

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# On the beginnings of Christianity at the Port of Sanitja (Menorca, Balearic Islands, Spain). The radiocarbon dating of Tombs 11 and 16 in “Necropolis 3” as a starting point for understanding the origin of the people who made possible a singular ecclesiastical complex

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## Abstract

The 2024 excavation in “Necropolis 3” at the Port of Sanitja (Menorca) has yielded radiocarbon dates for two Christian burials —Tombs 11 and 16— falling between 388 and 402 cal. AD, the earliest funerary contexts of this kind documented with absolute chronology in the Balearic Islands. The convergence between the AMS dates and a coin of *Theodosius I* with a VOT XX reverse recovered from Tomb 11 reinforces this chronological framework. Since the graves were fitted into the interior of the building, the basilica must have been erected earlier, probably in the third quarter of the fourth century, placing it among the earliest ecclesiastical complexes of the Balearics, in parallel with developments documented in Sardinia, Corsica and Malta. The study proposes two routes of arrival for the Christian community —the Tarraconensian, linked to Priscillianism and the barbarian invasions, and the North African, associated with regular trade along the Tunisian coast—, rules out a Baetican origin and considers the *relegatio ad insulas* as a complementary mechanism. The overall evidence is consistent with the mature Christian community described by Bishop Severus in his encyclical letter of 418.

**Keywords:** Sanitja, Early Christianity Basilica, Late Antiquity, Sanisera, Earliest Ecclesiastical Complex, Balearic Christian Community.

## 1. Introduction

The Port of Sanitja lies on the northern coast of the island of Menorca (Balearic Islands, Spain), within the municipality of Es Mercadal, some 200 meters south of the Cap de Cavalleria headland —the northernmost point of the Balearic archipelago. Its geographical coordinates are approximately 40° 04' 24" N, 4° 05' 02" E (WGS 84). The cove opens to

the Mediterranean Sea facing north, forming a narrow and elongated natural inlet, flanked to the east by the Cap de Cavalleria peninsula and to the west by the coastline of Cala Torta. This configuration provides effective shelter against the prevailing Tramontana and Gregal winds. The ecclesiastical complex extends along the inner head of the port.

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Figure 1. Aerial view of the Port of Sanitja (Menorca, Balearic Islands, Spain).

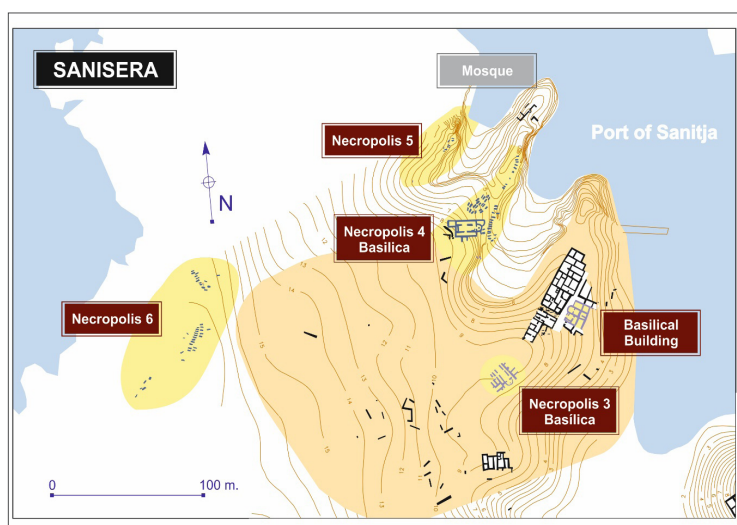


Figure 2. General plan showing the archaeological remains, including basilicas and several necropolises around the Port of Sanitja.

## 2. Archaeological Context of the Tombs Under Study

*Sanisera Archaeology Institute* began excavations in 2024 in “Necropolis 3”, a complex composed of a basilical building that contains more than 30 tombs, fitted into the inner spaces of the church and

into the funerary chambers attached to it. In the case addressed by this study, the tombs are located in the side aisles —Tomb 11 (sector 4, west aisle) and Tomb 16 (sector 3, east aisle)— and occupy a privileged sacred position, very close to the *presbyterium* of the church.



Figure 3. Location of Tombs 11 and 16, the focus of this study, set in the side aisles of the basilica of “Necropolis 3”, near the presbyterium.

Tomb 16 is a cist grave oriented north–south, in accordance with the width available in the east lateral side. It was preserved intact, cut into the bedrock as a simple pit, with a cover of flat stone slabs and side walls coated with lime mortar.

It’s a collective burial containing two individuals—UF 5080 and UF 5086. The skeleton labelled 5080 belonged to a young man aged between 22 and 34 years, approximately 1.65 meters tall, and was fully articulated; the remains of UF 5086 were disarticulated, with most of the bones placed against the western side and the skull resting next to that of UF 5080, in the northern corner of the grave. Individual UF 5086 was an adult aged between 20 and 34 years, of unknown sex, approximately 1.59 meters tall. The position of the bones indicates that individual 5080 is later than 5086.

Among the recovered remains, 30 elements of fauna and shellfish were documented. The fauna includes 16 fish fragments and 6 from ovicaprids. Among the

malacological materials, gastropods predominate, with four specimens of the *Muricidae* family, three of *Cerithiidae* and one of *Trochidae*.

In addition, three notable objects were recovered in association with individual UF 5080: a bronze pin, a possible earring, and a Late Imperial coin so worn from circulation that its poor condition prevented identification. This monetary deposit may relate to the survival of the *obolus Charontis*, reinterpreting the pagan rite in Christian terms as a viaticum or protective amulet-coin (Delmaire, 2001, pp. 211–219). Among the faunal remains, a single sheep *astragalus*, isolated and unconnected to the rest of the fragments of the same genus, may be interpreted either as a residue of the funerary banquet or as a meat offering, consistent with the persistence of pagan customs within a Christian context (Février, 1978, pp. 211–274; Volp, 2002), as documented by Augustine of Hippo (*Confessions* VI, 2, 2). It seems likely, in short, to reflect a custom that endured outside official discourse.

