puto nondum: alioqui narrasses mihi), uide, quem ego (paenitet tarditatis) proxime uidi! Modicus collis adsurgit antiqua cupresso nemorosus et opacus. Hunc subter exit fons et exprimitur pluribus uenis, sed imparibus, eluctatusque, quem facit gurgitem, lato gremio patescit purus et uitreus, ut numerare iactas stipes et relucentis calculos possis. […] Adiacet templum priscum et religiosum: stat Clitumnus ipse amictus ornatusque praetexta; praesens numen atque etiam fatidicum indicant sortes».[2] [Plinio il Giovane 2000]

[2] Have you ever seen the source of the Clitunno? If you haven't seen it yet (and I believe you haven't, otherwise you would have told me about it), go and see it! I have only just seen it myself, and I regret the delay. There is a small hill that rises gently, thick with ancient cypresses and full of shade. From its slopes, a spring emerges, gushing forth in several streams, each unequal to the others. After struggling through the eddy it creates at its exit, it expands into a vast basin, pure and crystal-clear, so much so that you could count the coins and pebbles shimmering at the bottom. From there, it is carried forward, not by the slope of the land, but by the sheer abundance of its own waters, which seem to weigh it down. Thus, what was just a spring soon becomes a mighty river, even navigable: it is strong enough to carry two ships side by side, each moving in opposite directions, driven by opposing currents. It is so powerful that, in the direction of its natural flow, despite the level terrain, it needs no help from oars, while in the opposite direction, it resists oars and poles with great difficulty. […] Nearby stands an ancient and revered temple. Inside, Clitunno himself stands, draped in a toga with a purple border. That he is a present and even prophetic deity is attested by the oracle. Scattered all around are several small temples, each dedicated to a different god. Each has its own cult and name, and some even have their own individual springs. In fact, besides the main spring, which is almost the mother of all the others, there are smaller ones with separate sources, yet they all merge into the river that is crossed by a bridge. This bridge marks the boundary between the sacred



FIGURE 1 Perugia, Clitunno Springs and Christian Temple

During the Lombard period, between the 7th and 8th centuries, a Christian temple was constructed under the patronage of the Dukes of Spoleto, repurposing earlier pagan sacred structures (Bordi 2023, 379–94). Although its precise dating remains debated, the predominant hypothesis places its construction in the 7th century, within the Duchy of Spoleto. The structure, resembling a Corinthian tetrastyle temple with an *in antis* rectangular plan, is elevated on a platform with a pronaos overlooking the waters of the Clitunno. The interior features a T-shaped space incorporating a spring, further reinforcing the connection between Christian architecture and the sacred natural environment. The site's religious significance persisted into the Renaissance, when Palladio mistakenly identified the medieval church as a classical temple, depicting it as such in his architectural treatise (Palladio 2018, 98–102).

FROM PAGANISM TO CHRISTIANITY: SACRED ARCHITECTURE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURE IN ITALY

Sardinia

In addition to documentary sources that shed light on the Christianisation of pre-Christian cults, significant evidence of water-related rituals can be found in the remains of sacred architecture (Cadinu 2015). Notable examples exist within the Nuragic complexes of Sardinia, where Christian churches were constructed near these ancient sites from the

and the profane: upstream, only navigation is allowed, while downstream, one may also swim.

medieval period onwards (Lilliu 1982; Spanu 2008, 1029–78). To date, approximately 120 sacred wells have been identified, emphasising the central role of water worship in Nuragic civilisation.

