A PIONEER BRITISH NAVAL HOSPITAL IN MENORCA

The existence of the British Naval Hospital on the Isla del Rey in the Port of Mahon is known to all.  But perhaps less known are some aspects of its history and architecture.  Or even more so, the possible sense that in  the final analysis and use  of the hospital, Naval or otherwise, at that time at the beginning of the 18th century, when the first British hospital was built on that little island in Port Mahon,  Menorca was already controlled "de facto" if not by right by the English.

We can now put forward some ideas about them.  In April 1711 Admiral Sir John Jennings, Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean fleet, and a resolute sailor,  confirmed with his signature the construction of what would be the first naval hospital,  in Menorca.  This was done before sending details to London the following June, with the plans and budgetary estimates, which had been drawn up on the island the same year.  The author of those had probably been Captain Latham, member of the English-Menorca garrison.  A year later, when Jennings had to give an account of this irregularity, he answered that he had been expecting to obtain permission...."we would have lost the specialist workforce of Mallorcans and Catalans, who had been finishing building various island fortifications."

But in reality the interest in constructing specifically for the navy had started earlier.  Just like the British interest in "Portus Magonis", that fabulous port in the Mediterranean, which had been mentioned by Pliny.  Both matters were slightly exaggerated.  Although still far from 1713 and the Treaty of Utrecht, which ceded the island to the British crown, in 1708 English troops disembarked in Menorca, under the guise of allies of the Spanish who were supporting the Archduke in the War of the Spanish Succession.

Mostly, those who controlled the Menorcan estates, being fervent supporters of the cause, opened their doors.     There is no room in this short article, either due to lack of space nor for the subject which this broaches, to develop further this passionate episode in Menorcan history, which has already consumed a great deal of ink!

Only to mention that, in one form or another, for one or more reasons, during the 17th C the port of Mahon and the Isla were already being re-evaluated along the same lines, as having a prestigious importance.  Now it included international and also maritime traffic.  Not in vain, Menorca found itself in the middle of great maritime convoys sailing around the Mediterranean, like for example the route to Smyrna.  Between them the English and the Dutch, whose commercial companies were developing the East Indian trade throughout the 17th Century.

There are stories about the use of the port of Mahon for wintering these fleets, among others, in the middle and end of the 17thCentury.  During these years,

the English navies did not only seek refuge in the port of Mahon, they also careened and repaired their vessels.  England also sent a Commissioner of Stores and an Agent for the fleet.

In November 1678 Thomas Baker arrived in the port of Mahon, who was the British Consul in Tripoli.  He stayed there until the beginning of January, en route to Genoa and Livorno..  During his stay, other

ships  from Marseille and above all England  arrived.

The maritime movements in the port of Mahon in the second half of the 17thCentury, even during the winter, were very obvious.  Including before, in 1621, it could be noted that the English navies were seeking water and provisions there, whilst patrolling the Barbary coast.  Also, at times, this included the French fleet.

Meanwhile, at the end of the century, vessels with low draft and length

were continuing go be attracted by or to moor in the little port of the capital of the island, Ciutadella.  Or in Fornells, which by then was beginning to become fortified, where few people lived except those in the area of the also new Castle of San Antonio.

But in 1661 England concluded that anxious times were approaching, and it was necessary to consolidate her plans as an emerging power.  That was already clear in 1585, when she rose up against Spain and in support of the Dutch, who were becoming a new maritime power, entering the political power games of the Mediterranean, placing their feet at the doors of the Mare Nostrum.  And followed by Portugal, when they gave their place to Tangier, as part of their wedding dowry to the recently restored Stuart King Charles II of England and Catherine of Braganza.  This alliance was not unusual.  Moreover Portugal had close memories of belonging to Spain and allying itself with England, by means of marital alliances which were customary in those days, to help them strengthen their independence.  But in reality they soon saw that the expectations that the English had placed in them would not be fulfilled.  For that reason and despite having also created a commercial company to exploit the alliance, between 1683/4 these plans were abandoned.

The celebrated journalist, Samuel Pepys, recalls in his writings the vicisitudes of that enterprise.  And England reverted to being outside the Mediterranean.

Then, once again and in the aftermath of the century, Menorca and especially the port of Mahon, appear on the horizon of desires and needs of the English.

Moreover, in the last half of the century, starting in 1680, French naval power was intensifying, with the modernization of their existing naval bases, together with the creation of new ones, along her Mediterranean coasts.  Already with an intuition of what would be fully developing in the 18thCentury; that the sea would be one of the most important and decisive "scenarios" of the game and amongst all in the Mediterranean, one of the most fundamental bases.  With this, Menorca and above all the port of Mahon, could not pass unnoticed and remain at the margin.  Now both the French and the English had turned their attention to the minor Balearic island and its fabulous port.

