

BASIC IDENTIFICATION**Site name:**

Sacellum of Saint Prosdocimus (Padua)

Location:

Padua (Veneto, Italy), within the complex of the Abbey-Basilica of Santa Giustina

Associated complex:

Late Antique Basilica of Santa Giustina and its monastic precinct

Geographical context:

South-western suburb of Roman/early Christian Patavium, adjacent to funerary and martyrial precincts along major arterial routes

Chronological range (site):

5th–6th centuries AD, with important transformations and restorations from the Renaissance (16th century) to the present

Focus period for roofing systems:

Late Antiquity (5th–6th centuries), with post-antique modifications



Figure 1. Padua, Church of San Prosdocimo, exterior view. (Source: A. Passuello)

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Sacellum of Saint Prosdocimus stands as one of the earliest and most significant early Christian monuments preserved in the Veneto region, and it represents a rare architectural witness to the cultic and constructional environment of Padua in Late Antiquity. Attached to the south-eastern corner of the original Basilica of Santa Giustina, the sacellum was erected between the mid-5th and early 6th centuries AD under the patronage of Rufus Venantius Opilio, *vir clarissimus* and praetorian prefect, whose dedicatory inscription is recorded in the surviving lapidary fragments associated with the basilical precinct.

The sacellum is generically identified with the cult of Saint Prosdocimus, traditionally considered the first bishop of Padua and a disciple of Saint Peter, whose burial and relics became focal to the nascent Christian community's identity. Santa Giustina The monument functioned both as a memorial chapel for the veneration of relics and as a commemorative shrine linked to the principal basilica. The intimate relation between sacellum and basilica reflects the late antique practice of associating funerary and martyrial memory with ecclesiastical space, positioning the sacellum at a crossroads between liturgical function and devotional commemoration.

Archaeological and stylistic evidence indicates that the sacellum's architectural articulation—especially its roofing system centred on a dome supported by pendentives on a Greek-cross plan—was conceived within the conceptual milieu of late Roman sacral architecture, sharing formal parallels with contemporary Adriatic and Ravenna-oriented chapels.

2. BUILDING PHASES AND CHRONOLOGY

2.1 Foundation and Late Antique Phase (5th–6th centuries)

The initial construction of the sacellum likely occurred between 450 and 520 AD, contemporaneously with the basilica founded by Opilio. Designed as a compact, cross-inscribed space, the sacellum's plan consists of a central square from which four short arms project, one of which terminates in a small apse oriented to the east—consistent with early Christian liturgical orientation norms.

Masonry is characterised by late antique techniques employing brick and stone bonded with lime mortar, the overall mass of the walls designed to support the weight of the vaults and the central dome. The sacellum's interior walls were originally clad in precious marbles and mosaics, in keeping with the high status of the founder and the ecclesiastical importance of the site; fragments of the polychrome tessellated mosaic decoration have been the subject

of recent archaeometric studies, showing connections in material and technology with other late antique mosaics of the Veneto.



Figure 2. Padua, Church of San Prosdocimo, interior view. (Source: A. Passuello)

The central dome rose above the square core, articulated by pendentives that facilitate the transition from the square base of the sacellum to the circular drum and vault. Four short barrel-vaulted arms project from the central space, the eastern of which terminates in a semi-circular apse, forming a clear liturgical axis.

2.2 Early Medieval Developments and Liturgical Use (7th–11th centuries)

After its foundation, the sacellum remained an active locus of veneration. The relic-based liturgical practice and the burials of some of Padua's early bishops within the chapel reinforced its commemorative role. Despite political and ecclesiastical upheavals throughout the early medieval period, the core spatial configuration remained recognisable.

Due to the limited survival of above-ground structures and the extensive rebuilding that occurred in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods, the evidence for specific medieval structural interventions is scant. Nevertheless, stratigraphic and liturgical continuity suggests that periodic repairs and adaptations were undertaken to maintain the structural integrity of the clerestory openings, vault junctions, and surface finishing.

2.3 Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Interventions (16th century onward)

The sacellum underwent significant alteration in 1564 as part of a comprehensive restructuring of the Basilica of Santa Giustina. At this time, the sacellum was linked to the main church by the "Corridor of the Martyrs", an architectural passage designed to integrate older sacred spaces with the newly refurbished basilica.

