

The Roman Military Fort at the Port of Sanitja

The site of Sanitja is located in the northernmost part of the island of Menorca (the Balearic Islands), in the privileged natural setting of Cape de Cavalleria, a place of extraordinary beauty, rich in history and archaeology.

Titus Livius narrated the events of the Roman Conquest of the Balearic Islands in his work *Ad Urbe Condita*. Unfortunately, his book, LX, has not survived and we have only a few quotes from authors that describe, in general terms, the great victory of the Roman General, Quintus Caecilius Metellus, when he reached Rome after conquering the islands which served as his base for a brief period lasting from 123 to 121 B.C.

With no convincing classical records available, we need to turn to archaeology to get a closer picture. Since 1993 'Sa Nitja Association, Gestión del Patrimonio Mediterraneo', a non-profit organization, has been researching the archaeological remains at the Port of Sanitja.

The archaeological work of the area has been directed by the Ecomuseum of the Cape of Cavalleria with excavation projects included as part of its very successful international courses aimed at people who are looking to gain archaeological experience. Because of these projects we have been able to identify a Roman military fort dating back to the moment of the Roman conquest of Menorca in the year 123 B.C.

The archaeological work that has been taking place over the previous years has been focused on determining the size of the military fort, the function of each unearthed area and what the different phases of occupation were. The time frame of the different buildings is very precise, covering the years from the Roman conquest of the islands in 123 B.C. through to the year 45 B.C.

The reasons for the foundation of the military fort in this location are related to the fact that Sanitja was the best natural port for anchorage on the northern coast of Menorca, protected from the strong Tramuntana (Northern) winds, by a natural breakwater lying in shallow water which extends over 200 metres and connects the nearby Illa de los Porros to the mainland.

The Roman site was established as a result of Quintus Caecilius Metellus 'Balearicus' military conquest at the most strategic place just south of the port. From here, the port and a large area of the northern coast of Menorca can be seen clearly.

The purpose for the fort's positioning at this site is very clear. It was easy to defend and control the port as well as to prevent unwelcome incursions and access to the shore. The layout of the land in this area, in the shape of a promontory, enabled the military fort to use the rocky terrain as a defence system in that the rocky mound that was formed around it provided a natural shield.

In the transitional period between the III and II century B.C. the Roman Republic was at constant war with the Carthaginians and Hispania became an almost permanent battlefield.

In 218 B.C. the Romans arrived on the Iberian Peninsula with an army that disembarked at Emporion (Ampurias). The conflict would last until the year 201 B.C. when a peace treaty between Rome and Carthage was finally signed. From this moment Rome controlled a vast territory along the coast of the Peninsula stretching

from the Pyrenees in the North to Cadiz in the South and extending inland along the rivers Ebro and Guadalquivir.

The specific period in which the conquest of the Balearic Islands took place was essentially characterised by the attempt at reform carried out by the Graccho family at a moment in the history of the Republic of Rome where there was social and political crisis and upheaval. These were years of transition and change aimed at transforming the then obsolete and archaic Republic into what would later culminate in the new Imperial Regime.

The knowledge of the most important Senatorial families and the internal struggles during the Late Republican period are of vital importance to understand the incorporation of the Balearic Islands into the Roman world and the role they played through the military fort of Sanitja.

It is important to note that the sector which had benefited the most from the favourable results in the wars against Carthage and from Roman territorial expansion had been, without a doubt, the Senate. This elite was governed by such oligarchic families as the Aemilii, the Scipions, the Metella, the Flamini or the Minucia.

These Senatorial families dictated Roman foreign policies thus gaining economic wealth and prestige over the rest of the social classes of Roman. This 'nobility' was arrogant, disunited, self-centred and ambitious in their drive to gain even more privileges and power for themselves. They would enter into any type of alliance and support whosoever to achieve this.

This is how, between the years 200 and 134 B.C., individuals of only 25 elite families gained admittance to the Consulate.

One of the most important of these groups was headed by P. Cornelius Scipio Emilianus, the adopted grandson of Scipio 'the African' who conquered Carthage in 146 B.C., was Consul during the years 147 to 134 B.C., Censor in 142 B.C. and who later would be victorious at the Battle of Numantia. Because of his renowned victories his prestige and fame were immeasurable to the extent that he became the most important political figure in Rome at the time.

Another important group within the political arena was formed by the extremely influential Metella clan, whose leader was Q. Caecilius Metellus 'the Macedon,' and the Claudia clan, with Apius Claudius Pulcher at its head. Both of these families, though they never formed a common 'Antiscipio' front, fought against Scipio's policies but for different reasons.

Family ties were the priority for the Metella family. Its sons became Consuls and its daughters married into other very influential families of the Oligarchy. Consequently the Metella clan became one of the most respected gens of the Roman Oligarchy in Republican times, especially around 130 B.C.

