The talayotic settlement at Ses Païsses

The gateway to prehistoric Mallorca
1 The first human beings in Majorca, approximately 5,000 years ago.

The Talayotic settlement at Ses Païses is one of the most important, well-preserved archaeological sites in the Balearic Islands.

The earliest human remains discovered, excavated at Moleta Petita (Sóller) and Moro Cave (Mancor), demonstrate that Majorca was first settled approximately 5,000 years ago. During the Chalcolithic period, the island was inhabited by an endemic goat known as Myotragus balearicus, today extinct.

The island's first settlers were sedentary groups that lived in natural and artificial caves in the Tramontana Mountains and raised sheep and goats.

Round huts with branch roofs and clay-faced walls in unenclosed settlements have been dated to a later period. Natural and artificial caves continued to be used in certain seasons.

These populations were already familiar with copper, used bell-shaped ceramic artefacts, diversified their livestock to include hogs and cows and began farming practices. Their burial rituals consisted of individual or small collective tombs in natural or artificial caves.

Important changes in the society and its economy took place around the late Bronze Age (1400-1300 BC). Many naviforms from this period had large hearths with platforms and ovens or boxes to keep embers in. Although the burial rites remained the same, dolmens and hypogeas were gradually replaced by burial navetas and caves with cyclopean closings.

Numerous different burial practices overlapped during this period: dolmens such as s'Aigua Dolça in Artà, hypogeas carved out of rock and burial in single or collective tombs. Several natural caves were used as places of worship.

A number of changes took place during around the late Bronze Age (1400-1300 BC). Many naviforms from this period had large hearths with platforms and ovens or boxes to keep embers in. Although the burial rites remained the same, dolmens and hypogeas were gradually replaced by burial navetas and caves with cyclopean closings.
A series of changes in the late Bronze Age (1,300-900 BC) ushered in Talayotic society. Contacts established with outsiders allowed the island’s population to secure prime materials and introduce innovative technologies into ceramic making and metallurgy.

In construction, naviforms from the previous period were abandoned and small, raised burial mounds of stone and soil and tower-shaped structures (including round talayots and turri-form monuments with stairs and ramps to reach the upper parts) began to appear. At first, turri-form structures on hillsides were erected to mark out territory. Later on, these constructions were introduced into Talayotic settlements, where they existed alongside dwellings and other communal or prestigious units.

Talayots are round or square structures that enclose a space, in the centre of which stood a column of huge boulders that supported the ceiling, which was made out of slabs of rock and served as the floor of the second storey. The purpose of the structures is not clear; several researchers believe they may have been used for religious or tribal ceremonies or as meat storehouses and distribution centres. They are not believed to have been used as dwellings or defence structures.

The settlements consisted of groups of structures huddled together and had no well-defined streets. The first walls were erected around the settlements in the middle of the first millennium BC in a clear attempt to delimit and defend community territory. Built with cyclopean masonry techniques, the most remarkable aspect of the Talayotic walls are their spectacular posts and lintels and outer walls made from enormous boulders anchored vertically in the soil and smaller rocks in the upper part.

Recent research shows that Talayotic settlements existed all over the island and were occupied by clans of approximately 200 people. The dense population in the territory during this period caused two significant phenomena: serious deforestation and struggles between clans to secure better lands on which to settle, which led to the appearance of chieftains who structured the community and undoubtedly grew rich through trade with other communities; later on, these chieftains would exercise their power as governors.

The beginning of Talayotic culture 3,000 years ago.

The accumulation of surplus production encouraged the first social differences, which were visible in burial offerings. As for funerary practices, natural and artificial caves continued to be used for collective burials, while new practices were introduced, such as burials in lime and cremation. Talayotic society was primarily devoted to raising sheep, goats, oxen and pigs, a practice that afforded men the free time needed to erect the huge monuments that have survived until our day. However, the women planted and harvested cereals, wheat and barley. Their diet was complemented by hunting and fruit gathering. Metallurgy was based on the use of copper, bronze, iron and lead products.

Around 600-500 BC, Talayotic society underwent several changes that paved the way to the so-called post-Talayotic period. And one hand, religious sanctuaries were consolidated and burial rituals diversified. On the other, contacts were established with Punic populations from Ebusus (Ibiza), who founded colonies and factories in Majorca. The participation of Balearic mercenaries in Punic armies during this time has been documented.

