

Nicolas, J.C., *Sanitja: a Roman Settlement North of Es Mercadal, Festes Majors d'Es Mercadal*, 1985, pp. 21-30.

"The Balearic Islands, inhabited by people skilled in the use of the sling, were called Gymnesiae by the Greeks. The largest island has a length of 100,000 strides and a perimeter of 475,000. Of its towns, Palma and Pollentia have Roman rights, while Guium and Tucis have Latin rights. Bochorum, which no longer exists, enjoys the right to federation. The smaller island differs from the former in that it measures 40,000 strides across and is 150,000 around. It has the cities of Iamon, Sanisera and Magon."

Caius Plinius. *Naturalis Historia*, III, 77-78.

This description of the Balearic Islands made by Plinius in the mid I century AD is of great value to Menorcan history because, apart from naming two cities, Ciudadela (Iamo) and Mahón (Mago) which were already known through earlier texts, for the first time it identifies a third city – Sanisera – located on the shores of the port of Sanitja to the north of Es Mercadal .

A few years ago the link between the ancient name of Sanisera and the present name of Sanitja was recognized.

In 1947, the historian A. García Bellido made the statement , in his commentaries on the works of Pomponius Mela and Caius Plinius referring to Hispania, that *Sanisera is unknown* (Alayor) (1). Years later, Anna María Muñoz, in her study of Greek and Latin sources on the Balearics, commented, in reference to Plinius's text that where *Sanisera is concerned, we have neither data nor, for the moment, know its situation* (2)

At the end of the XVIII century, Joan Ramis y Ramis had already suggested the similarity between the names of Sanitja and Sanisera in his treatise of the famous text by Plinius in the manuscript used widely by José de Vargas Ponce in his book *Descripciones de las islas pithiusas y Baleares* published in Madrid in 1787 (3)

Ramis' manuscript used almost literally by Vargas Ponce was published in the Revista de Menorca in 1948. For this reason, we can see what Ramis thought about the subject:...*in the municipality of Mercadal to the North, there is a very large Bay called Sanitja whose name is very similar to Sanisera and at the bottom of this Bay where salt water meets fresh water there is a place right next to the sea where some ancient ruins can be found – these could belong to the aforementioned city* (4). Some years later, the very same Ramis repeated once more: *Very near a port which we call Sanitja there are several ruins which indicate the existence of some ancient town in the same place and Plinius the Elder cites three roman cities (Civitates habet Jammonen, Saniceram, Magonem, Lib.3 cap.5.), Saniceram whose name is very similar to the present name* (5).

Other Menorcan historians of the XIX century such as Rafael Oleo y Quadrado (6) and the Archduke Luís Salvador also emphasized the similarity between the names and nurtured the possibility that the ruins of Sanitja were the same as those of Sanisera as quoted by Plinius.

Once in the XX century, we should take special note of two contributions which we consider to be of interest. The first belongs to Francisco Campos y Mercadal who has collected oral stories which refer to the existence of an ancient town called *Janissari* and to a church where a martyred bishop was buried (8). The second was contributed by Josep Contrina who also came to the conclusion that there was an ancient Roman town at Sanisera (9).

Thus far we have the details provided by Plinius' famous work: the similarity between the names of Sanisera and Sanitja and the possible relation between the archaeological remains located in the port of Sanitja and the ruins of the third Roman city of Menorca. In 1977, the earliest data based on the observation and analysis of the remains of culture-material found near the port of Sanitja were published. From this date it became clear that *the place had been occupied in ancient times, at least from the II century BC to the IV century AD. The evidence found demonstrates that the testimonies grouped into certain areas in such a way that it was possible to guess at the location of the oldest nucleus, on a hill near the mouth of the port of Sanitja, to the right of the little stream which flows into the sea. At this place are the oldest ceramic remains were found, such as fragments of Campaniana A, GrecoItalian and Republican amphorae and Talayotic ceramics and also the remains of cyclopean walls. On the other side, to the left of the stream, large quantities of fragments of sigilata of all kinds and origin have been found. Amongst these, there was a large proportion of light sigilatas (II, III and IV centuries), terra sigilata, pieces of Imperial amphorae and fragments of roof tiles etc.. In addition to the above, the foundations of a Roman house or two and part of a necropolis can be seen some distance from the two main nuclei, on land that has been ploughed over and again by farm workers. We expect that when they are excavated by scientific methodology, some of the tombs will reveal extremely important information. I honestly believe that someday, very close to the port of Sanitja and very deteriorated by centuries of farming, the foundations of Plinius' Sanisera will appear (10).*

In 1979, the first systematic excavations, sponsored by the Museum of Menorca, began at Sanitja. María Cristina Rita, José Ignacio Latorre and Juan Antonio Orfila directed the work and soon the foundations of different buildings began to appear. As the excavations carried out there over a number of years were to reveal a series of buildings and installations that bore no relation to one another and as there has been no evidence, for the moment, that suggests the existence of an urban plan, we are unable to confirm that Plinius' Sanisera lies buried at Sanitja. These excavations, the first results of which came out last year and are still being published, will be the subject of a brief description in this work, but beforehand we should mention the publication of a series of archaeological finds – basically of culture-material – as well as of a collection of the historical names of Sanitja in ancient cartography.