The construction of new architectural structures on sites imbued
[352] with pre-Christian sacred significance played a crucial role in preserving both historical and religious memory. Many churches built in proximity to sacred wells maintained a direct relationship with Nuragic architecture. Rather than dismantling the wells, Christian builders often integrated them into church layouts, at times incorporating them into liturgical practices. Water continued to be venerated, with medieval churches near these wells frequently dedicated to saints whose hagiographies were linked to water-related miracles.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the veneration of water in Sardinia dates back to the Late Bronze Age (1300–1200 BCE), when monumental structures were built around wells and springs, following architectural principles shared across the island's communities. Scholars attribute the development of water cults to both cultural and climatic factors. The transition into the Iron Age saw a shift from ancestor-hero worship to a focus on water as a central element in Nuragic society. Despite the spread of Christianity, the Church faced difficulties in fully erasing the historical memory of these sites and rituals. Pre-Christian spirituality linked to water was never entirely eradicated, as evidenced by the persistence of place names and traditional ceremonies honouring ancient deities such as Maimone, the rain god. Even today, festivals like *Su Maimulu* in Gairo and Ulassai preserve remnants of this ancient cult, ensuring the survival of Sardinia's ancestral connection to water (Santoni 2005). In the Ogliastra region and parts of Barbagia, oral traditions have been preserved, with popular chants linked to ancient water rituals surviving into the last century.

Several sites in Sardinia retain names that directly reference their ancient dedication to water deities, such as *Spiaggia di Maimoni* (Maimoni Beach) near the Sinis Peninsula. This area is particularly rich in evidence of the Nuragic civilization's water cult, as seen in key archaeological locations like Tharros, Mont'e Prama, and San Salvatore di Sinis near Cabras.

San Salvatore di Sinis: The Hypogeal Well and Community Participation in Traditional Festivities

The case of San Salvatore di Sinis presents a particularly valuable subject of study. The Sinis Peninsula, located on the western coast of

Sardinia in the province of Oristano, has historically served as a key Mediterranean trading hub due to its proximity to the sea. Archaeological evidence suggests continuous human occupation since the Iron Age, with significant settlements emerging as a result of its strategic coastal position. One of the site's most distinctive features is its sacred [353]
hypogeal well, over which a church dedicated to the Saviour was later built, giving the settlement its name. The site is also located near the Middle Neolithic necropolis of Cuccuru is Arrius, which was destroyed in the late 1970s due to the construction of a flood diversion canal connecting the Cabras lagoon to the Gulf of Oristano (Depalmas 1990, 5–11). The discovery of a stele in the circular well at San Salvatore, together with extensive Nuragic remains in the Sinis Peninsula, suggests that the site was frequented during the Nuragic period. However, precisely dating the hypogeum remains challenging, as the present structure appears to have undergone significant modifications, particularly during the Roman era.

Owing to its geomorphological features and proximity to key trading routes, the Sinis Peninsula was subject to repeated incursions by Phoenician, Carthaginian, and later Arab groups. These influences contributed to the region's complex cultural and religious syncretism, shaping both its traditions and architectural models (Stiglitz 1998, 24–55; Zucca 2015). Following Rome's victory in the Punic Wars, the Sinis Peninsula was incorporated into the Roman Empire and repurposed primarily for agriculture due to its fertile lands and maritime access. During this period, San Salvatore emerged as a crucial settlement at the crossroads of major Roman road networks, which remain in use today, linking Tharros to Cornus and San Salvatore to the Roman site of Othoca near Santa Giusta. Evidence of Roman occupation includes the remains of imperial baths at the village entrance, further confirming the area's role as a residential and agricultural centre. Additionally, the discovery of a mosaic depicting an *horreum* (granary) during the 1980s suggests that the Sinis Peninsula functioned as an important grain supply hub for the empire (Donati and Zucca 1992, 5–53).

The hypogeum, partially carved into the rock and partially constructed in brick, has been dated to the 4th century CE. At this time, pagan traditions remained deeply embedded in the region's cultural practices. The structure likely functioned as a sanctuary devoted to the water cult, as evidenced by the frescoes preserved on its walls, which depict pagan rituals related to water and agro-pastoral traditions. The hypogeum consists of five underground chambers, accessed via a stair-



FIGURE 2 San Salvatore di Sinis (Cabras)

NOTES Plan of the hypogeum and the church, sacred well and Christian altar, *sinopia* dated to the 4th century AD.

case located within the nave of the present-day Church of San Salvatore, constructed in the modern era. The descent leads into a corridor flanked by two quadrangular rooms, culminating in a circular space housing a quadrangular well. Three apsidal rooms extend from this area, with the central one containing a second, circular well. The nearly axial alignment of these two wells, visible from the entrance corridor, underscores the primacy of water in the site's religious significance (Camedda 2022, 34–43).