The mosaic decoration and original surface finishes of the early Christian sacellum were largely removed or overpainted in favour of Renaissance decorative programs, including grotesque frescoes within the vaults. This shift reflects broader aesthetic priorities of the period but also resulted in the loss of direct visual evidence for the original mosaic imagery.

Despite these changes, structural elements—including the cross-inscribed plan, vault geometry, and core roofing system—persisted, albeit partially modified for liturgical and conservation purposes.

3. STRUCTURAL AND TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROOFING SYSTEMS

3.1 Late Antique Integrated Roofing Concept

The roofing system of the Sacellum of Saint Prosdocimus epitomises the late antique integration of masonry vaulted ceilings and protective external enclosures. Internally, the spatial hierarchy culminates in a central dome rising above a square core, structurally articulated through the use of pendentives. These pendentives channel the loads of the dome downward into the supporting piers, reducing lateral thrust and enabling a clear architectural articulation of vertical continuity.

The four short arms, each covered by barrel vaults, extend symmetrically from the central space. The eastern arm, ending in a semi-circular apse, likely housed the principal altar and relic focus. Externally, the original roofing would have been formed by timber elements

sheltering the masonry dome and vaults, possibly concealed behind parapets or low walls to create an unbroken exterior massing.

This dual roofing logic—masonry structurally expressive within, timber functionally protective without—is consistent with other late antique chapels and martyria of northern Italy and the Adriatic region.

3.2 Dome and Pendentives: Structural Behaviour

The dome's geometry would have presented a hemispherical or lightly compressed profile, resting on pendentives that convert the square plan into a circular base. The construction technique required precise brick bonding to ensure cohesion between the pendentives and dome rings, minimising stress concentrations at the points of transition.

Load transmission occurs through a continuous shell action, with the thickened supports at the corners of the square core functioning as vertical piers. These piers absorb and transfer the vertical loads into the foundations, while the pendentives moderate lateral forces.

