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MAGAZINE #63

## NOBLE WARRIORS

### Finding the nomadic fighting elite of the Russian steppes

#### FEATURED

#### ROME'S FORGOTTEN FRONTIER

Revealing the lost *Limes* of Eastern Europe

#### SALSOVIA

Leopards and legions in the Danube Delta

#### POLLENTIA

Tracing 1,300 years of occupation on Mallorca

#### VIKINGS

Raiders? Traders? The truth behind the myths

#### PLUS

ANCIENT TOWNS: AMARNA VS POMPEII KOREA: ROCK ART BASQUE COUNTRY: GUGGENHEIM BILBAO ALBANIA: FORGOTTEN TREASURES



Today, visitors can stroll through Roman ruins at Pollentia, just a short distance from the thriving Medieval town of Alcúdia on Mallorca, the largest Balearic island. Ideally located at the base of a mountainous isthmus with access to the western Mediterranean sea on either side, this great site once played a pivotal role in the island's long history. But how did it all begin? When did the indigenous settlement become Roman?

We know Pollentia flourished under the Roman Empire before slowly diminishing into a Christian hamlet 1,300 years later. Now, however, the archaeologists are searching for clues to the period before and during the Roman occupation.

Written sources date the conquest of Mallorca to 123 BC, under the command of the consul Quintus Caecilius Metellus, sent to quell pirate activity that terrorised

the western Mediterranean. However, the earliest excavated structures date to the 70s/60s BC, just after the Sertorian revolt. So what happened on the island during the intervening period, between the Romans' arrival on the island's shores and the construction of their first buildings? The team believes Roman Pollentia, or at least part of it, was built over an indigenous settlement, and that a Roman military camp may well have been established nearby.

### Finding Pollentia

The search for Roman Pollentia dates to the 16th century, when a marble head depicting the emperor Augustus was found near the Santa Anna chapel in the fields outside Alcúdia. Over the centuries, farmers working the soil discovered Latin inscriptions, coins, and other artefacts. Clearly, something big sat below ground-level. However, 19th-century scholars argued that Pollentia was under the similar

sounding modern-day Port de Pollença, 8km (5 miles) to the north, or El Palmer, in southern Mallorca. The discussion came to an end in 1887, when an inscription including the words *Res Publica Pollentina* emerged from the Santa Anna fields.

In 1923, history professor Gabriel Llabrés and amateur archaeologist Colonel Rafael Isasi conducted the first archaeological



# Pollentia

## TRACING 1,300 YEARS OF TUMULTUOUS OCCUPATION

For nearly a century, archaeologists have investigated Mallorca's best-preserved Roman remains at Pollentia. Now Miguel Ángel Cau, Esther Chávez, and Mike Elkin are searching for the origins of the island's largest and most important Roman settlement. What have they learned so far, and what challenges lie ahead?

ABOVE Pollentia once commanded this narrow strip of land, located between two bays and protected by a string of mountains across the projecting isthmus.  
BELOW Excavation of the city's forum, with the Medieval city of Alcúdia in the background.  
INSET The head of the emperor Augustus, found in the 16th century, provided the first clue to the whereabouts of Roman Pollentia.

excavations at Pollentia. Their work, continued by Llabrés's son Juan after Gabriel's death in 1928, uncovered different parts of the city, structures with mosaics and painted walls, and marble and bronze statues, including the head and a leg of an equestrian statue that is now in the National Archaeological Museum, Madrid. Llabrés and Isasi excavated at Pollentia until 1946, with a six-year hiatus due to the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered a city wall, several cemeteries, and a network of streets with houses in the so-called *Sa Portella* ('little door') residential sector. One such house is the House of the Bronze Head, named after a bronze head found in a rubbish pit and initially identified as that of a girl but actually of an *ephebus* (youth). The house was occupied between the middle of the 1st century BC, and at least until the Byzantine period in the 6th-7th centuries AD. It comprises eight rooms around a peristyle courtyard – there were more rooms, but these were destroyed in the late 1930s when authorities began building a railway station, still unfinished, in Alcúdia.