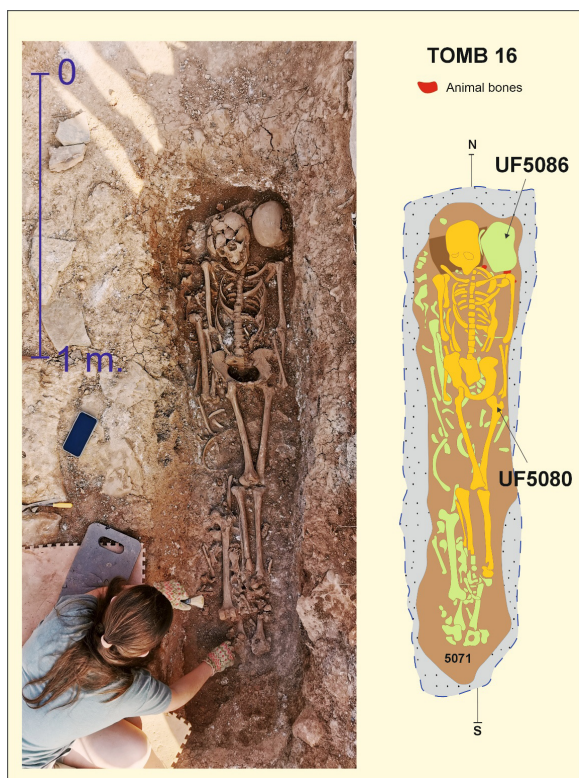


Figure 4. Tomb 16, uncovered in the western side aisle of the basilica of “Necropolis 3”.

Tomb 11 is located in the west lateral side of the basilica. It’s a cist grave oriented north–south, cut into the bedrock as a simple pit, with sides built up using vertically placed limestone slabs. The cover consisted of slate and sandstone slabs, while the base, perfectly levelled, was made up of four sandstone slabs arranged to accommodate a wooden coffin, of which only some iron nails have survived. The tomb contained the remains of a single individual. The skeleton lay

along the entire length of the grave, in supine position with the limbs extended. It corresponds to an adult male aged between 30 and 40 years, with a stature of approximately 1.68 meters. The only personal item associated with his clothing was a bronze pin.

The burial was accompanied by a set of faunal and malacological remains, interpretable either as a residue of the funerary banquet or as a meat offering, as well as numismatic materials and a small glass

vessel, of which seven fragments of rim and a handle have survived. Within the faunal remains, seven ovicaprid fragments were identified, one of which corresponds to a sheep astragalus, together with seven fish fragments.

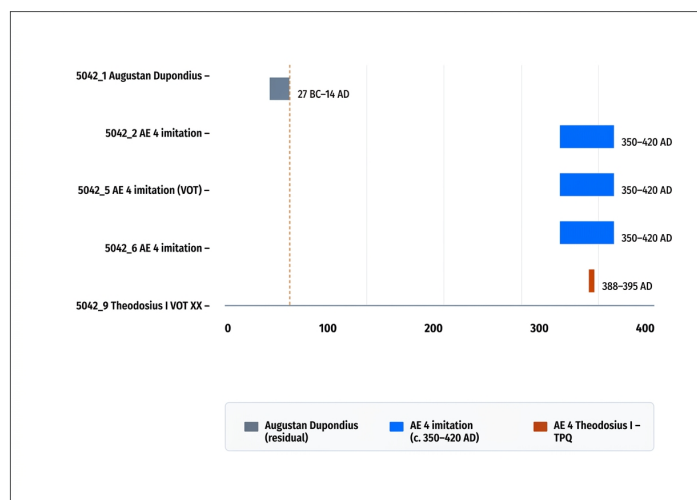
A total of 15 specimens were recorded among the malacological materials. Bivalves are represented by four individuals belonging to the families *Ostreidae*, *Glycymerididae*, *Cerastoderma* and *Pectinidae*, with one specimen of each taxon. Gastropods total 11 specimens, with four of the *Muricidae* family, four of *Trochidae* and three of *Patellidae*.

The monetary deposit associated with the deceased consisted of five coins, which were not grouped at a single point of the grave: three of them appeared at

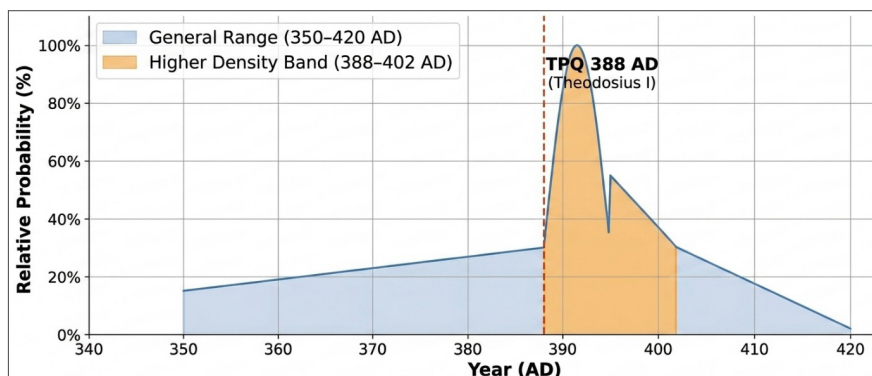
knee level, and the other two in the area of the torso. The set includes one Augustan dupondius and four Late Imperial bronzes, three of them classified as local imitations of the AE 4 type (c. 350–420 AD) and one attributable to Theodosius I with a VOT XX reverse (388–395 AD), which provides the most precise *terminus post quem* for the funerary assemblage, since the burial cannot be earlier than 388 AD, the year in which the VOT XX issues for Theodosius I began. Combining this *terminus post quem* with the upper limit set by the Late Imperial imitations (c. 420 AD), the most likely range for the funerary deposit of Tomb 11 falls between 388 and 420 AD, with the highest statistical probability concentrated within 388–402 AD, where the greatest density of numismatic evidence converges.

**Table 1.** Numismatic inventory of Tomb 11 (SU 5042).

ID	Type	Description / Legend	Chronology
5042_1	Dupondius	Obv.: two busts back-to-back, Agrippa (left) and Augustus (right). Rev.: crocodile chained to a palm with long-ribboned crown.	27–14 BC
5042_2	AE 4 imitation	Late Imperial imitation, type indeterminate.	c. 350–420 AD
5042_5	AE 4 imitation	Late Imperial imitation with VOT type.	c. 350–420 AD
5042_6	AE 4 imitation	Late Imperial imitation, type indeterminate.	c. 350–420 AD
5042_9	AE 4	Obv.: DN THEODOSIVS PF AVG. Rev.: VOT XX inside a laurel wreath.	388–395 AD



**Figure 5.** Chronological timeline of the numismatic deposit of Tomb 11 (SU 5042). In grey: residual Augustan dupondius. In blue: AE 4 imitations. In red: coin of Theodosius I.



