

BASIC IDENTIFICATION**Site name:**

Sacellum of Santa Maria Mater Domini

Location:

Vicenza (Veneto, Italy), eastern suburban area, near the ancient Via Postumia

Associated complex:

Early Christian and medieval complex of the Basilica of Saints Felix and Fortunatus

Geographical context:

Originally extra-mural area of Roman Vicetia, characterised by funerary landscapes and early Christian cult sites, later incorporated into the medieval urban fabric

Chronological range (site):

Late 4th–early 5th century – present, with significant phases in the 5th–6th, 9th–10th, and 12th centuries

Focus period for roofing systems:

Late Antiquity (5th–6th centuries), with early medieval and Romanesque adaptations



Figure 1. Vicenza, Church of Santa Maria Mater Domini, exterior view. (Source: A. Passuello)

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Sacellum of Santa Maria Mater Domini represents one of the most important survivals of early Christian architecture in Vicenza and constitutes a key monument for the study of late antique roofing systems in the Veneto hinterland. Closely connected to the cult complex of Saints Felix and Fortunatus, the sacellum originated as a commemorative and funerary structure within a suburban Christian landscape shaped by the gradual transformation of Roman burial grounds into sacred topographies.

The site lies near the ancient Via Postumia, the main east–west artery of northern Italy, which facilitated both the diffusion of Christianity and the circulation of architectural models between Aquileia, Verona, Padua, and Ravenna. Archaeological evidence indicates that the area was occupied by Roman funerary structures from the Imperial period and that it became a focal point of Christian worship between the late 4th and early 5th centuries, when the basilica of Saints Felix and Fortunatus was established.

Santa Maria Mater Domini appears to have functioned as a martyrion or memoria, closely associated with the cult of the Vicentine martyrs Felix and Fortunatus, whose relics were venerated at the site. Within this cultic framework, the sacellum played a specific role as a centralised sacred space, distinct from the basilical hall yet integrally connected to the ritual life of the complex.

A crucial element for understanding the foundation of the sacellum is the testimony of an epigraphic dedication, transmitted by later sources, which attributes the construction of a *pergula*—a liturgical enclosure or architectural screen marking the transition between spaces—to a certain Gregorio *referendarius*. This individual, whose title suggests a high-ranking administrative or ecclesiastical function, emerges as the named patron of the building. Such explicit identification of a commissioner is exceptionally rare in early Christian architecture of the Veneto and allows Santa Maria Mater Domini to be situated within a broader network of late antique patronage, where elite figures actively sponsored the construction of commemorative religious buildings.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the sacellum retained its symbolic and liturgical importance. Although it underwent repairs, adaptations, and partial reconstructions, its late antique core—particularly its roofing system—remained substantially intact, making it a crucial case study for the continuity of constructional practices from Late Antiquity into the medieval period.



Figure 2. Vicenza, Church of Santa Maria Mater Domini, interior view. (Source: A. Passuello)

2. BUILDING PHASES AND CHRONOLOGY

2.1 Foundation and Late Antique Phase (late 4th–6th centuries)

The foundation of Santa Maria Mater Domini is generally placed between the late 4th and early 5th century, based on stratigraphic evidence, masonry techniques, and its relationship with the earliest phase of the basilica of Saints Felix and Fortunatus. The sacellum was

conceived as a centralised martyrium, likely connected to an adjacent funerary area that had already acquired Christian significance.

Archaeological investigations have revealed the presence of late Roman and early Christian burials beneath and around the building, confirming that the sacellum was embedded within a pre-existing funerary landscape. This continuity between burial, memory, and cult is fundamental for understanding both the function and the architectural form of the building.

The original structure was characterised by thick load-bearing walls constructed in mixed masonry—river pebbles, reused Roman bricks, and lime mortar—arranged in irregular but carefully bonded courses. The plan was centralised, probably square or slightly polygonal, and designed from the outset to support a domed roofing system.

2.2 Early Medieval Repairs and Refunctionalisation (9th–10th centuries)

During the early medieval period, the sacellum underwent maintenance and consolidation works, likely in response to structural ageing and to the continued liturgical use of the complex. These interventions affected both masonry and roofing elements, including repairs to the vaulting system and the replacement or reinforcement of timber roof components.

Although documentary evidence for this phase is limited, the constructional logic of the building suggests a deliberate effort to preserve the late antique structural core rather than to replace it.