The use of bronze declined during the post-Talayotic period and was reserved exclusively for the most important artefacts, while the use of iron and lead became widespread in ordinary pieces such as swords, daggers sundry tools and ornamental objects (necklaces, earrings and bracelets). Talayotic culture came to an end with the Romans’ arrival to the island in 123 BC.
Plano del Poblado de Ses Païsses

1. Monolith dedicated to Miquel Costa i Llobeta
2. The settlement wall and main doorway
3. The excavation zone
4. The horseshoe-shaped chamber
5. The hypostyle chamber
6. The central talayot
7. Rectangular building
8. The northeast doorway
9. The street and apsidal chamber
10. The apsidal building
11. The kidney-shaped chambers
12. The rectangular chambers
13. The oak grove
The Talayotic settlement at Ses Païsses was declared a historic-artistic monument in 1946. Italian Giovanne Lilliu undertook the first excavation in 1959 to ascertain the relationship between these constructions and others in Sardinia. The four digs he undertook furnished a wealth of information on the Talayotic period. Over thirty years later, Majorcan archaeologist Javier Aramburu renewed excavations in the settlement. His digs brought new buildings to light, which has contributed to a better understanding of life in Ses Païsses.

The settlement stands on a small hillside near the village of Artà that commands a panoramic view of the land in the vicinity (Son Sastres, Sa Badeia, Son Sureda Vell and Sauma Vell). Like other Talayotic settlements, it is located near a torrent and a spring, which guaranteed the community’s water supply.

The surviving structures belong to different phases in the settlement’s history. Occupation began early in the first millennium BC with the construction of the central turriform. Afterwards, the first dwellings were added, in line with the pattern followed by other settlements. The site’s most characteristic structure, its wall, was built between 650 and 540 BC, according to Aramburu.

The population flourished during the post-Talayotic period, indicated by the additional buildings erected alongside those already in use. The settlement was abandoned after the Romans arrived in Majorca (123 BC) and several buildings were destroyed.

1. Monolith dedicated to a Miquel Costa i Llobera

Opposite the settlement’s main doorway stands a monolithic monument erected in homage to Miquel Costa i Llobera (Pollença, 1854 – Palma, 1922). Costa chose the Talayotic settlement at Ses Païsses as the setting for several passages of his well-known poem “La deixa del geni grec” (1900), whose protagonist was Nuredduna, granddaughter of the great priestess and sibyl of the tribe that inhabited the oak grove in Ses Païsses. The poem, an idealised epic recreation of Majorcan prehistory, represents the union between our land, personified in Nuredduna, and the spirit of Hellenic civilisation, symbolised by Melesigenes’ lyre in a nod to Homer.
2. The settlement wall and main doorway

The wall around the settlement at Ses Païsses was built sometime between 650 and 540 BC to enclose the site that existed there 3000 years ago. The elliptical-shaped wall’s perimeter measures 320 m; it is 3.60 m thick on average and some stretches reach 3.50 m high. The bottom row of the broad, double-faced wall was made out of huge boulders anchored vertically in the soil, some of which weigh around eight tonnes. The rocks on the inner facing are smaller and are also arranged in rows. The doorway to the settlement comprises two vertically placed boulders as posts on which another slab lies as a lintel. On the other side of the threshold is a 4.3-m-long passageway flanked on both sides by staircases that lead to the settlement.

3. The excavation zone

Current archaeological research focuses on the zone nearest the main doorway, where a rectangular building built with cyclopean masonry dating to the early Talayotic period and reformed 100 years later was discovered. It appears the building underwent new modifications during the post-Talayotic period and turned into a small dwelling.

Next to this building is another kidney-shaped unit attached to the wall that dates from the fifth century BC.

Archaeological digs must continue to ascertain the purpose these two structures served.

4. The horseshoe-shaped chamber

Attached to the central talayot is an apsidal-shaped building with rounded corners and a concave façade measuring 132 m². This building’s walls, in contrast to the settlement’s wall, is made from small stones laid in horizontal rows. Lilliu discovered this talayot during his 1959 and 1960 digs and dated it to the post-Talayotic period. Inside are a number of hearths with bone fragments, talayotic ceramics and charcoal as well as a tomb and several iron tools, which is why Aramburu believed it may have been used for social purposes or perhaps as a sanctuary in a later phase.

5. The hypostyle chamber

This apsidal-shaped construction with straight lateral walls and a round apse was most likely devoted to community purposes and is known as the hypostyle chamber, thanks to the three columns in the centre and the vestiges of seven others embedded in the walls. Another striking feature is the passageway that cuts through the chamber and leads to the central turriform Lilliu dated to the Talayotic period. According to several researchers, both structures may have been used in ritual ceremonies.

6. The central talayot

This turriform appears to have been the settlement’s first structure. It is a cylindrical tower, the outer walls of which have shallow stairs, which measures 12 m in diameter and 4 m high. Although they have not survived, there must have been a central column and a roof with wooden beams, as in other sites. On the ground of the central space is a passageway that connects the talayot to two adjoining chambers, one of which is the hypostyle chamber, through two apertures in the wall. It is difficult to determine the function of this passageway, which measures approximately 0.75 m high. The turriform has two buttresses, which would have helped reinforce the chamber walls, according to Lilliu. This talayot is thought to have been used for ritual and symbolic purposes and as the site for community events, as was the hypostyle chamber.
7. Rectangular Building

This structure is divided into two rectangular chambers, the walls of which are made out of small rocks. There are indications that this area of the settlement was one of the first to be inhabited, although this building dates from the post-Talayotic period.