Around 123 B.C., the Balearic Islands made an appearance on the Roman scene. Until then, the Talayotic society of the Baliarides, prior to the Roman conquest, appears to have been dependent on Punic-Ebussitan culture for various needs but had a very underdeveloped cultural level when compared to the island of Ebussus or to the contemporary communities closer to the Iberian Peninsula.

The one, key Balearic element that we discover from classical sources that we can single out from this period is the Balearic Slinger.

The Balearic Slingers were much admired for their skills in the use of the sling and their bravery and, according to Strabo, the Balearic Slinger was the best among all other slingers and far superior to the men from Egio, Patras and Dimo.

One disadvantage that the sling had as a weapon was that the slinger required many years of training and experience, more so even than that of an archer. For this reason, the use of the sling as a weapon, was restricted to those ethnic societies that were specialised in its use (eg. the Balearics, the Rhodes etc.) who, in turn, were hired as mercenaries.

Continuing with the peculiar aspects of slingers, Strabo paints a very clear description of a slinger in battle. He mentions that they went into battle without body armour carrying their goatskin shield in one hand and a fire-hardened javelin in the other, and sometimes they also used a spear with a small metal point. The first projectiles used were natural materials predominantly pebble stones collected from the beach, riverbeds and streams as is the case at Sanitja. Later on they would combine the use of stone shot with handmade ones formed out of terracotta or lead to give them a more aerodynamic shape and to improve their quality and efficiency.

Relying on classical references and also the discovery of sling shots at military forts and on battlefields, it seems plausible to state that the Balearic Slingers fought alongside the Carthaginian Army from around the VI century B.C. to the year 123 B.C. in campaigns such as Sardinia and Sicily.

After the first Punic War (264- 241 B.C.) they appear again during the next Roman-Carthaginian conflict. Polibius and Livi talk about Hannibal's preparations in the winter of 219- 218 B.C., explaining that among his Hispanic troops there were 870 Balearic Slingers and in his brother Asdrubal's army there were another 500.

Again, the slingers were mentioned as having been recruited as mercenaries in the light infantry of the Carthaginian Army at the battles of Trebia (winter of 218 B.C.), of Trasimene (217 B.C.) and of Cannas (216 B.C.), led by Hannibal, who defeated the Roman army at every battle as he made his way through the Alps and into the Italic Peninsula.

The last battle that the Balearic Slingers took part in with the Carthaginians was *Zama* (201 B.C.) where they were deployed as a spearhead along with Ligurian, Gaul and Mauritanian troops. In total there were some 12,000 foreign troops that Hannibal had placed in the front line of his army, right behind his elephants, to fight against Scipio 'the Africanus' troops.

The Carthaginians were defeated and from that point on the Balearic Slingers fought for the Roman Army.

In most cases, the slinger became an auxiliary of the army in exchange for rewards; booty or payment. Perhaps on other occasions, although not too frequently, and due to a series of extremely adverse conditions within the Carthaginian Army (such as heavy casualties and exhaustion amongst the men) the slinger would be forcibly conscripted.

As the Roman Empire increased in size, the greater became its need for fighting men and this necessity forced a re-structuring of the Roman Army which, by then, had become totally obsolete. These changes led to the recruiting of soldiers from amongst the populations of the territories that had been defeated, subdued and dominated.

Their recruitment would not have been excessively strict or difficult. The commanders were indigenous while the troops would have been grouped together according to their nationality, their function in combat and the weapons in which they were skilled so that the Light Cavalry was made up of Numidae, the Balearics were the Slingers, the Cretans were the Archers and the rest were simply foot soldiers who carried the weapons of their countries.

At first Rome had not wanted to annex the Balearic Islands despite their strategic location. The pirates who sailed around the western Mediterranean considered the islands as a perfect refuge. Rome, along other Mediterranean states, was not permanently hostile to them as they could be an excellent supplier of slaves and for certain operations could fight as auxiliaries.

Piracy was a well established occupation in the Mediterranean only to be abolished during the times of Augustus.

In the year 123 B.C., however, Rome feared an alliance had been made between the pirates established on the Balearic Islands and the indigenous people in Southeast Gaul, which could have posed a serious threat to the established trade throughout the western Mediterranean.

In 123 B.C., at the time the Balearic Islands were conquered, Caius Gracchus had begun to pander to the *Equites* to convince them to his cause and also to pay special attention to the two areas where his family had vassals: Hispania and Asia. Metellus remained on the islands for two years to reorganise the territories to Rome's specifications. According to Strabo (although this has been contested by modern historians) he founded two settlements named Palma and Pollentia where he placed 3000 Roman colonists that he brought from Iberia and granted plots of land, who could be used as a military reserve corps in the event of a local uprising. In this way, the Balearic Islands became part of the Hispania Citerior province. The original Roman settlements built as soon as Quintus Metellus 'Balearicus' had conquered the islands in 123 B.C., would not have had full legal status as they were simply military institutions formed by garrisons within small forts or *Castella* and only in later periods did they become true cities with a legal title. On the island of Mallorca one of these military installations could have been the fort of Ses Salines, which would now be buried under the modern town in the southernmost part of the island about 6 km from the coast. A defensive ditch has been identified at this fort -*Fossa Fostigata*- which coincides with the principles of military architecture of the Republican Period.