To the north of the House of the Bronze Head, separated by a porticoed street almost 4m (13ft) wide, sits the House of the Two Treasures, named after the two

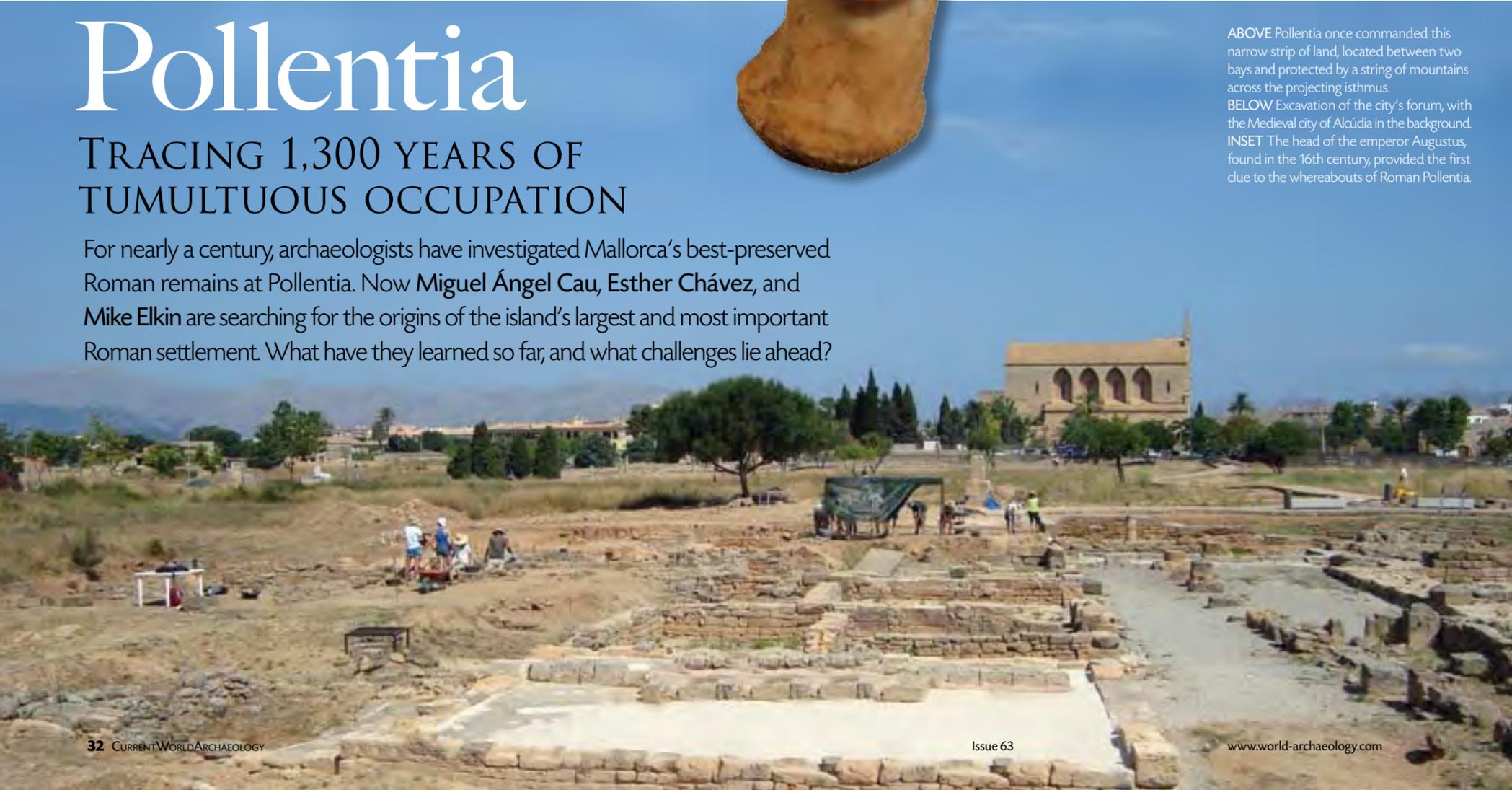
hoards of coins from the 4th and 5th centuries respectively, found there. This is the best-preserved house in Pollentia: it is a ten-room, Augustan-era structure that had a colonnaded portico along its southern face. It was damaged in the 3rd century, but still in use during Late Antiquity.