The walls of the hypogeum bear traces of diverse religious practices, attesting to its role as a multi-faith sanctuary over time. Notable iconographic elements include depictions of deities, heroes, mythological figures, ships, and animals, all dated to the 4th century CE. Among the most intriguing representations is the so-called *Sacred Conversation,* a *sinopia* portraying Luna, Venus, and Mars, accompanied by figures identified as Amor and Musa (figure 2).

Additional zoomorphic figures, combining human and animal features, appear to reference distinct cultic traditions. The frequent depiction of Hercules, particularly in his *Herakles Soter* (Hercules the Savior) aspect, suggests a symbolic association with purification and healing, reinforcing the site's ties to the protective power of water. The presence of Venus and Mars Italicus further indicates fertility-related rites linked to both land and wildlife. Naval-themed imagery reflects the region's maritime connections during the Roman period.

In addition to iconographic evidence, faint Greek inscriptions on the hypogeum's walls indicate that the site held religious significance for Mediterranean cultures beyond Sardinia, likely due to trade interactions. The site's Christian adaptation is evidenced by two altars – one situated in the room with the circular well and the other in the north-



FIGURE 3 San Salvatore di Sinis (Cabras)

NOTES *Novenario* celebrations and the *Corsa degli scalzi*.

ern quadrangular chamber adjacent to the entrance corridor. A further layer of religious plurality is revealed by an Arabic inscription above the eastern altar invoking Allah, suggesting the presence of Muslims during Saracen incursions into the Sinis Peninsula between the 10th and 11th centuries (Barreca 1984, 187–9; Susini 1994, 71–4; Spanu 1998, 163–4).

In the late 18th century, Spanish authorities constructed the present-day rural church dedicated to the Saviour, integrating the ancient hypogeal well within its nave. A *novenario* – a settlement of monastic-style dwellings – was established around the church, reflecting a common tradition in Christian worship. This village remains uninhabited for most of the year except for the nine days preceding the festival of San Salvatore, during which the novena is celebrated. San Salvatore di Sinis hosts Sardinia's largest *novenario,* comprising approximately 130 houses, known locally as *muristenes* or *cumbessias* (figure 3).

While most of these dwellings belong to the Church and require an offering to secure residence during the festivities, ownership has gradually been transferred to private individuals, predominantly from the nearby town of Cabras. Although many *novenari* are subject to depopulation due to their limited occupancy and small size, San Salvatore stands as a unique example of the enduring transmission of intangible heritage, reinforced by active community participation.

One of the most significant cultural expressions associated with San Salvatore is the *Corsa degli Scalzi* (Barefoot Race), an event deeply embedded in local tradition. Although its origins lack formal documentation, scholars suggest that it derives from Spanish influences and represents a key manifestation of Sardinian folklore. Each year, this ritual reenactment involves men from Cabras, or those married

into local families, running barefoot over an 8-kilometer stretch from Cabras to San Salvatore, carrying the statue of the saint. The race marks both the opening and closing of the religious celebrations at the *novenario's* rural church. At the festival's conclusion, the event is repeated
[356] in reverse, returning the saint's image to its original location (Sannia 2013). Throughout the festival, the village comes to life with traditional music, dances, and communal meals prepared along the *novenario's* streets. The tradition holds particular significance for younger generations, with participation in the *Corsa degli Scalzi* increasing markedly since the 1950s. Initially involving only a few dozen *curridoris* (runners), today the event attracts approximately 800–900 male *curridoris*. In response to historical gender restrictions, a women's version of the race has emerged, now featuring around 400 participants who complete the journey in traditional dress. This small village, inhabited only during the festival period, serves as a powerful example of how local communities continue to safeguard and transmit their cultural identity. In doing so, San Salvatore unconsciously aligns with the principles of the Faro Convention, emphasising the vital role of heritage communities in preserving and celebrating their traditions.