Quintus Metellus 'Balearicus' could have distributed his troops in garrisons located in strategic areas of Mallorca and Menorca to conquer the islands in a short period of time.

When the foreign conflicts had ended, Rome was still suffering from internal problems caused by personal hatred and squabbles amongst the different factions of the Senate which created such a tense and bitter atmosphere in the city that it ended in a civil war known as the 'War of the Allies' or 'Marsic Wars', which lasted from 91 to 88 B.C.

In 91 B.C. M. Livius Drusus, one of the ten Tribunes of the Plebe, failed in his attempt to obtain Roman citizenship for the Italic allies of Rome even though, at the time, he had the support of one of the most important families in the Senate which was, of course, the Metellus family. Most of the Italic allies that had contributed to the wars of the *URBS* rose up against the Senate. Faced with this dangerous situation, Rome decided to offer citizenship to these allies and the rebellion came to an end.

We believe that the fort of Sanitja could have provided the Metellus clan with auxiliaries to put down the rebellion in Italy.

Because the Republican troops would have been weakened due to a large number of the men who had made up the conquering army were now fighting against Rome in this conflict, this would have been a perfect time for the Senate, and the Metella family, to call on the auxiliary troops in the Balearic Islands.

The Sertorian wars, which occurred between 83 and 73 B.C., correspond to one of the periods of the Civil War Era belonging to the Late Roman Republic in which Hispania was one of the theatres where its protagonists fought.

In 83 B.C. the confrontation between Lucius Cornelius Sila and one of the Senate groups known as the Popular Party moved the civil war to Hispania in the person of Quintus Sertorius who had been appointed Praetor of Hispania Citerior through the support of the popular group which C. Marius had been leader of years ago. After fleeing to Africa, Sertorius disembarked on Ebussus where a garrison faithful to Annus Luscus was waiting to engage him.

The excavations of the fort at Sanitja, mainly the stratigraphical context in which some of the rooms appear to have been rebuilt, some with storerooms containing lead shot and a spear head, suggest that its foundation by Q. Caecilius Metellus 'Balearicus,' around the first quarter of the first century B.C., could have happened just before Sertorius' arrival in Ebussus so that Caius Annus Luscus' army may have landed at Sanitja to expel Sertorius from the islands and protect the supply of slingers.

The 5000 hoplites that Luscus brought in to defeat Sertorius were used, after the battle, to reinforce the garrisons on the Balearic Islands and prevent Sertorius from trying to recuperate the strategic ports of Ebussus and the Balearic Islands. Various levies of mercenaries of Balearic Slingers were possibly used in the long war against Sertorius.

We know that from the port of Sanitja, of the many lead shot finds, two with inscriptions have been found, one bearing the epigraphic markings [S CAE] which clearly links it to Metellus 'Pius' and the other inscribed with the markings [S S (C)] which possibly links it to the same general. All this implies that the slingers were in the service of Consul Quintus Caecilius Metellus in the year 80 B.C.

The object of Pro-Consul Q. Metellus was to establish a series of enclaves, the *Propugnacula Imperi*, to control the most strategic points of Lusitania.

Evidence confirms that the fort lasted until 45 B.C. Before the wars in Gaul took place, Caesar was aware of the status of the Balearic Slingers and he may have employed them. Caesar, like Pompeii and other outstanding generals who had fought in the wars against Sertorius, had received their training in military tactics in Hispania at the advanced age of 40 when he was *Quaestor* there in 68 B.C.

During the civil war which set Caesar against Pompeii, the Balearic Islands were once again used as a strategic point by both of the warring factions although it seems the islanders favoured Pompeii more than his rival.

Taking advantage of their feudal ties with the islands, Cneus Pompeii, Pompeii's eldest son, was in the Balearics preparing an expedition to disembark on the south coast of the Peninsula and regain control of Hispania which was now in the hands of Caesar's allies Q. Pedius and Q. Fabius Maximus.

The final phase yet the most recent phase of the occupation of the military fort at Sanitja where we can appreciate the period of the restructuring of buildings carried out between 75 and 45 B.C. and confirmed by stratigraphical context, would have been a perfect scenario for Cneus Pompeii to put together an army large enough to allow him to achieve his goals and, of which, the Balearic Slingers, would no doubt, have been a part.

The military fort at Sanitja could quite easily have been abandoned in the year 45 B.C. when Caesar restructured the Roman army. During that time, Rome depended on a limited number of legions which were stationed at different frontiers so this could have forced a movement of the troops based in Hispania to other areas of conflict. At the same time, another logical reason for the withdrawal of these troops is that from that moment on, both the Islands and Hispania were at peace and had begun their process of Romanization.