It was not until 1952 that archaeologists finally dated Pollentia's Roman theatre to the early 1st century AD. It is partially built into the bedrock on the south-east corner of the site, measuring 75m (245ft) at its

BELOW Juan Llabrés, with the horse head found during excavation in the first half of the 20th century.



PHOTO: Museu de Mallorca





LEFT A site map of Pollentia, showing the forum in relation to, on one side, the Sa Portella residential district, and to the theatre on the other.

worship the Capitoline Triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. Sadly, many of its dressed stones have been robbed over the centuries, and only the foundations remain from Antiquity.

It is a Tuscan-style temple, measuring 18m by 23m (60ft x 75ft), with a single entrance held up by a front row of four columns and a back row of two columns. Looting during Spain's Islamic period destroyed much of the stratigraphy, but we have been able to date the temple to the Late Republic, and it was probably one of the city's earliest buildings.

Excavations suggest that part of the temple was dismantled and recycled for use in other structures during the 4th century. But because the Early Medieval necropolis in the forum did not impinge on the temple's boundaries, we believe

BELOW The Roman theatre dates to the 1st century AD, and was partially cut out of the actual bedrock.



RIGHT Excavation of the Late Antique fortification of the forum.



this temple continued to play some role in the Late Antiquity period.

Since the current team took over, excavation has focused on identifying and dating the overlapping structures and time periods in the forum. The oldest layers date to around 70/60 BC; a construction boom of monumental structures probably took place during the reign of Augustus and continued throughout the 1st century AD.

Another construction phase dates to the end of the 2nd century or beginning of the 3rd century, most evident in shop interiors and exteriors. Walls were put up between the columns in front of the shops, for instance, to block access from the open square. Also, a series of counters were added to the store-fronts, as if to be used for displaying goods.

A single space was created from two shops measuring 7m by 8m (23ft x 28ft), which was paved with *opus signinum* (small pieces of tile mixed with mortar and then flattened) as well as pieces of different-coloured marble. An impression in this pavement suggests a pedestal for a statue once stood there, and we believe this area was possibly associated with the *curia*, a guild, or other type of *collegium*.

These renovations suggest an appropriation of public space for private use, as well as a drastic separation of commercial and religious activities in the forum. The artefacts recovered

during excavation, including a complete set of stone weights, parts of scales, bronze figures, and a ring seal with the inscription *ACTIACI*, are associated with commerce, demonstrating that the shops continued to play an important role in the life of the forum until the end of the 3rd century.

There is also evidence of a great fire during this period that destroyed large parts of the forum, as well as other parts of the city. Though badly damaged, Pollentia survived this catastrophe, albeit probably much diminished in size.

Vandal and Byzantine occupation followed. Over the years we have excavated about 300 burials. Stratigraphic evidence and the lack of grave goods suggest that they were Christian burials from the Early Medieval period.

Analysis of human remains uncovered between 2004 and 2008 shows a typically Mediterranean population: so far we have identified 26 males, 26 females, and 15 for whom their gender cannot be determined. Most are adults with an average height for men of about 1.6m (5ft 3in), and for women 1.55m (5ft 1in). As well as dental ailments, their remains revealed clear indications of arthritis, rheumatism, and spinal damage, suggesting hard manual labour featured heavily in day-to-day life.

A further 80 burials – a mix of interments and cremations – have been found in cemeteries to the north and south of the city centre. These date from the 1st century BC to the 2nd century AD, and contained grave goods, including jewellery.

In the last few years, we have been investigating a large area in the eastern forum that could have been a *macellum*, a market that would have supplied the city with fresh products daily. The structure is rectangular and measures around the same size as the *Capitolium*. Many of the walls were damaged when the site was reused as a necropolis centuries later, and then subsequently disturbed again by looters.