**Figure 6.** Probability distribution of the chronology of the funerary deposit of Tomb 11, based on numismatic evidence. Blue area: general range (350–420 AD). Amber area: zone of greatest density (388–402 AD). Red dashed line: terminus post quem (388 AD).

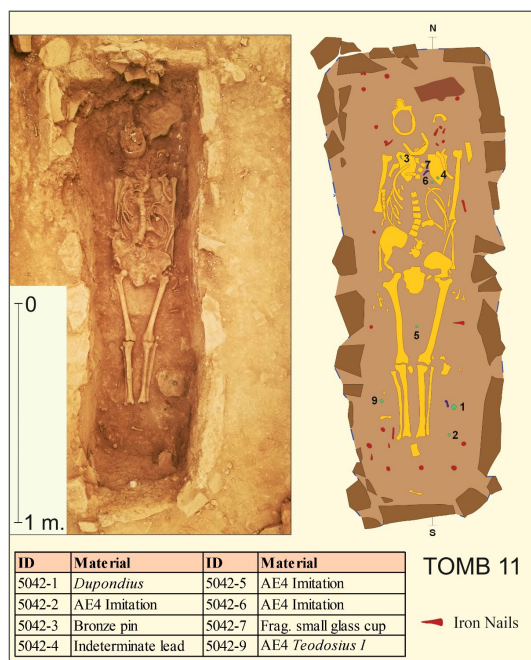


Figure 7. Tomb 11, uncovered in the eastern side aisle of the basilica of “Necropolis 3”.

### 3. Chronology of the basilica of Necropolis 03

#### 3.1 The Radiocarbon Dates of Tombs 11 and 16

The samples analyzed come from two graves excavated during the 2024 campaign in the Early Christian Basilica of Sanitja, within the so-called “Necropolis 03”, located beneath the floor level of the side aisles. Tomb 11, set in the western side aisle, yielded a sample of bone collagen (STE\_5042\_1, Beta-731231) dated between 245 and 402 cal. AD with 95.4% confidence.

Tomb 16, located in the eastern side aisle, provided another bone sample (STE\_5071\_1, Beta-731232), the main calibrated range of which falls between 326 and 422 cal. AD with 78.7% probability, with a secondary component between 255 and 285 cal. AD (16.7%). Both dates were produced by Beta Analytic and calibrated against the IntCal20 curve (Reimer et al., 2020, pp. 725–757). They are, to date, the earliest absolute dates obtained for a Christian funerary context in the Balearic archipelago.

Table 2. Full analytical results of the AMS radiocarbon dates from Tombs 11 and 16 of the basilica of Sanitja (Beta Analytic, Inc., 2025).

Sample	Beta No.	Context	Conv. age (BP)	$\delta^{13}\text{C} / \delta^{15}\text{N}$ (‰)	C/N	pMC (%)	Calibration	Cal. range 95.4%
STE_5042_1	Beta-731231	Tomb 11, west side aisle. Sample from left tibia.	1740 ±30	-17.5 / 12.7	3.2   40.22   14.69	80.52 ±0.30	IntCal20 / BetaCal 5.0	245–402 cal AD
STE_5071_1	Beta-731232	Tomb 16, east side aisle. Sample from right femur of individual UF 5080.	1690 ±30	-19.4 / 11.0	3.3   36.93   12.97	81.03 ±0.30	IntCal20 / BetaCal 5.0	326–422 cal AD (78.7%); 255–285 cal AD (16.7%)

#### 3.2 Statistical Combination and Zone of Maximum Probability

When two radiocarbon dates come from the same archaeological context and are suspected to represent the same phase of activity, the standard practice is to combine them statistically in order to obtain a more precise date. The procedure was formalized by Ward and Wilson (1978, pp. 19–31) and is the same one implemented by the *R\_Combine* function in OxCal (Bronk Ramsey, 2009, pp. 337–360). Applied to our two samples, the test yields a value of  $\chi^2 = 1.389$ , well below the critical value of 3.841 for one degree

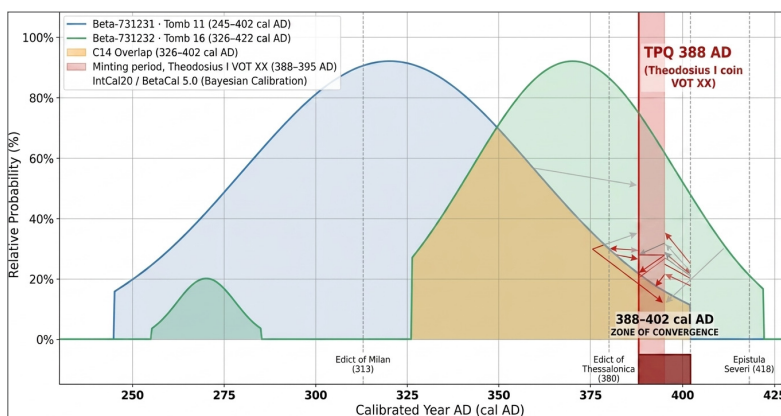
of freedom at 95% confidence. This confirms that the two dates are statistically compatible and may be combined. The resulting weighted mean is 1715 ±21.2 BP, which, calibrated with IntCal20, falls at 2 $\sigma$  (95.4%) within the approximate range of 263–389 cal. AD.

However, the most relevant figure for our analysis is not the full range of the combined date, but the zone of maximum probability, defined as the interval where the calibrated individual ranges of both samples overlap. Tomb 11 covers the interval 245–402 cal. AD and Tomb 16, in its main component, the interval 326–422 cal. AD. The overlap lies between