Santa Cristina at Paulilatino: The Pinnacle of Nuragic Sacred Architecture

Near Oristano, the site of Santa Cristina in Paulilatino represents a key example of the integration between pagan and Christian cultures. The sacred area consists of three distinct parts: the Nuragic village, the sacred well, and the Christian novenario, which includes the church dedicated to Saint Christina, giving the site its name (figure 4).

The Nuragic site is notable for its well-preserved tholos nuraghe, several tombs, and village remains, surrounded by approximately two hundred olive trees. About 300 meters from the Nuragic settlement lies the well temple, dated to around 1100–1200 BC, regarded as the pinnacle of Nuragic sacred architecture. Its floor plan, unique in Sardinia, features a monumental trapezoidal access staircase with twenty-five steps. The well descends 7.20 metres into the natural rock, reaching an underground spring. The water level remains stable at approximately 50 cm due to a drainage channel that prevents overflow. The dome consists of concentric rings that gradually narrow, forming an opening at ground level. The staircase covering mirrors the steps, acting as a superimposed architrave that integrates seamlessly with the well's structure.



FIGURE 4 Santa Cristina in Paulilatino (Oristano)
NOTES Christian church, sacred well and Nuragic village.

The architecture has been largely preserved in its original state. Only the uppermost section, nearest the surface, appears to have been restored, as materials from this part were repurposed to construct the nearby rural church dedicated to Saint Christina (Cattaneo 2012). The well is considered a sacred site associated with water as a healing element. Hundreds of bronze statuettes have been found along the staircase, each representing a human figure emphasising a specific body part in need of healing. Scholars suggest these figurines served as ex-voto offerings. Furthermore, the constant water level indicates that rituals may have involved bathing affected body parts at the well (Demurtas and Manca Demurtas 1999; Moravetti 2003). The belief in the healing properties of water persists in Christian worship today, as seen at the pools of Lourdes, drawing parallels with ancient Nuragic rites that may have preserved cultural memories of earlier religious practices. Approximately 200 metres from the well, a medieval church was constructed, repurposing the pagan site for Christian worship. As with other Nuragic sacred wells, Christian churches were dedicated to saints associated with water-related miracles. Saint Christina, for example, was thrown into Lake Bolsena in Lazio with a millstone tied around her neck but was miraculously saved by angels. The dedication of Christian sites to water-associated figures highlights the enduring significance of this element in religious syncretism and spiritual transition.

Archaeological evidence suggests the site remained active through the medieval period. The church, built by Camaldolese monks in the early 13th century, has a single nave with a flat apse termination. Its

façade was reconstructed in the 20th century during an expansion. The apse wall incorporates stones from the well, identifiable by their distinct cut, size, and coloration. The *novenario* consists of approximately thirty-six houses, mostly privately owned, resembling the case
[358] of San Salvatore di Sinis. The inhabitants of Paulilatino gather at Santa Cristina for the novena, celebrated on the second Sunday of May, although Saint Christina's feast day in the Christian calendar falls on July 24 (Salice et al. 2016).

The Sacred Well of Sardara: Archaeological Excavations of the Early 20th Century

In the province of Cagliari, Sardara presents another example of a pagan structure near which a Christian church was erected. The site features a Nuragic village from the 13th–12th centuries BC, housing a sacred well. Although the structure shares elements with Santa Cristina, such as a staircase and tholos construction, it differs in scale and in the rougher workmanship of its basalt stone blocks. The well stands approximately 5 metres high, and its pseudo-dome is formed from rows of relatively regular stone blocks (Juvanec 2014; Ibba 2016) (figure 5).

