Church of San Basilio Magno

Dating back to Byzantine times and perched on the top of the mountain of the same name, the church of San Basilio Magno and the annexed monastery were built by Eastern monks following the rule of Basil the Great and known under the name of 'Basilians'. The religious building, seemingly built in late Gothic style as evidenced by the ashlars of the portals, was probably rebuilt a first time in the 15th century and then in 1925, a date inscribed on a commemorative (hardly legible) plaque affixed to the archway leading to the presbytery. The roof and ceiling were restored in 1998-1999. In the 12th century the monastery was taken over by Benedictine monks, who were eventually replaced by the Franciscans from Oristano at the end of the 1400s. They ended up abandoning it after being involved in a dispute between two important local families; during their escape, they took away a precious crucifix that is currently housed in the basilica of Santa Giusta.

The church, which was even visited by Blessed Bernardine of Feltre, is situated on a rocky slope not far from Mount S'Ascusorgiu (1126 metres), which offers breath-taking views that earned it the name 'Window of Sardinia'. All around the church are numerous oaks and even the ruins of some *cumbessias*: these dwellings for pilgrims were built from the trachyte ashlars of the original structure of the church and monastery, which was in extremely poor repair.

The walls are plainly plastered, but the façade stands out for the small portal surmounted by a pointed arch that is positioned slightly to the left of the central axis. Another pointed arch portal belonging to the original late mediaeval structure opens in the wall facing north. The church has a single hall and the rectangular presbytery, with the altar facing east, is set transversely to it. On the back wall, a lunette painted blue houses a small statue of the saint dressed after the Eastern style. The interior is quite simple in appearance as well: the small hall is divided by two transverse round arches, which support the recently renovated concrete and masonry roof. Both the roof and all the small stone stoups are light blue.

In 2006-2008 a number of excavation projects were carried out in the vicinity of the small church, in the area where, according to tradition, the Franciscan monastery was located: the excavations uncovered the remains of a building made of stone and held together by mud mortar (the door jambs are made of non-local red trachyte). This building consisted of several communicating rooms and also featured a large domed oven. The excavations also revealed that local spring water was directed through a channel carved into the rock to a stone fountain. Other evidence of human activity include a wide range of materials dating to a period that spans from the 15th century to the 20th century: mainly fragments of locally produced or imported tableware and kitchenware, but also coins and traces of obsidian showing a full history of continuous human presence since prehistoric times.

The feast of St Basil the Great is locally known as *Qapidanni* and occurs every year on September 1, which is the first day of the year according to the Byzantine calendar. During the rest of the year the church is not used for services, but it is still open to visitors.

Text by Cecilia Mariani