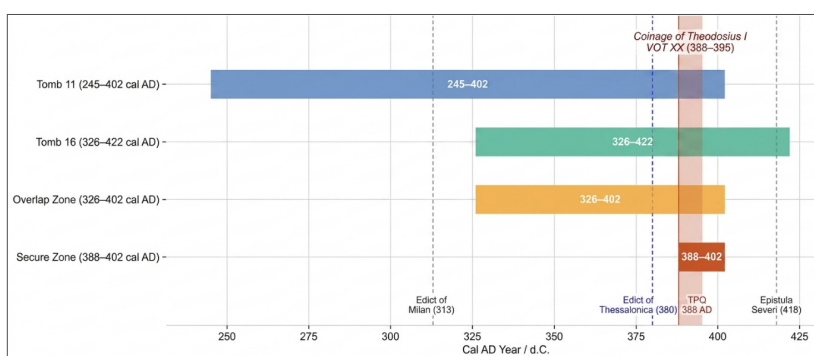
326 and 402 cal. AD. Within this zone, the probability distribution is not uniform: the individual probability curves reach their highest values in the second half of the interval, and the combined date at 1σ (68.2% confidence) clusters approximately between 310 and 389 cal. AD. If a strictly statistical criterion is adopted, the lower limit could be set around 350 cal. AD. The numismatic evidence from Tomb 11, however, provides an independent indicator that allows this lower bound to be tightened: the AE 4 attributed to Theodosius I with a VOT XX reverse (5042\_9), struck between 388 and 395 AD, constitutes a *terminus post quem* establishing that the burial cannot be earlier than 388 AD. The convergence between this numismatic

indicator and the calibrated range of the radiocarbon samples defines a secure zone between 388 and 402 cal. AD, where both lines of evidence overlap.

From the historical perspective, the 388–402 cal. AD bracket corresponds to the reign of Theodosius I and to the years immediately following the Edict of Thessalonica (380), which established Nicene Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. A burial performed under Christian rite within this window is fully consistent with what is known about the definitive consolidation of Christianity in the western Mediterranean during the last two decades of the fourth century.



**Figure 8.** Comparative panel of the radiocarbon calibrations Beta-731231 (Tomb 11, in blue) and Beta-731232 (Tomb 16, in green) with the chronology of the Theodosius I VOT XX coin (5042\_9). The curves represent the calibrated probability distribution of each sample (IntCal20/BetaCal 5.0). The amber-shaded area marks the overlap of the two C14 ranges (326–402 cal AD). The red band corresponds to the period of issue of the Theodosian coin (388–395 AD), the lower limit of which sets the *terminus post quem* of the funerary deposit at 388 AD. The lower dark-red strip indicates the convergence zone (388–402 cal AD), where the three independent lines of evidence—radiocarbon from Tomb 11, radiocarbon from Tomb 16 and numismatics—coincide, and which represents the most likely chronological window for the burials of the basilica of Sanitja.



**Figure 9.** Comparative timeline. From top to bottom: individual calibrated ranges, overlap zone (326–402 cal AD) and secure zone (388–402 cal AD). The Edict of Milan (313) and the Epistula Severi (418) are indicated as reference points.

### 3.3 Ceramic Context

The radiocarbon dates don’t stand in isolation. The ceramic record from the port of Sanitja provides a complementary chronological framework that allows the burials to be placed within the occupation sequence of the site. The study of the Late Antique pottery of Sanitja by Valente and Contreras (2013, pp. 199–204), based on the 2008–2012 excavations,

identified three periods of activity. The first period, which extends from Late Republican times to the beginning of the fifth century AD, is characterized by ceramics of African origin, evidence of the commercial breakdown with the provinces of *Baetica* and *Tarraconensis* and of the disappearance of the trade network with the Italian peninsula from the third-century crisis onwards (Valente and Contreras, 2013, p. 200).

The most relevant pottery group for the present analysis is African Red Slip A (ARS A), represented by Hayes forms 3, 8, 9, 14, 14/17, 19, 26, 27 and 34 (Hayes, 1972), together with ARS C and ARS D in their Hayes 61 and 67 types, all dated between the third and the mid-fifth century AD. These wares are accompanied by African amphorae of the Key 25 type (Key, 1984), whose large numbers in the Sanitja inventory point to the consumption of African olive oil from the fourth century AD onwards. Valente and Contreras also note the presence of Late Roman C / Lucente Ware (Hayes 4) and ARS C (Hayes 75) productions, which the authors place within the chronological interval 425–455 AD, confirming that there was no interruption in the occupation of Sanitja during the transition from the fourth to the fifth century.

### 3.4 Constructive Sequence of Tombs 11 and 16 in Relation to the Basilica

The implications of these results are significant. The physical sequence and constructive logic of the basilica indicate that the building predates Tombs 11 and 16. The two graves were installed in the side aisles, fitted into the available space within the architectural plan and respecting the north–south orientation of the basilical body. This arrangement only makes sense if

the building already existed at the time the burials were carried out: the bodies were oriented according to the structure of the basilica, not independently from it. This is a well-documented pattern in Early Christian funerary architecture in the western Mediterranean, where burials *ad sanctos* or inside cult buildings used the pre-existing liturgical spaces (Duval, 1988, pp. 15–28; Godoy, 1995, pp. 45–67).

The fact that the tombs lie below the floor level of the side aisles further indicates that, after the burials, people continued walking on the floor surface, with the graves integrated beneath the line of circulation—a common practice in the Early Christian basilicas of the islands (Palol, 1967, pp. 3–28; Godoy, 1995, pp. 52–60). This observation has a chronological consequence of the first order: if the tombs are dated between 388 and 402 cal AD and were placed within an already-built basilical building, the basilica of Sanitja must have been erected at an earlier date or, at the latest, contemporaneously with the earliest burials. This would place the construction of the building before 388 AD, probably in the third quarter of the fourth century, making it one of the earliest archaeologically documented basilicas in the Balearic archipelago.

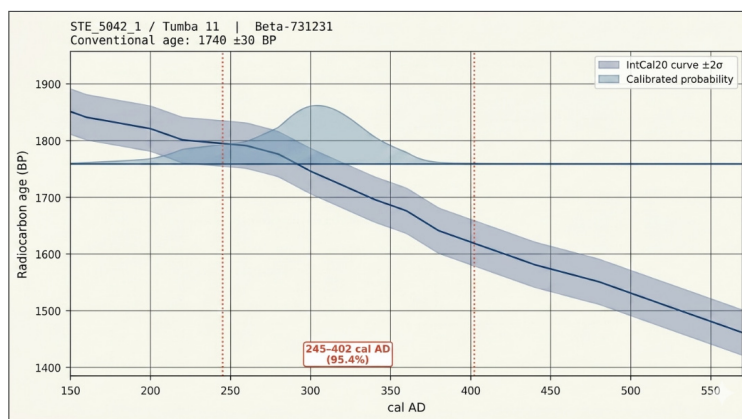


Figure 10. Calibration curve Beta-731231 (STE\_5042\_1, Tomb 11). AMS calibration with IntCal20/BetaCal 5.0. Range at 95.4%: 245–402 cal. AD.