Some scholars draw parallels with the sacred well of Garlo in Bulgaria, suggesting similarities in architectural techniques (Mitova-Dzonova 2007). These construction methods, particularly pseudo-domes with *dromos* entrances, reflect broader Mediterranean influences, including Mycenaean architecture.



FIGURE 5 Sardara (Cagliari)
NOTES Church of Sant'Anastasia, liturgical well and Nuragic holy well.

Immediately outside the well's access staircase stands the Church of Saint Anastasia, dating to the 12th century. Inside, along the northern side aisle, a Christian well was incorporated for evangelical liturgical celebrations – demonstrating the continued veneration of water. Excavations in 1913 resulted in the partial demolition of the church, [359] revealing the underlying Nuragic remains. At the time, archaeologists prioritised exposing the original settlement over preserving the medieval structure, thereby altering the site's historical stratigraphy. Antonio Taramelli, a key archaeologist involved in the excavation, theorised that the Christian building had covered part of the Nuragic temple. As at San Salvatore di Sinis, the church of saint Anastasia appears to have been constructed atop a pre-existing pagan sanctuary, reinforcing the connection between Nuragic sacred wells and their later adaptation into Christian religious spaces (Sirigu and Usai 2003).

Santa Vittoria: The Dominance of Christian Worship Over Paganism in Sardinia and Lazio

Another example of water as a unifying element between pagan and Christian worship is found in churches dedicated to Saint Victoria. Both in Sardinia, at Serri, and in Monteleone Sabino near Rieti, traces of ancient water cults were integrated into medieval Christian practices through the construction of churches dedicated to the saint.

In the Sardinian case of Serri, a circular sacred well has been discovered, dating from the Late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age. It forms part of one of Sardinia's most significant settlements of the 2nd millennium BC, known for its political, commercial, and religious functions. The well is about 4.5 metres deep with a diameter of 2 metres. Its walls are built from neatly arranged black basalt blocks, and the structure features a staircase with thirteen trapezoidal steps, reminiscent of the one at Santa Cristina. The temple's façade was possibly adorned with alternating black and white stones and a dentil frieze with taurine protomes in limestone. The lower chamber does not appear to connect directly to a spring or to groundwater, suggesting that it functioned as a rainwater collection well (Pettazzoni 2022, 14–36).

At the westernmost point of the Nuragic complex stands a Christian church, initially dated between the 8th and 9th centuries, though it underwent a radical transformation in the 18th century, when it was rebuilt and reoriented away from its original position facing the sacred well (Mancini 2013, 1–15; Paglietti et al. 2018) (figure 6).



FIGURE 6 Santa Vittoria di Serri (Cagliari)

NOTES Aerial view of the site (photograph by Valentino Selis), medieval church, and sacred well.

In Lazio, the Basilica of Saint Victoria in Monteleone Sabino also reflects the progressive Christianisation of a pre-existing pagan site. According to tradition, the site marks the burial place of the martyr Victoria. A pre-Christian temple, likely constructed in the 3rd century BC, was later transformed into a church in the second half of the 12th century by Bishop Dodone of Rieti. The Christian structure was built using elements from the earlier temple. The church has two naves and a gabled façade, with evidence of later, poorly documented expansions.

At the centre of the nave is a quadrangular well of uncertain date, an unusual feature as it does not appear to have had any clear liturgical function. It is likely a remnant of the site's cultural transition. In antiquity, the area was dedicated to the goddess Feronia, a deity associated with water but was later redefined through the veneration of the martyrs Victoria and Anatolia. Over time, a sacred cult developed around the burial site, and miraculous healings were attributed to water drawn from the well, aligning with the devotion of the faithful (Ercolino 2008, 337–47) (figure 7).

San Bartolomeo in Rome: The Sacred Well as a Vestige of the Ancient Temple of Asclepius

A significant example in central Italy is found in the Basilica of Saint Bartholomew in Rome, located on Tiber Island. This site has been further explored in the conference *Rome in the 10th Century* (Barral I Altet and Gianandrea 1999).