In 1974, several batches of archaeological artifacts were retrieved from the sea floor and donated to the Museum of Mahon by the Club Marítimo de Mahon and the Club Náutico d'Es Castell. Amongst these finds, retrieved from the port of Sanitja, were four Roman amphorae necks from the Low Empire, two of which bore stamps: LEPMI/BSCD and TEP/KOP.

These amphorae, of North African origin, are the first underwater archaeology finds dating from the Low Empire in Menorca (11). Shortly afterwards, a series of stamped amphorae discovered in Sanitja were published. These finds were a result of research carried out both in the port and also on land provided interesting data about the commerce of wine and oil in the western Mediterranean between the I and IV centuries AD (12).

In 1983 (13) further publications took place of archaeological finds coming from Sanitja. One such object, dating possibly from the I century AD, was the only monumental inscription to have been found there. Unfortunately, it had been defaced so that only three letters could be seen. Nevertheless it is an important piece of evidence to be considered when trying to establish Sanitja as the urban settlement quoted in the works of Plinius.

The work we referred to earlier concerning the historical cartography of Sanitja is a compilation carried out by J. Mascaró Pasarius dealing with the different ways in which this name has been represented in documents and ancient maps. It is interesting to note that Sanitja is one of the most frequently used names in ancient cartography and it is consistently one of the few names along with Mahón, Ciudadela and Fornells which is always present in the XIII, XIV and XV Centuries. This demonstrates that in medieval times, the port of Sanitja was of considerable importance to geographers and navigators (14).

Let us look now at the results of the excavations which the Museum of Menorca has been carrying out since 1979. They have published a few short previews which provide some information but they still need to publish the most important part which is the study of the archaeological material excavated (15).

The site at Sanitja, according to land surveys done before the excavations began, covers a surface area of 60,000 square meters and is divided up into very precise and easily definable zones. One such zone which has not been excavated and which lies about 150 meters north of the house of Santa Teresa and to the east and west of the path leading to the lighthouse of Cavalleria reveals the remains of what is possibly a house with several rectangular shaped rooms, sections of large, stone walls and many fragments of Punic, the Roman Republic and the High Empire amphorae (to the west of the path above the entrance to the port).

The largest area of the Sanitja site is to the west of the stream which flows into the mouth of the port and then moving a few meters in the direction of the British defense tower built in the beginning of the XIX century. In this area there have been two very precise excavations which have unearthed a building with different rectangular rooms called Building C. A little to the north there is a necropolis with tombs built of slabs and covered with a mixture of lime and ceramic (signinum). These tombs are related to structures or building foundations which, quite possibly, are related to a liturgical centre or a paleo-Christian basilica.

Even further to the north, at a point dividing two small coves, there is another area where excavations have located a very strange structure that's function, to this day, has not been determined.

Of all the areas where remains have been found of architectural structures and tombs, the one which is of the most interest to us is the one furthest to the south where the Building C and the necropolis, with an unexcavated building, are located.

Building C is made up of six and seven rooms more or less rectangular in shape, of which only the dry stone foundations remain.

The material retrieved from the excavation leads us to believe that room C-2 was for everyday life, that C-6 and C-9 were some kind of storage room, while room C-13 had something to do with amphorae and since it had a basin and a water deposit, it may have been used for some industrial activity. The objects of culture-material recovered: amphorae and the other ceramic remains date from the centuries V-VI AD. So, even though we can tell when the building was abandoned, it is very difficult to know when it was built.

The necropolis area, situated to the north of building C has revealed twenty-one tombs over an area of 250 meters squared. Of all these tombs there are four belonging to infants and an ossuary containing the remains of three adults and a child. The tombs were boxes, the walls and covers of which were large flat stones, with *opus caementicum* on lime and ceramic. They are found amongst dry stone walls which probably belong to some kind of religious building and which, hopefully one day, will appear as the excavation progresses. We seem to be lacking data in this zone to define the chronology of the necropolis although ceramic remains have been found which suggest a date of between the V-VI centuries AD. What does seem clear is that several pieces of stone, notable for their masonry and size, had been reused in the building of this necropolis.

It is almost certain that Sanitja is the Sanisera which Plinius cites as the third Roman city of Menorca but we do not yet have definite proof. The evidence needed could be an inscription bearing its name or it may come in the future when a truly urban building is found on the site near the port of Sanitja. We will have to wait for the excavations, begun in 1979, to run their course. Every single piece of culture-material we find during the excavations will have to undergo the strictest scrutiny. Every year that passes, the unearthed ruins, no longer guarded by layers of silt, will fall prey to decay unless we can come up with the resources needed to protect and preserve them. At present, the excavations of Sanitja are not at all striking but in the future perhaps they will be and every citizen of Mercadal will feel proud to boast the ruins of an ancient Roman city within his municipality.

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