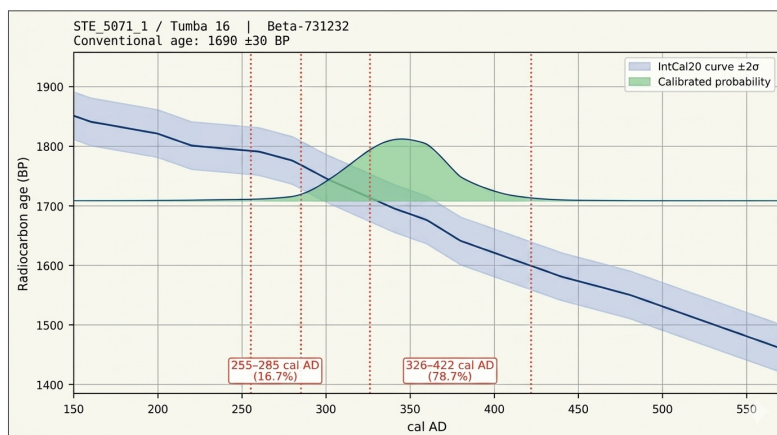
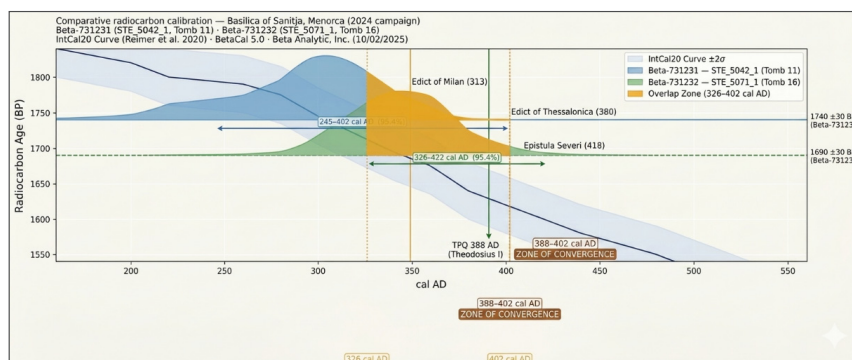


Figure 11. Calibration curve Beta-731232 (STE\_5071\_1, Tomb 16). Ranges at 95.4%: 326–422 cal. AD (78.7%) and 255–285 cal. AD (16.7%).

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**Figure 12.** Comparative panel of calibrations Beta-731231 and Beta-731232. Note the overlap of ranges between 326 and 402 cal. AD.

### 3.5 Comparative Mediterranean Context

Christianity in the islands of the western Mediterranean is a complex phenomenon that needs to be set in context. In Sicily, the underground funerary complexes of Syracuse show evidence of Christian use from the late second or early third century AD (Wilson, 1990; Rizzone, 2006). In Sardinia, the earliest testimony of an organized Christian community is the participation of Bishop *Quintasius* of Cagliari in the Council of Arles in 314 AD; the martyrdom of Saint *Simplicius* at Olbia has been dated to 304, during the persecution of Diocletian, and a necropolis grew up around his place of burial, on which a cult building was later erected (Fiochi Nicolai, 2015, pp. 81–123). The first monumental developments of basilicas and martyrial sanctuaries on the island fall between the fourth and fifth centuries AD (Spanu, 2002; Fiochi Nicolai, 2015, pp. 81–123).

In Corsica, the earliest evidence comes from Mariana, where a basilical complex with baptistery has been documented going back to the second half of the fourth century AD (Pergola, 1998, pp. 811–826). In the south of the island, the INRAP excavations at Propriano (Quattrina) brought to light two superimposed churches associated with a necropolis of 72 tombs, the funerary offerings of which —coins and glass vessels— are mainly attributed to the fourth century AD (INRAP, 2009).

Finally, in Malta, the earliest archaeological evidence of a Christian presence comes from the funerary complex at Rabat, located outside the walls of the ancient Roman capital of Melite, the Christian use phases of which begin in the fourth century AD (Buhagiar, 1996).

The dates from Tombs 11 and 16 of Sanitja, falling between c. 388 and 402 cal. AD, fit naturally into this chronological framework and place the Sanitja settlement within the same temporal horizon in which Christianity was being established in Corsica, Sardinia and Malta.

## 4. The Inhabitants of Sanitja: Origin and Mechanisms of Arrival

### 4.1. The Historical Context: The Western Mediterranean Between 350 and 420 AD

The irruption of Sueves, Vandals and Alans into Hispania from the autumn of 409, preceded by their crossing of the Rhine on the night of 31 December 406 and a three-year passage through Gaul, set off a chain of events that directly affected the Mediterranean coast of the Iberian Peninsula and, by extension, the Balearic Islands. Menorca, administratively integrated into the province of *Tarraconensis* and turned into the independent province of *Balearica* during the fourth century, within the framework of the provincial reforms of the Late Empire (Cau Ontiveros, 2009, p. 64), did not stand apart from these transformations. Its insular condition did not isolate it from the mainland; rather, it kept the island linked to the political and demographic dynamics that shook Late Roman Hispania (Arce, 2002, pp. 97–104).

The sources, particularly the chronicler *Hydatius* and the presbyter *Orosius*, describe a two-year period of widespread plundering (409–411) which affected most of the Hispanic provinces. In 411, after an agreement, the invading peoples divided the territory among themselves: the Sueves and Asding Vandals settled in *Gallaecia*, the Alans occupied *Lusitania* and *Carthaginiensis*, and the Siling Vandals took up residence in *Baetica*. *Tarraconensis* and *Balearica* formally remained under imperial control, which turned them into spaces of relative refuge for the Hispano-Roman population fleeing from the occupied areas (Arce, 2002, pp. 99–101; Amengual i Batle, 2008, pp. 119–122). At the end of 414, the Visigoths of *Athaulf* entered Hispania for the first time and established themselves in *Barcino*, opening a new cycle of military pressure on the Mediterranean coast.

### 4.2 The *Tarraconensis* Route

The possibility that the Balearics received waves of

Hispano-Roman population coming from the mainland has been raised by several scholars. Josep Amengual i Batle, in his fundamental work *Judíos, católicos y herejes: el microcosmos balear y tarraconense de Severus de Menorca, Consentius y Orosius (413–421)* (2008, pp. 119–127), analyses the documentation of the fifth century and underlines how the Balearics functioned as a natural extension of Tarraconensis, closely connected to it through maritime routes that facilitated the movement of people, ideas and goods. The very passage of the presbyter *Paulus Orosius* through Menorca in 417, carrying the relics of Saint *Stephen* from the *Holy Land*, illustrates the permeability of these routes even in times of crisis (Amengual, 1991, vol. I, pp. 85–102).