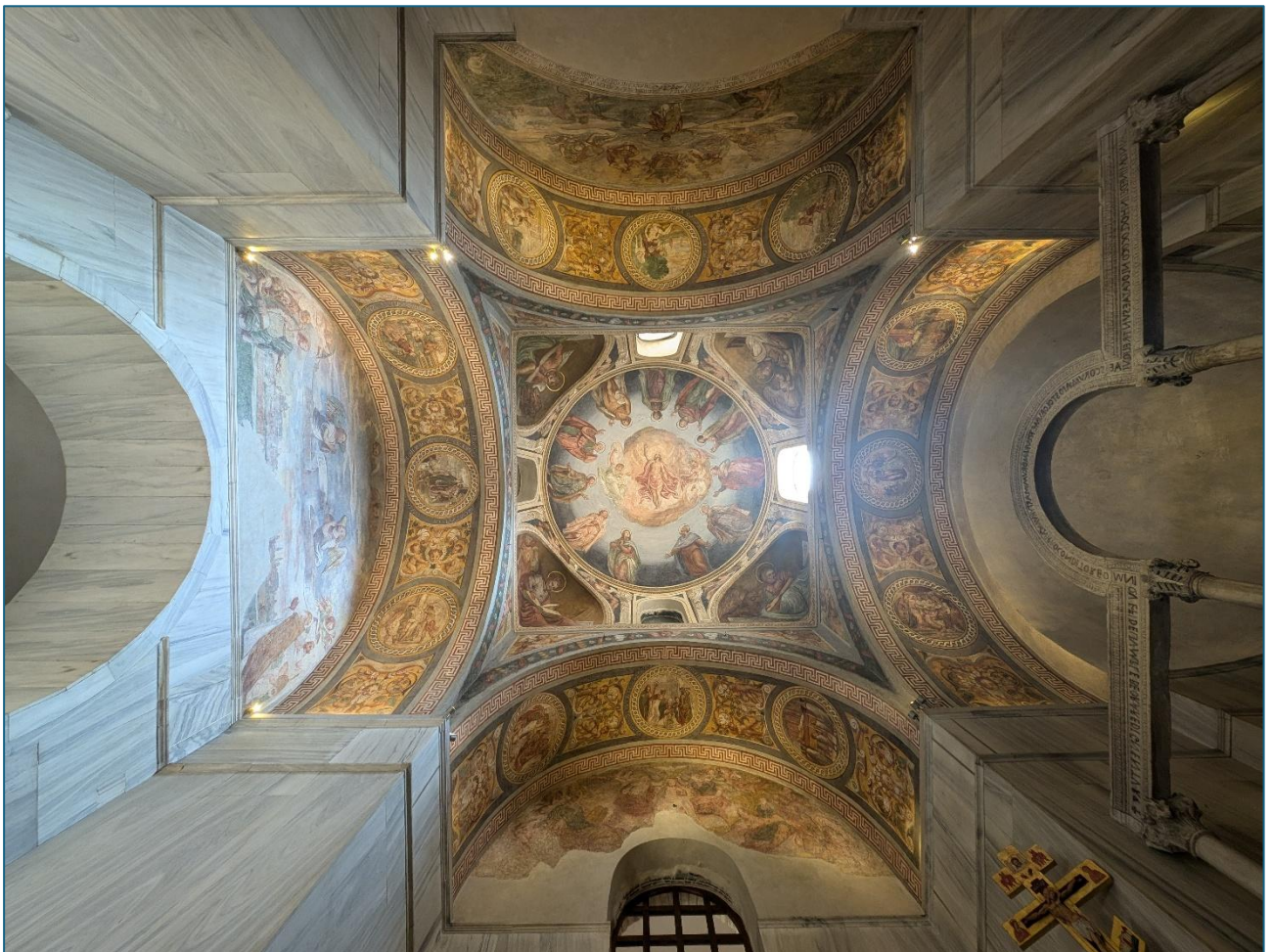


Figure 3. Padua, Church of San Prosdocimo, vaulted roofing system. (Source: A. Passuello)

3.3 External Roof Protection

Original external protection for the dome and vaults is not extant; however, comparative evidence suggests a timber roof with moderate pitch, likely concealed behind parapets to

preserve the sacellum's visual integration with the adjoining basilica. Such a roof would have provided effective rainwater shedding while limiting exposure of the masonry envelope to direct weathering.

The presence of clerestory openings and the need for ventilation would have influenced the roof's geometry, potentially requiring air gaps or ventilated eaves—features attested in other late antique roofing systems.

3.4 Renaissance Alterations and Material Continuity

Renaissance interventions, while substantially altering surface decoration and the immediate visual character of the sacellum, did not fundamentally disrupt the underlying roofing geometry. Instead, later painters applied new finishes over the vaults and dome, masking the original mosaic decoration but preserving the structural framework required by the late antique design.