The church was built on the remains of a temple dedicated to Asclepius, the god of medicine, likely constructed in the 3rd century BC. Given the temple's proximity to the Tiber, water played a crucial role in healing rituals. In the late 10th century, the Saxon emperor Otto III



FIGURE 7 Santa Vittoria in Monteleone Sabino (Rieti)
NOTES Medieval church and liturgical well.



FIGURE 8 San Bartolomeo all'Isola Tiberina (Rome)
NOTES Nave of the basilica and holy well.

commissioned a church on the ruins of the ancient sanctuary, dedicating it to Saint Bartholomew and transferring the saint's relics there.

Today, a well is located inside the basilica, positioned in front of the altar (figure 8).

It is believed to date back to Roman times and may originally have been part of the Temple of Asclepius, where its waters were considered curative. During the early 11th century, the well was reshaped using the lower section of a repurposed column, which was hollowed out.
[362] Scholars suggest that it was originally housed in the pagan temple before being integrated into the Christian church above (Richiello 2001; Milella 2015, 547–63). The wellhead aligns with an underground water source about 10 metres below the ancient sanctuary, effectively replacing any lingering memory of pagan purification rituals with the Christian metaphor of water as a source of salvation, as expressed in Isaiah 12, 3: «With joy, you will draw water from the springs of salvation» (Tollo 2000, 85–104; Kinney 2006, 12–29).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the archaeological sites under investigation confirms the central role of water as a mediating element between paganism and Christianity, fostering a cultural continuity evident in both the location of religious structures and the functions attributed to sacred wells. The transition from the veneration of water, associated with the sanctity of nature and its healing properties, to a Christian understanding of water as a medium of purification and salvation highlights a process of syncretism that profoundly shaped the spiritual transformation of local communities.

The construction of churches above or adjacent to Nuragic and Roman temples and sacred wells was not solely the result of pragmatic conversion strategies but also reveals an intentional effort to preserve symbolic continuity with the past. The Christian appropriation of these sites, through dedication to saints associated with water and the incorporation of wells into liturgical practices, did not erase their earlier sacred character, but rather reinterpreted it within a new religious paradigm. This phenomenon is not confined to Sardinia but can be observed across various regions of the Mediterranean, reflecting a broader and long-standing trend of adaptation and superimposition of cultic traditions. From an architectural standpoint, the sites analysed reveal a significant evolution in construction techniques. Nuragic structures, particularly sacred wells, are distinguished by their engineering sophistication: monumental staircases, tholos-style coverings, and advanced drainage systems attest to a high degree of technical expertise already present in the pre-Roman period. Their incorporation

into Christian contexts often ensured their preservation, even as they underwent modification and reuse over time. This ongoing process illustrates the continuous reshaping of the sacred landscape through interactions among different civilisations, with water serving as a unifying symbolic and functional element. The enduring centrality of water in both pre-Christian cults and Christian liturgy underscores the resilience of certain symbols and practices over time. From the healing properties attributed to Nuragic wells to the miraculous cures associated with the veneration of saints, water has consistently functioned as a conduit between the earthly and the transcendent. This continuity suggests that popular religiosity maintained deep roots in archaic ritual forms, contributing to a cultural resilience still evident in contemporary local festivals and rites centred around springs and sacred wells. Looking forward, several promising research avenues emerge. Further excavations could refine our chronological and functional understanding of these sites, particularly in relation to the transitional phases from pagan to Christian usage. A more nuanced investigation into hydrogeology may help explain the original placement of certain sacred wells, revealing connections between physical geography and sacred topography. Finally, examining the relationship between these sites and contemporary religious tourism could provide valuable insights into the persistence and transformation of the sacred within the modern public sphere, encouraging interdisciplinary dialogue among archaeology, anthropology and heritage studies. [363]

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