Amengual (2008, pp. 145–178) has also pointed to the role of *Consentius*, a Tarraconensian lay theologian who corresponded with Augustine and seems to have had direct links to Menorca. The letters discovered by Divjak (1981) confirm an active epistolary relationship between *Consentius* and the bishop of Hippo between 413 and 420, demonstrating a direct connection between the ecclesiastical elites of Tarraconensis-Balearica and North Africa.

The persecution of Priscillianism is another vector of human movement that may have directly affected the Balearics in the second half of the fourth century. *Priscillian*, bishop of Ávila, was executed at Trier in 385 after being condemned by a civil court, and the Council of Saragossa of 380 had already condemned his ascetic practices (Chadwick, 1976, pp. 111–132). The repression of his followers was particularly intense in Tarraconensis. Amengual (2011, pp. 265–315) has shown that Priscillianism reached the Balearics and Tarraconensis, and that *Consentius* adopted violent methods to combat the Priscillianists in the province. Amengual and Orfila (2007, pp. 197–246) have noted that the tensions between pagans, Jews, orthodox Christians and Priscillianists shaped a complex religious landscape on the islands that can only be explained by the arrival of people who carried these various currents with them.

### 4.3 The North African Route

The ceramic record from Sanitja, with an abundant presence of African productions from the fourth century onwards —ARS D, Keay 25 amphorae, African cooking ware—, confirms that the port kept up regular commercial contacts with the Tunisian coast (Valente and Contreras, 2013, pp. 199–204), the territory with the densest Christian presence

in the western Mediterranean from the mid-third century onwards (Leone, 2007, pp. 1–30). It cannot be ruled out that, alongside the goods, people also arrived: traders, craftsmen, clerics, and, occasionally, refugees. The very influence of *Augustine* on Bishop Severus, made explicit in the encyclical of 418, points to a direct connection with the North African world that was not only intellectual but also material and human. The same *Augustine*, shortly before his death during the Vandal siege of Hippo in 429/430, wrote *Epistula* 228 to Bishop *Honoratus* of Thiave, in which he debated whether bishops should flee or remain in charge of their communities in the face of the barbarian invasion (Augustine of Hippo, *Ep.* 228, 2). The letter shows that the flight of the North African clergy was a real phenomenon, debated within the very intellectual circles that connected *Augustine* with the Balearics through *Consentius*, and that some of these voluntary movements may have followed the same trade routes that are documented by the shipwrecks and African pottery of Sanitja.

A specific factor that may have accelerated the arrival of North African population was the revolt of *Firmus* (372–375), a Moorish prince of the *Iubaleni* tribe who rebelled against the Emperor Valentinian I in Mauretania Caesariensis. *Ammianus Marcellinus* (*Res Gestae*, XXIX, 5) describes a three-year guerrilla war that devastated wide areas of Mauretania Caesariensis and Mauretania Sitifensis. The conflict involved numerous indigenous tribes and units of the regular Roman army (Drijvers, 2007, pp. 129–155). The repression was led by general *Theodosius the Elder* and ended with the suicide of Firmus, but the subsequent reprisals must have caused population displacements throughout the region. Since Sanitja maintained regular commercial connections with the Tunisian coast, it is plausible that some of these displaced people reached the Balearics following the same trade routes that carried African ceramics.

Underwater archaeology in the port of Sanitja provides direct material proof of the regularity and intensity of these trade routes. The study of Byzacena (North African) amphorae found on the seabed of the port, carried out by Contreras and Talavera (2013, pp. 119–126), identified an assemblage of 32 individuals of the Keay VI/Africana II C and Keay VII/Africana II D types, originating from port cities of the Tunisian coast such as Leptis Minor, *Hadrumentum*, *Sullectum* and *Thaenae*. The authors propose that these materials correspond to the cargo of a vessel sunk at the mouth of the port between 300 and 350 AD, that is, immediately

before or contemporaneously with the lower limit of the dates from Tombs 11 and 16. The shipwreck does not document the end of a route, but an accident within a regular and sustained maritime traffic.

One particularly relevant fact is that the shipwreck off Sanitja was not exclusively transporting Tunisian goods. On the same seabed, amphorae from Baetica have also been recorded, specifically of the Dressel 20G, Almagro 51C and Beltrán 72 types, which may well have been loaded at ports such as Sexi (Almuñécar). Contreras and Talavera (2013, p. 124) propose that the ship sailed from the Tunisian coast, reached the south of Hispania to take on olive oil and fish derivatives, continued northward along the coast and, off Denia, set course for the Balearics. This route must have been a regular one, since Key VI and VII amphorae are very common in the cities and ports of Carthago Nova, Puerto de Mazarrón, Portus Ilicitanus, Ilici, Garganes, Denia and Valentia (Molina Vidal, 2007, p. 239). What the Sanitja wreck reveals, therefore, is not a bilateral connection between two points, but a commercial circuit that linked the Menorcan port to a wide arc of the western Mediterranean, from Tunisian Byzacena to the Hispanic Levantine coast, by way of Baetica. The ships that sailed this route carried goods of varied origin, and with them travelled also people: sailors, traders, craftsmen and, on occasion, clerics or Christian faithful coming from any of the stops along the itinerary. There is no need to postulate a deliberate evangelizing mission or a massive movement of population to account for the arrival of Christianity in Sanitja: it was enough that the ships which regularly supplied the port transported, alongside oil and fish-salts, individuals who practised the Christian faith and who, by settling in the place or by visiting it on a recurring basis, contributed to shaping the community that Severus describes in 418.

The numismatics recovered at the port of Sanitja provides an independent line of evidence that reinforces the intensity and continuity of commercial traffic during the chronological window concerned, the largest group of which corresponds to Late Imperial bronzes of the fourth century AD, especially the Constantinian issues (Bravo, Contreras and López Delgado, 2015). Notable among these are the AE 3 and AE 4 of Constantine I (307–337), Constantine II (337–340), Constans (337–350) and Constantius II (337–361), as well as later issues of Magnentius (350–353), Valentinian I (364–375) and Gratian (367–383). The most frequent iconographic types are *Fel Temp Reparatio* and *Gloria Exercitus*, both characteristic

of monetary circulation in the ports of the western Mediterranean during the second half of the fourth century. Particularly significant is the presence of an AE 2 of Constantius II struck at Arles, the reverse of which depicts Constantine I bearing a chrismon on board a vessel—an explicit allegory of the maritime expansion of the Christian faith.

