



San Pietro a Corte is one of the most important monuments in Salerno. An extensive campaign of excavations has restored a diverse amount of knowledge on the material culture of this multilayered site. The complex includes an underground area, the Chapel of Saint Anne, the bell tower, an upper representative Hall, and the Church of *San Pietro a Corte* (Palatine Chapel).

From a temporal point of view, the monumental complex presents four main layers:

- a Roman thermal building (I-II century AD)
- a building of an early Christian cult with annexed burial site (V-VII century AD)
- the throne room and the Lombard Chapel (second half of the VIII century AD)
- the church of San Pietro a Corte with Romanesque frescoes (from XII century)
- the medieval public palace, from the XIII century, also seat of the Parliament's meetings in which the ceremony for the conferment of degrees from the Medical School of Salerno was held.

In the underground area, in Roman times, there was a thermal system in which the palatium was built later. The bath complex, made in the Flavian-Trajan era (I-II A.D) was about 13 meters high, while it was structured according to a dynamic succession of locations with crossed and barreled vaulted ceilings. In particular, the frigidarium's rectangular hall was divided in two parts, the first of which was covered by crossed vaulted ceilings, while the second, which hosted a marble bath, had barreled vaulted ceilings. The site continued towards the northeast, under what is now the Fruscione palace. The baths were abandoned in the fourth century, most likely after a bad storm. In the late-classical age, and at least from the end of the fifth century, the existent bath structures were used by the Christian communities of Salerno as a place of worship in some way (ecclesia) with a nearby burial area. Important graves are still preserved there, such as the *arcosolium*, situated in the northwestern corner of the frigidarium's western room, which belonged to a man named Socrate: *vir spectabilis* of Greek-byzantine origin, which bears the following epitaph: "Under the consulate of our lord Anastasius, perpetual Augustus, in the fourteenth day before the *calends* of December, here lies in peace Socrate, magistrate of high rank who lived for forty-eight years."

Besides Socrate's text, other epigraphs have been found which can be dated between the second half of the fifth through the seventh centuries, which bear witness to the presence in the city of people of various ethnicities and cultural extractions.

The successive stage has the *princeps longobardorum*, Arechi II's arrival, who, based on historical and literary evidence, moved the capital city of *Longobardia Minor* from Benevento to Salerno in 774, in order to escape the Franks' invasion under Charles the Great, who shortly before had defeated Longobardia Major in the north.

Salerno, moreover, represented a fundamental access point to the sea and a very important monitoring center for trade and commercial routes, which passed through Lombard lands and connected them to the Mediterranean.

At this point, political and economic clout poured into Salerno, which Prince Arechi had chosen as his residence; this is evident in the building redevelopment featuring a strengthening of the defense systems and the construction of numerous buildings. Indeed, this is the moment that Arechi II built a majestic residence in the city center behind the walls facing the sea both for himself and for his government. The site's lavish decorations are described by several contemporary chroniclers, such as Paolo Diacono, Erchemperto, Leone Ostiense and the anonymous author of the *Chronicon Salernitanum* (tenth century).

The *Chronicon* recounts that Arechi II, in order to build Pietro and Paolo's chapel, accidentally destroyed the temple of Priamus while digging a foundation, and from one of its statues he took the gold with which he decorated the church. Excavations have uncovered that, with the construction of the *palatium*, the vaults of the bath building were surely demolished and, inside the paleo-Christian hall and its sepulchral avant-corps, powerful pillars and semi-pillars were built to support the floor of the reception hall overhead, as well as the palatine chapel. Another passage from the *Chronicon* says that the chapel was located north of the palace "... (Arechi) fortified this city in every part and built a palace of marvelous extension and beauty in it and there, in the northern part, he erected a church in honor of the blessed Peter and Paul." Unfortunately, very little remains of his palace, probably because it was incorporated into modern structures. The restoration of the upper hall has brought to light the Longobard wall structure built with alternating stone and brick blocks on at least three sides: on the western façade, a series of arches can be seen resting on columns to form a loggia. On the north side, a mullioned window and a series of single-lancet windows illuminated the interior. The eastern part of the hall is occupied by a quadrangular apse, while on the southern side, access to the room was probably achieved directly from the palatium.

A particular architectural element is surely the *loggia* placed on both the northern and southern sides that have some things in common with various palaces of the classical and byzantine eras built like the roman domus. The San Pietro a Corte complex represents the

only example of an architectural public palace of the Lombard age in Europe. After the Norman conquest in 1076 until the end of the Swabian period, the palace settings were used for public purposes. The courtroom of the palace was used for the reunions of the citizen parliament, and later for the solemn ceremonies for the graduations of the Scuola Medica Salernitana.

The *chronicon salernitarum* mentions the existence of a bell tower built around 922 CE at the behest of Prince Guaimario II. However, it doesn't seem to resemble the current Romanesque bell tower located on the northern side of the church. It certainly belongs to an era after the X century, as has been confirmed on the basis of stratigraphic studies, along with the other surviving structures and levels of ancient road plans.

An oratory was arranged in the underground environment starting from the Norman age. The cemetery space, used as a construction site, housed tanks for the production of lime and was later abandoned and detached from the liturgical hall, access to which was ensured via a communication stairway between the road to the north and the church. The renovation of the building led not only to the reinforcement of the perimeter walls but also to the creation of new frescoes which went on to decorate the building. On the pillar built by Arechi II to support the floor of the palatine chapel above were painted a Madonna enthroned with Child and, on the right, a saint; a representation that also occurs on the other sides of the same pillar.

The walls of the perimeter, on the other hand, are decorated with paintings of the Procession of Saints, among whom we can see Saint George and Saint Nicola, Saints Peter and Paul, the Virgin Hodegetria and Saint James. The frescoes are datable to between the end of the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries.

In the **modern era** Arechi II's palatine chapel underwent several profound transformations. Two of the four altars in the church have been topped by paintings. One on the high altar and the other on the altar to its right. The painting on the High Altar shows Madonna in Glory with the Saints Peter and Paul, where we can also find Saint Cyrus, a doctor and hermit, and Saint John the soldier, his disciple. Decio Caracciolo, an abbot until 1613 who commissioned the artwork which has been attributed to Decio Tramontano, can be seen on his knees in prayer.

The martyrdom of Saint Stephen as he is stoned to death is the subject of the painting on the second altar.

A particularly interesting work of art is that which shows the "Glory of the Virgin"; placed on the ceiling, this painting was undertaken by Filippo Pennino or an artist of his school from around the mid-seventeenth century. The central scene of this work, with the Madonna and various Saints, including Saint Matthew, is surrounded by illusionistic architecture populated by angels and cherubs.

Traduzione in lingua inglese a cura del Liceo Statale "Regina Margherita" di Salerno anno scolastico 2022-2023, Dirigente Scolastico Angela Nappi.