8. The northeast doorway

In addition to the main doorway, the settlement has two other doorways in the same style. The lintel of the main doorway, which measures 1.6 m wide, has not survived. In addition to these doorways, Lilliu identified another one in the southwest area of the settlement, which he christened “Porta dell’acqua”, since it led to a nearby spring.

9. The street and apsidal chamber

This is the only street that has been located in the settlement to date. It separates two buildings, the first of which is apsidal-shaped. The chamber’s westernmost wall, made from large boulders, juts out from the settlement wall, while its other walls are made from small rocks. Clay walls divide the structure into three separate spaces and the roof appears to have been made of wooden beams. A fire devastated this space, which was why it was abandoned and later used as a burial zone from the fifth to the second centuries BC.

10. The apsidal building

This structure was built using the same construction techniques as the previous building and divided into three chambers. The outer walls display cyclopean masonry, while the use of several different sized rocks leads one to think that the interiors were remodelled on several occasions. According to Aramburu, it was occupied from the fifth century BC until the Roman conquest.

11. The kidney-shaped chambers

This series of kidney-shaped chambers in the centre of the settlement are attached to the central talayot and were excavated by Lilliu in 1959. Although they belong to the settlement’s earliest phase, they were divided around the fifth century BC. The building on the left has a doorway to the passageway that leads to the turiform.

12. The rectangular chambers

To the south of the talayot are two rectangular chambers, the first of which has a surface area of 25.7 m² and walls 1 metre thick. In the centre is the base of a column and along the wall are the remains of a hearth. It appears to have been occupied between the fifth and first centuries BC and vestiges of Roman culture have even been found, such as a skylight from the second half of the second century AD.

The other building has similar features, a surface area of 37.5 m², two central columns and an area on one side.

13. The oak grove

The forest that rings the archaeological remains today was part of the prehistoric settlement’s landscape and acorns, the fruit of the oak (Quercus ilex), were part of this community’s diet. Associated to this species are several shrubs, such as buckthorn, mock privet, strawberry tree, myrtle and other bushes, which prevent the archaeological structures from being clearly seen at present. Three thousand years ago, these shrubs were probably not so abundant, as the terrains inside and outside the settlement were cleared to plant crops.
Artà is a 140-km² municipality located in the Llevant Mountains in northeastern Majorca. 1,576 hectares of its coastline and mountains currently form part of the nature park created in 2001, in which the publicly-owned estates known as Albarca and Es Verger can be found. The municipality has not received tourism's impact directly, which has allowed it to preserve its traditions, popular fiestas, cuisine and craftworks, in addition to natural scenery that makes it unique. The variety of habitats conserved in its mountains, the alluvial deposits in Colònia de Sant Pere, and the coastal area and fields of dunes in Sa Canova are some of its most striking features. The hill on which the Freda watchtower is located (561 m) and Cape Ferrutx (519 m) are also very well known. Palm trees play a fundamental role in the municipality and are highly prized in woven palmito craftwork.

The population resides in two main areas, the village of Artà and Colònia Sant Pere. The former is located in a valley at the foot of a hill and its notable features include a walled enclosure known as Sant Salvador (which was originally a Moorish palace and later a Christian church), a neo-Gothic church and several palatial homes in the historic centre. Colònia de Sant Pere is a small coastal zone that includes two residential areas: Betlem and S’Estanyol.

The most important archaeological remains in the municipality are the Aigua Dolça dolmen (2000-1650 BC), the talayote at Sa Canova and the settlement at Ses Païsses. The necropolis at Sa Posada de Carroza (first and second centuries AD) were already known in Roman times (after 123 AD). The name of the village and municipality comes from the Arabic word Yar-tân for the farmstead and one of the districts into which the Moors divided the island, which included Capdepera and Son Servera. Intensive farming practices and water culture with springs and wells were introduced in the zone during this period in history.

The Priory of Santa Maria de Bellpuig, an oratory that still stands today on the outskirts of Artà, was founded at the time of the Catalan conquest in 1229 and encouraged the village’s growth. During the Middle and Modern Ages (the tenth to eighteenth centuries) and well into the nineteenth century, the municipal economy developed around large estates (Els Olors, Son Fortesa, Sauma). These rural lands belonged to noble families such as the Vivot, Dametos, Truyols and Zaforteza, who also erected important buildings, such as Can Cardaix, Can Sureda, Can Moragues and La Posada dels Olors, also known as Cal Marqués. Some prominent palatial homes, such as Can Blanes and Na Batlesa, are testimony to the wealth of residents who emigrated to America.
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