The abundance of these Late Imperial issues in the occupation strata of the site, associated with late wares such as ARS D, Late Roman C and the African and Eastern amphorae, confirms that Sanitja functioned as a port fully integrated into the Mediterranean commercial networks during the fourth and fifth centuries AD. The agreement between the numismatic record of Sanitja—with its strong fourth-century component—and the radiocarbon dates from Tombs 11 and 16, falling between 388 and 402 cal. AD, reinforces the picture of an active port settlement, a recipient of people, goods and religious practices coming from across the western Mediterranean.

#### 4.4 Baetica Ruled Out

It should be noted, by contrast, that Baetica does not appear to have acted as a center of population emission towards the Balearics within the chronological framework under consideration. Between c. 388 and 402, Baetica was one of the most stable and prosperous provinces of the *diocesis Hispaniarum*, with no episodes of violence, revolt or military pressure recorded by the sources comparable to those that affected Mauretania or Tarraconensis. The major events that shook Baetica—the Siling Vandal occupation from 411 onwards, the sack of Hispalis in 426 and the crossing of Geiseric to North Africa in 429—are all later than the upper limit of the Sanitja dates. The absence of expulsion factors in Baetica during the second half of the fourth century reinforces the hypothesis that the population inputs came mainly from the Tarraconensian coast and from North Africa (Kulikowski, 2004, pp. 78–109; Arce, 2005, pp. 33–56).

#### 4.5 The *Relegatio Ad Insulas* as a Mechanism of Mobility

The imperial practice of *relegatio ad insulas* is a mechanism of forced human mobility that deserves attention in the context of the establishment of Christianity in the islands of the western Mediterranean. Roman law distinguished between *relegatio*, a milder form of exile that preserved the citizenship of the convicted, and *deportatio in insulam*, a more severe one that entailed the loss of civic rights and the confiscation of property (Hillner, 2015, pp. 125–

133). From the fourth century onwards, both forms were used with growing frequency not only to punish ordinary crimes but to impose religious conformity. Bishops, clerics and monks were sent to islands of the Mediterranean in successive waves linked to the

Arian, Donatist and Priscillianist controversies. The decision was taken at the imperial court —Milan, Trier or Constantinople depending on the period— and the praetorian prefects and provincial governors carried it out within their territories.



**Figure 13.** Ninth-century miniature representing Christians fleeing from the Arians (Collins, M. and Price, M.A., 1999, p. 61).

The case of Sardinia is the best documented. Already in the fourth century, Bishop *Lucifer* of Cagliari was exiled by the Emperor Constantius II to several Eastern sees as a punishment for his defense of Nicene orthodoxy. More relevant to our argument is the great persecution of *Huneric* in 484, documented by *Victor of Vita* in his *Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae* (ed. Lancel, 2002). Victor describes how 4,966 bishops, clerics and members of the Nicene Church were sent into exile, many of them to Sardinia, where a later tradition holds that the exiled bishops carried with them the relics of Augustine of Hippo. A second wave of exile to Sardinia took place in 498, and the case of Bishop *Fulgentius of Ruspe*, exiled by King Thrasamund at the beginning of the sixth century, shows that the island operated for more than a century as a recurrent destination for the persecuted North African clergy (Spanu, 2002; Fiochi Nicolai, 2015, pp. 81–123).

A comparable pattern is seen in Corsica. Pergola (1998, pp. 811–826) has noted that the cruciform baptismal font discovered at Ajaccio follows North African prototypes, which confirms the dependence of the island on the religious routes of the central

Mediterranean during Late Antiquity. The Corsican tradition attributes the arrival of the relics of saints John and Euphrasia to exiled African bishops.

For Menorca, no direct evidence has so far been found that *relegatio ad insulas* operated as a route of arrival for ecclesiastical population between 388 and 402. Several elements, however, invite us to consider this possibility as a working hypothesis. Menorca was located on the same maritime routes that connected North Africa with the islands of the western Mediterranean. The letter of *Severus* from 418 describes a mature Christian community that includes monks, consecrated virgins and an organized clergy —precisely the kind of population one would expect to find at a destination of ecclesiastical exile. The basilica of Sanitja in “Necropolis 3” could have served as a reception point for clerics in transit or in exile. The archaeological excavation of the remaining tombs of Necropolis 03 may, in the future, provide material indications —grave goods, burial orientations, bioarcheological features— that allow this hypothesis to be tested by determining whether any of the occupants showed an origin compatible with such a scenario.

**Table 3.** Episodes of *relegatio ad insulas* and forced ecclesiastical exile in the western Mediterranean (4th–6th centuries).

Date	Authority	Seat of the order	Cause of exile	Destination	Source
c. 355–362	Constantius II	Milan / Constantinople	Arian controversy: punishment of Nicene bishops	Eastern sees	Hillner, 2015, pp. 221–232
380–385	Gratian / Theodosius I	Trier / Milan	Condemnation of Priscillianism: Council of Saragossa (380) and execution of Priscillian (385)	Unspecified destinations	Chadwick, 1976, pp. 111–132

On the beginnings of Christianity at the Port of Sanitja (Menorca, Balearic Islands, Spain). The radiocarbon dating of Tombs 11 and 16 in “Necropolis 3” as a starting point for understanding the origin of the people who made possible a singular ecclesiastical complex.