Nevertheless, we have found that the rectangular market stalls surrounded a central patio paved with *opus signinum*. We are still excavating this structure, but ▶

widest. It can hold about 2,000 people, with the first three rows of seating – for the city's elite – separated from the remaining 11 rows.

In 1980, the focus of investigation turned to the newly uncovered forum, where excavations are now being led by a team from the universities of Barcelona and La Laguna in the Canary Islands.

### Commercial area

Our excavations have revealed the main temple, shops, the open square, a porticoed street, and two smaller temples. One of our greatest achievements has been the complete excavation of the main temple, traditionally considered to have been the *Capitolium*, used to

### FROM IRON AGE SLINGERS TO TOURISTS



ABOVE Excavating the Early Medieval necropolis of the forum. RIGHT Virtual reconstruction of the Roman city.

The strategically important Balearic Islands were well-known to Greek and Roman sailors. However, the four-island archipelago was divided, with two different cultures: Mallorca (*Kromyousa* in Greek or *Baliaris Maior/Maiorica* in Latin) and Menorca (*Meloussa* or *Baliaris Minor/Minorica*) formed the *Gymnesia* or *Baliares*; while Ibiza (*Ebusus*) and Formentera (*Ophiusa* or *Columbraria*) were grouped as the *Pityussae*.

Ibiza and Formentera had a strong Phoenician-Carthaginian character and a refined sense of urban planning. Mallorca and Menorca, meanwhile, were inhabited by the Iron Age Talayotic culture, with relatively poor urban planning and famous for their marksmen-slingers, hired by both Carthaginian and Roman armies. In the 1st century, the Greek historian Strabo wrote: 'And their training in the use of slings used to be such, from childhood up, that they would not so much as give bread to their children unless they first hit it with the sling. This is why Metellus, when he was approaching the islands from the sea, stretched hides above the decks as a protection against the slings.'

The Metellus to whom Strabo refers was consul Quintus Caecilius Metellus, leader of the fleet charged with clearing the western

Mediterranean of pirates in 123 BC. Metellus completed his task and conquered the islands in less than two years. Military veterans and settlers soon followed, and eventually the cities Pollentia and Palma were founded. Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History* around AD 79 that these two cities enjoyed the rights of Roman citizens, and mentioned two as yet unknown towns called Tucis and Guium, as well as Bocchorum, a town bound by treaty to Rome.

The Balearics developed under the Romans from the Republican period onwards. In Pollentia, significant changes took place during the reign of Augustus and also in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries. At the end of the 3rd century, probably around 270 to 280, the city went through a period of turmoil, during which several parts of it were destroyed. A fire destroyed a large section of the commercial district in the forum. Though traumatic, the fire did not drive the Romans from Pollentia: the damaged areas were rebuilt, and the settlement gradually moved from a Roman Imperial and pagan city to a Christian one.