2.3 Romanesque Adjustments (12th century)

In the 12th century, coinciding with broader transformations of the basilica of Saints Felix and Fortunatus, Santa Maria Mater Domini was partially reconfigured. Romanesque masonry techniques were introduced, and the external roofing system was regularised, possibly increasing the pitch of the roof to improve drainage and durability.

Despite these changes, the fundamental spatial and structural organisation of the sacellum—centred on the domed core—was retained, underscoring the enduring value attributed to its late antique form.

3. STRUCTURAL AND TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROOFING SYSTEMS

3.1 Integrated Ceiling and Roof System

The roofing system of Santa Maria Mater Domini exemplifies a late antique architectural strategy based on the integration of masonry ceiling structures and external timber roofs. Internally, the space is articulated by a central dome, while externally the structure was protected by a pitched roof system designed to shield the masonry from climatic exposure.

This dual system reflects a clear functional distinction: the dome and its supporting elements defined the sacred interior and articulated symbolic meaning, whereas the timber roof served primarily as a protective envelope.



Figure 3. Vicenza, Church of Santa Maria Mater Domini, vaulted roofing system. (Source: A. Passuello)

3.2 The Dome, Pendentives, and Structural Logic

The central dome constitutes the core of the roofing system. Constructed in brick and mortar, it rests on pendentives that mediate between the square or polygonal plan of the walls and the circular base of the cupola. The careful integration of the pendentives into the masonry fabric indicates that the dome was part of the original design and not a later addition.

Structurally, the dome relies on the mass and continuity of the surrounding walls to counteract thrusts. The absence of external buttressing suggests that stability was achieved through wall thickness and the cohesive behaviour of the masonry, consistent with late Roman engineering principles.

3.3 External Roofing and the Role of the Tiburio

Although the internal dome was the dominant spatial feature, it was almost certainly concealed externally by a timber roof, probably with a low-pitched, double-sloped

configuration. Comparative evidence suggests the presence of a tiburio or lantern-like structure, enclosing the dome and providing a base for the external roof.

This solution protected the masonry dome from water infiltration and thermal stress while allowing the interior to maintain its symbolic and spatial autonomy. Such an arrangement is characteristic of late antique architecture in northern Italy and the Adriatic region.

3.4 Medieval Adaptations of the Roofing System

In the medieval period, the roofing system was adapted to changing environmental and functional needs. Timber elements were periodically replaced, and the roof pitch may have been increased. Nevertheless, these interventions respected the underlying late antique structural logic, ensuring the long-term stability of the domed system.