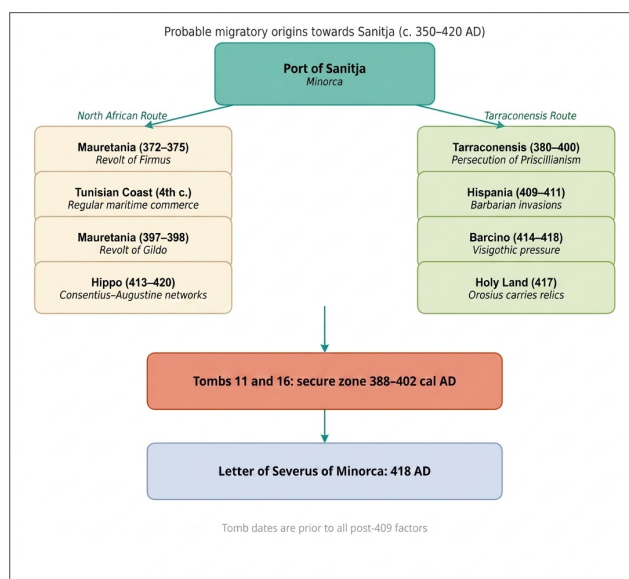
484	Huneric (Vandal king)	Carthage	Persecution of the Nicene Church: mass exile of 4,966 clerics	Sardinia, Corsica, desert	Victor of Vita, ed. Lancel, 2002
498	Gunthamund	Carthage	Continuation of the anti-Catholic persecution	Sardinia	Spanu, 2002
c. 507–523	Thrasamund	Carthage	Exile of Nicene bishops (Fulgentius of Ruspe)	Sardinia	Fiochi Nicolai, 2015, pp. 81–123
4th–5th c.	Imperial authorities	Imperial court / Carthage	Tradition of relics carried by exiled bishops	Corsica	Pergola, 1998, pp. 811–826

#### 4.6 The Encyclical Letter of Bishop Severus

The encyclical letter of Bishop *Severus* of Menorca, written in February 418 (del Valle, 1998, pp. 63–76), shows that island society was complex, with active urban life and clear connections both with the mainland and with North Africa. Severus mentions monks, consecrated virgins, an organized clergy and a faithful people who took an active part in the liturgy. This mature ecclesiastical structure, already visible in 418, necessarily presupposes a process of Christian implantation that must have begun, at the earliest, several decades earlier. There are no direct testimonies in the historiography concerning the arrival of Christianity in Menorca. As Amengual (1991, vol. I; 2008, pp. 119–127) has pointed out, no written sources earlier than the fifth century document the existence of Christian communities in the Balearics (Cau Ontiveros, 2009, p. 65). The radiocarbon dates from Tombs 11 and 16 of Sanitja now provide, for the first time, archaeological evidence with absolute chronology that confirms this hypothesis and places it within the 388–402 cal. AD range.

#### 4.7 Synthesis of Migratory Factors

The answer to the question of whether population from outside reached Menorca before the Vandal invasions is, on the basis of the documentation currently available, that it is highly likely, even though we cannot specify the volume or the exact chronology. Several indications converge in this direction. The position of the Balearics as a zone of imperial control after the partition of 411 makes them a logical destination for population fleeing the occupied provinces. The presence in Menorca of figures such as *Paulus Orosius* (417) and probably *Consentius* shows that movement between the peninsular coast and the islands was a frequent occurrence. And the complexity of the Menorcan society described by Severus in 418—with an influential Jewish community at Magona, an organized Christian church at *Iamona* and an active episcopal seat—is hard to explain on the basis of internal demographic growth alone in such a small island. The period 400–425 AD was a moment of intense human mobility in the western Mediterranean. Menorca, with its ports of *Mago*, *Iamona* and *Sanisera*, was well placed to receive these migratory flows.



**Figure 14.** Probable migratory origins towards the port of Sanitja (c. 350–420 AD). The North African route (left) and the Tarraconensis route (right) represent the two main currents of population arrival and religious influence reaching the Menorcan settlement.

On the beginnings of Christianity at the Port of Sanitja (Menorca, Balearic Islands, Spain). The radiocarbon dating of Tombs 11 and 16 in “Necropolis 3” as a starting point for understanding the origin of the people who made possible a singular ecclesiastical complex.

**Table 4.** Factors of human mobility towards the Balearics (c. 350–420 AD).

Origin	Chronology	Push factor	Evidence
North Africa (Mauretania)	372–375	Revolt of Firmus: war in Mauretania Caesariensis and Sitifensis	Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae, XXIX, 5; African pottery at Sanitja
North Africa (Tunisian coast)	4th–5th c.	Regular maritime trade: Christian sailors, craftsmen and traders	ARS D, Keay 25 amphorae (Valente and Contreras, 2013)
Tarraconensis (peninsular coast)	380–400	Persecution of Priscillianism: repression of Priscillian’s followers after 385	Amengual i Batle, 2011; Chadwick, 1976
Tarraconensis (general)	409–420	Barbarian invasions: irruption of Sueves, Vandals and Alans into Hispania	Hydatius; Orosius; Arce, 2002
Tarraconensis (coastline)	414–418	Visigothic pressure: Athaulf at Barcino (414) and his successors	Amengual i Batle, 2008
Holy Land / Eastern Mediterranean	417	Ecclesiastical transit: Orosius bringing the relics of Saint Stephen	Amengual i Batle, 1991, vol. I
North Africa (Hippo)	413–420	Intellectual networks: Consentius–Augustine correspondence	Divjak, 1981; Amengual i Batle, 2008
Mediterranean islands	4th–5th c.	<i>Relegatio ad insulas</i> : forced exile of clerics due to religious controversies	Hillner, 2015; Victor of Vita, ed. Lancel, 2002

**Table 5.** Timeline of converging migratory factors at Sanitja (350–420 AD).

Date	North African route	Tarraconensian route
c. 350	Regular trade with the Tunisian coast. Earliest Christian burials at Sanitja (388–402 cal AD)	Edict of Thessalonica (380): impulse to basilica building
355–362	Lucifer of Cagliari exiled by Constantius II: precedent of ecclesiastical <i>relegatio</i> to islands	—
372–375	Revolt of Firmus: war in Mauretania. Population displacements	—
380–385	—	Council of Saragossa (380): condemnation of Priscillianism. Execution of Priscillian (385): repression in Tarraconensis
397–398	Revolt of Gildo: a new conflict in North Africa	—
409–411	—	Barbarian invasions of Hispania. Balearics as a zone of refuge
414–418	—	Athaulf at Barcino. Orosius in Menorca (417). Letter of Severus (418)

**Methodological note.** The combination of dates and the calibration presented in this paper have been performed by direct analytical calculation (weighted mean and  $\chi^2$  test according to Ward and Wilson, 1978, pp. 19–31), with an approximate calibration obtained by interpolation of key values of the IntCal20 curve. For the definitive publication, it is recommended to use OxCal v4.4 (Bronk Ramsey, 2009; 2021) with the R\_Combine function and the full IntCal20 curve, which will yield exact calibrated probability distributions and formal HPD ranges.

## 5. References

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