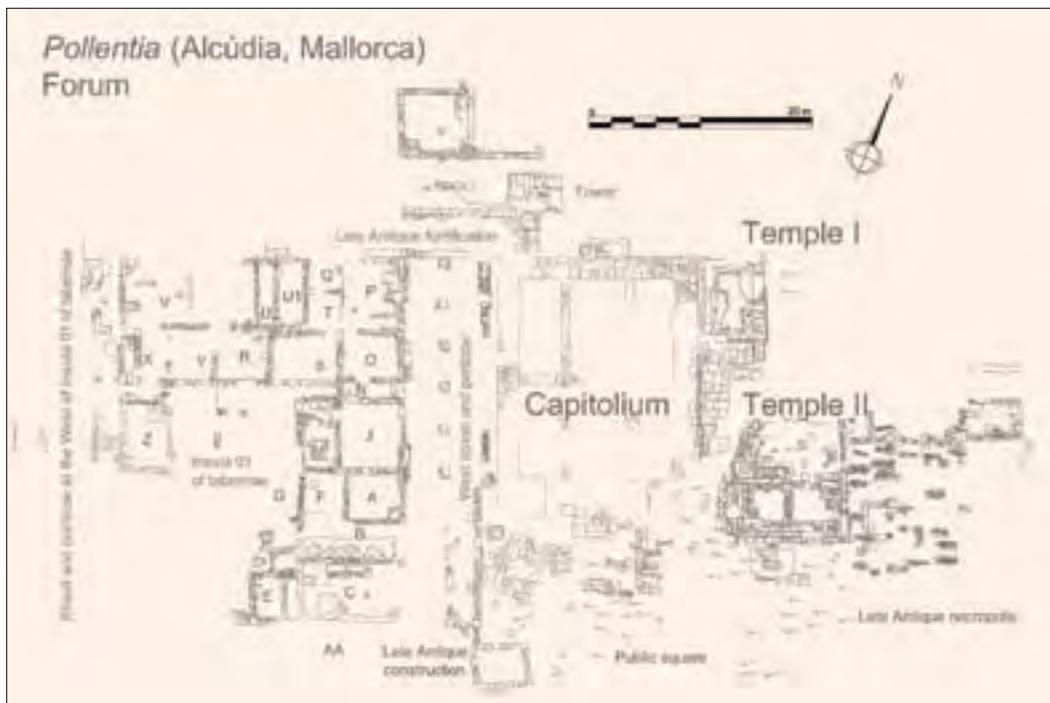
Pollentia was still inhabited during the Moorish rule over Spain, and after Jaime I, king of Aragón, conquered the island in 1229. A document from 1248 states that a small Christian settlement including a church,

a few houses, a street, and a barn sat atop the former Imperial city. Medieval Alcúdia, with its still-standing defensive walls, grew up adjacent to Pollentia, and today is a quiet tourist-town popular with German and British families.



IMAGE: B. Vallori

Pollentia (Alcúdia, Mallorca)  
Forum



ABOVE Part of the mosaic, dated to the 1st century BC/AD.

strategic importance, as shown in historical references and on Medieval maps: the *portus maior* in the southern Bay of Alcúdia and the *portus minor* on the northern Bay of Pollença. What is certain is that our work will keep our archaeological campaigns at Pollentia busy for many years to come. ■



TOP Plan of the excavation of the forum at Pollentia.  
ABOVE Excavation of the main temple, believed to be the *Capitolium*.

so far the evidence suggests it dates to the Late Republic, and that it was renovated in the Early Empire.

In addition, to the south of the supposed *macellum*, we have found another monumental building that dates to the reign of Augustus, and boasts a partially uncovered but spectacular *opus sectile* of white marble and black shale. We are still not sure of this building's function, but the architectural remains – a pedestal, Attican bases, fluted column drums, and sculpted pieces – suggest that it was an important public building, possibly even the basilica. Further research will tell.

### Into the future

We have three new goals. First, we want to uncover how Iron Age Pollentia became Roman. Deep test-pits in the 1950s revealed a pre-Roman structure in *Sa Portella*. In 2014, we will excavate this area to learn more about the city's indigenous history.

We also want to look at how Christianity changed the city: future excavations will look for early signs of Christianity in one of the largest necropolises here, where a gold signet-ring seal decorated with an anchor and two fish was recovered, and where earlier excavations suggest a basilica may be found. We will also try to locate the graves where an inscription – probably a Christian inscription for Arguta – was discovered in the 1930s: *Arguta / fidelis in pace / uixit ann[is] XL d[e]p[osita] / III id[us] Iulias*.

Finally, we plan an environmental study of the coastline, with experts from the universities of Aix-Marseille and Nice, to discover the ports that gave Pollentia its



ABOVE Excavation of the necropolis, east of the temple.

**JOIN IN**  
 Nearly 10 years ago, the archaeological team at Pollentia formed a partnership with US company ArchaeoSpain to allow secondary-school students to join the field crew of archaeologists and university students. For more information on joining the programme, visit [www.archaeospain.com](http://www.archaeospain.com) or email Mike at [programs@archaeospain.com](mailto:programs@archaeospain.com)

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