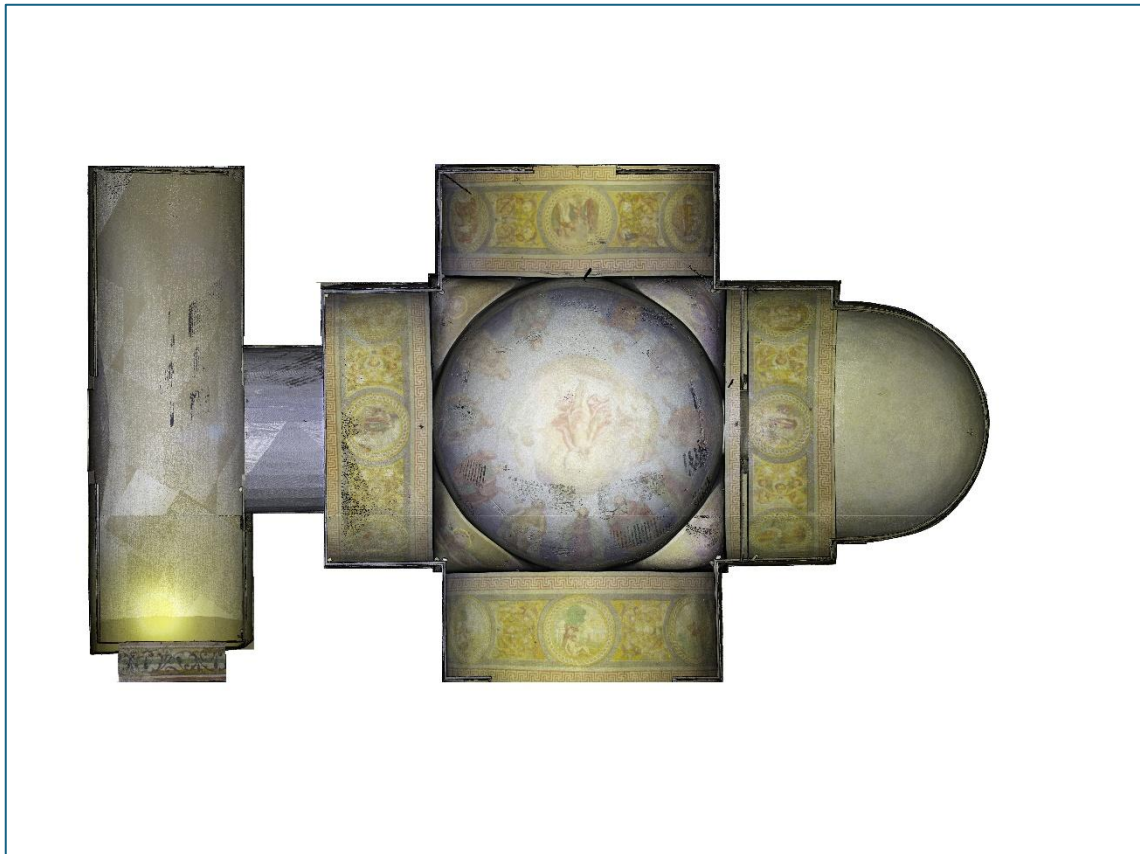


Figure 4. Padua, Church of San Prosdocimo, orthophoto and plan of the vaulted roofing system. (Source: LRA, University of Florence)

4. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE ROOFING SYSTEMS

4.1 Regional Comparisons in the Veneto

The roofing system of the Sacellum of Saint Prosdocimus finds clear parallels with other late antique chapels with centralised plans in the Veneto, particularly:

- the Chapel of Santa Maria Mater Domini in Vicenza, where a domed central space is combined with protective external roofs and pendantive logic; and
- the Chapel of Saints Teuteria and Tosca in Verona, which integrates barrel vaults and a central dome beneath a roofing structure converging on a tiburio.

These buildings collectively demonstrate a regional dialect of roofing systems in which internal structural expressiveness is balanced against external roofing pragmatics.

4.2 Adriatic and Ravenna Influences

Comparative architectural evidence from Ravenna and the Adriatic basin points to shared constructional strategies, where domed or vaulted spaces were protected by external roofs, often concealed behind parapets or low walls. For example, the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the Orthodox Baptistery of Neoniano employ similar principles of dome support via pendentives, albeit within larger complexes.

Such systems emphasise the importance of dome geometry and material cohesion, combined with appropriate external roofing, to mitigate environmental exposures while accentuating the sacred interior experience.

4.3 Mediterranean and Transalpine Precedents

Beyond the Adriatic, early Christian chapels in Western Europe display comparable strategies, though often utilising localized variations in plan form and roofing articulation. These parallels highlight shared conceptual approaches to dome support and external weather protection.

4.4 Continuity and Transformation

The roofing concept of the sacellum—internal articulation through vault and dome, protected externally by timber roofing—exemplifies a constructional logic that persisted across Late Antiquity and into the medieval period. Subsequent interventions adapted this framework to new aesthetic and liturgical priorities without displacing its foundational structural principles.

5. RESTORATION HISTORY AND CONSERVATION STATUS

The sacellum's post-antique history is dominated by the extensive restructuring of the Basilica of Santa Giustina in the 16th century, when Renaissance aesthetics and devotional programmes reshaped its interior. Mosaic decoration was removed, and frescoes were introduced, while the sacellum was connected to the basilica via the Corridor of the Martyrs.

Modern conservation efforts have focused on stabilising the sacellum's masonry, preserving surviving fragments of early decoration, and interpreting its original architectural logic within the broader late antique context. While some original finishes have

been lost, the plan and roofing structure remain legible, allowing for ongoing study and comparative architectural analysis.

6. ESSENTIAL/SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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