As  part of this, it was not surprising to note the recent arrival of the English on the island, in 1708,  with "The Sick and Hurt Board" of Britain who sent an agent, Pierce Griffyth, to Menorca, with the immediate order to establish a hospital there.  The primary and already urgent need for naval actions was to find and rent accommodation for some of the sick, which appeared to be a convent in the city of Mahon.

But in the long term the instructions were clearly explicit.  It would be necessary to consult with "the highest ranking naval officer to find the best location to construct a proper and suitable hospital, and to prepare (in Menorca) plans and budgets, for approval by London".  The following year, in 1709, Admiral George Byng and Pierce Griffyth, had estimated a budget of £9,000 for the project.  This was an enormous amount of money in its time, which gives us the idea that it was probably in their minds to construct an important hospital in Menorca.  On the other hand, that being said, it speaks of the most intimate and true intentions to remain in the island which the English had already taken, albeit at a premature date and before the Treaty of Utrecht, beyond the vicissitudes and supporting roles in the War of Succession to the Spanish Throne.

Jennings replaced Byng and the project remained in "cold storage".

But not so the intention.  The initial instructions given to Griffyth were not cancelled with the change in command.  Jennings would use them, with his authority, which we have already noted, to carry out the construction of the first dedicated naval hospital, built especially for the Royal Navy.  The cost was a third of what had been budgeted.  But the English Admiralty, whilst congratulating him for it, delayed the payment.  Until the same Jennings asked for it from Queen Anne, in his own name and that of his brother, also an officer of the fleet, who had paid part of the money from his own pocket,  in order to finance the project.

As a hospital of the Royal Navy outside of England, that of the Isla del Rey in the port of Mahon in 1711 was not only the pioneer, but was unique for   practically 30 years.   In reality two smaller ones had been constructed a few years earlier, but they were small and precarious constructions on every level, on both architectural and medical fronts.  The first was established in Jamaica in 1704.  Although we know little about it, it does not appear to have been more than a series of wooden shelters, which, including in later  years, in 1739, could house only 72 sick.  In 1706 a second hospital was opened, this time in Lisbon, securely situated in rented building.  It would not be until 1860, for example, when a grandiose and neoclassical naval hospital was built in Malta.

But in the 1830s voices were raised also asking for a proper hospital for Gibraltar, where they had only rented some accommodation for minor cases.  The rest were, until then, sent to Menorca.  In 1734 three designs were produced, but, including the largest one,  they could only house 170 patients.

In 1739 the international situation -imminent war with Spain and reinforcement of the English fleet in the Mediterranean - made the need patently clear for a proper hospital on the Rock.  The existing hospital there consisted of two shelters with room for 30 patients...and they had in reality more than 600!  For that reason, in 1741, a hospital with 1000 beds was authorized, which was completed in 1746.  It appears that the accommodations were more spacious in reality than the Menorcan hospital.

Not in vain, more than 30 years had passed since the design of the first naval hospital on the Isla del Rey!  And the studies, both scientific and architectural,

concerning  the evolution for a building for this use and characteristics, were at that time, together with other buildings of this type,  a focus of attention for the illustrious reformists.    England, pioneer in the Century of Light, from the dawn of the century, was also in this specialized camp. Then, in a short time, this uneasiness also manifested itself in France.

Perhaps something of all this could be anticipated with the situation which took place in the middle of the 18thCentury.  From the English point of view, it was the supposed negligence of the French administration, during the short period of their domination of Menorca, between 1756 and 1763, together with inadequate maintenance when the English returned to the island, which brought the building to a state of collapse which it suffered in 1770.  It is not mentioned whether it could be considered or not that there was insufficient interest shown by the British administration,  due to the fact that in the 1740s they had acquired the hospital on the Rock, began, as has been mentioned, in 1746.

But at least then, in the 1770s, Menorca and her hospital continued or perhaps became again of great interest to Great Britain.  For that reason, the naval hospital structure on the Isla del Rey was rebuilt.   And this included increasing its capacity ..... to 1200 beds....and introduced  innovations both in the field of architecture and in health, medicine and hygiene.

(But, given the length we have already reached with this article, all this and much more, will have to stay "on the  back burner", as promised, concerning the true sense and use of naval hospitals in the England of the 18thCentury,  and which  have to be part of another article.)

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