CHAPTER FOUR

MERCHANTS, MONKS, AND MEDIEVAL SARDINIAN ARCHITECTURE*

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This chapter evaluates medieval Sardinia from three perspectives: material culture, architectural history, and socio-economic history. This interdisciplinary approach yields the benefit of a better understanding of Sardinia’s evolving settlement patterns, the island’s role in Mediterranean trade, and its relationship with the Islamic world.1 As a point of departure, the focus of this study is placed on one particular architectural element, using it to connect these topics and further understand the island’s role in Mediterranean trade. With special attention to Arab culture and its ‘non-visible’ presence along the Mediterranean coasts, this chapter proposes that Sardinia might have played a wider role in medieval maritime trade than previously believed.

Bacini

The term ‘bacini’ (sing. ‘bacino’) was first used by Gian Battista Passeri in 1758 to describe decorative pottery on the churches of Pesaro, Italy. The term has since come to indicate vessels, generally of an open form, that perform a decorative function, predominantly on the facades of religious buildings (Fig. 1).2 Bacini are glazed utilitarian ceramic plates that were originally imported to continental Italy from different

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Islamic west-Mediterranean centres and subsequently produced on the peninsula. They were first introduced to continental Italy in the late tenth century and their durability and wide availability made them an ideal architectural element for many ecclesiastical structures that were built before and during the Gregorian Reformation. The use of bacini as architectural elements is also found in Spain, Albania, Yemen, and Iraq, although the origin of the practice is unclear. During the Middle Ages, bacini were also used as domestic wares in high-end residences or large monasteries.

There are two commonly accepted methods for dating bacini. The first typifies the bacini found on churches for which accurate dates of construction are known. This method assumes that bacini were incorporated into the masonry at the time the churches were constructed. Additionally, the recent discovery and identification of medieval pottery-production centres in the Mediterranean has not only led to an increased accuracy (within about 25 years) in the dating of bacini, but it has also provided valuable information about the particular geographic regions from whence the pottery originated.

**Bacini and the Dating of Medieval Sardinian Churches**

Most of the medieval churches on Sardinia have no surviving documents regarding their construction and, in the past, dating them was based exclusively on stylistic terms. On the other hand, in Pisa, documents on the construction of churches abound. In 1981, a pioneering book by Graziella Berti and Liana Tongiorgi on the medieval churches of Pisa that are decorated with bacini offered a comprehensive survey of all the major types of Islamic and Italian bacini produced in the Mediterranean, ranging from the end of the tenth to the fourteenth century. This text provided precise dates for each of these types,

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5 Berti and Tongiorgi, *I bacini ceramici medievali*. Berti and Tongiorgi analysed twenty-three churches in the maritime republic decorated with imported bacini. This