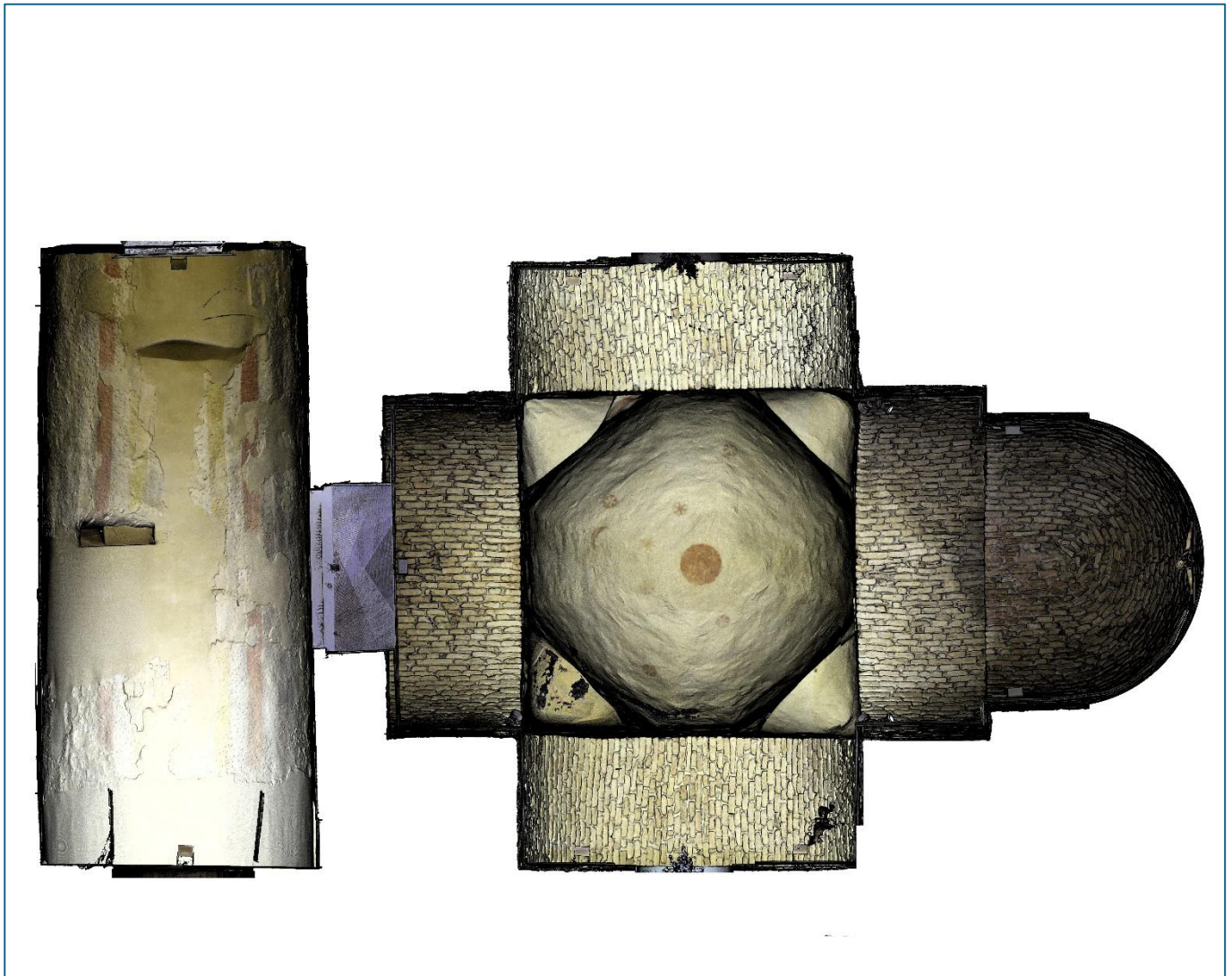


Figure 4. Vicenza, Church of Santa Maria Mater Domini, orthophoto and plan of the vaulted roofing system. (Source: LRA, University of Florence)

4. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE ROOFING SYSTEMS

4.1 Santa Maria Mater Domini within the Veneto Context

Within the Veneto, Santa Maria Mater Domini forms part of a coherent group of early Christian domed buildings, alongside the Sacellum of Saint Prosdocimus in Padua and the Sacellum of Saints Teuteria and Tosca in Verona. These monuments share a reliance on centralised plans, masonry domes, and externally concealed roofing systems.

Together, they illustrate the regional adaptation of late Roman constructional traditions to Christian commemorative architecture.

4.2 Ravenna and the Adriatic Cultural Sphere

The most significant architectural parallels are found in Ravenna, particularly in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the Orthodox Baptistery. In these buildings, domes resting on pendentives are similarly concealed by external roof structures, creating a contrast between interior spatial richness and exterior sobriety.

The diffusion of such roofing solutions across the Adriatic basin points to the circulation of craftsmen, models, and technical knowledge between northern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean.

4.3 European Comparisons

At a wider European level, Santa Maria Mater Domini can be compared with early medieval domed sacellums in Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula, where masonry domes were paired with timber roofs to balance symbolic aspirations with practical constraints. These parallels situate the Vicentine sacellum within a pan-European architectural discourse on sacred roofing systems during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

4.4 Continuity and Transformation

The roofing system of Santa Maria Mater Domini encapsulates a long-term process of architectural continuity. While its late antique core reflects Roman engineering principles and Christian symbolic concerns, subsequent medieval adaptations demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of this constructional model.

5. RESTORATION HISTORY AND CONSERVATION STATUS

Modern appreciation of Santa Maria Mater Domini developed primarily during the 20th century, when restoration campaigns aimed to stabilise the structure and recover its early Christian character. These interventions focused on consolidating masonry, repairing the dome and vaults, and renewing deteriorated timber roof elements.

While some materials were necessarily replaced, restorers sought to respect the original geometry and constructional logic of the roofing system, basing their interventions on archaeological evidence and comparative analysis.

Today, the sacellum is in a good state of conservation. The masonry ceilings remain structurally sound, and the roofing system continues to perform its protective function effectively. Santa Maria Mater Domini thus stands as a crucial reference point for the study of early Christian roofing systems and their long-term transformation in the Veneto region.

6. ESSENTIAL/SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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