

Hipólito Sans

DATE OF BIRTH Unknown
PLACE OF BIRTH Játiva, Valencia Region
DATE OF DEATH Between October 1604 and 21 October 1605
PLACE OF DEATH Játiva

BIOGRAPHY

References to *La Maltea* and to Hipólito Sans in the works of Spanish literary critics are meagre, and only scanty information about Sans's life is given in Spanish biographical works. In the 1916 *Setabenses ilustres*, under the title *Hipólito Sanz – militar y escritor*, he is described as a Knight of the Order of St John, and his place of birth is given as Játiva. His date of birth is noted as unknown, while his date of death is erroneously given as 1582. The most important detail that transpires from this note is that he took part in the defence of Malta during the 1565 Great Siege, distinguishing himself for his heroic behaviour (Cucarella, *Setabenses ilustres*, p. 94).

The 1931 *Játiva biográfica*, compiled by Ventura Pascual y Beltrán, confirms the details given by Cucarella and quotes a couple of verses from *La Maltea* to prove his poetic prowess. In fact, Pascual y Beltrán here seems merely to be repeating what Vicente Ximeno wrote about Sans in his *Escritores del reyno de Valencia*, published in 1747.

The *Enciclopedia universal*, meanwhile, while adding no new information as to Sans' date of birth and activity during the Siege of Malta or as a writer, somewhat complicates the biographical information, stating that, rather than being a Knight of St John of Jerusalem, he was a Knight of the Order of Santiago, i.e. the Order of St James of the Sword or St James of Compostela, which was founded around 1170. It does not give the source for this information, which is repeated in the *Gran enciclopedia de la region Valenciana* (Mas, *Gran enciclopedia*, vol. 10, p. 204).

According to Mas (*Gran enciclopedia*, vol. 10, p. 203), the Sans family migrated from Catalunya to the various towns of the Valencia region during the 13th century. The branch of the family that settled in Játiva contributed three knights to the Order of Calatrava, five to the Order of Montesa and four to the Order of St John of Jerusalem. Mas confirms the noble status of the Sans family, recording various others of its members who were granted further titles from the latter part of the 16th century.

Sans was part of the group of soldier-writers of the 16th century that included Spaniards such as Garcilaso de la Vega (1503?-36), Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492-1581), Ignacio de Loyola (1491-1556), Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) and the Italian Francisco Balbi de Correggio (1505-89). He took part in the defence of Malta during the siege of 1565, providing information and atmosphere for his poem *La Maltea*.

Sans must have been familiar with Muslim customs and way of life directly in his native town, Játiva, which was home to a relatively numerous community of Moors during the 16th century. In 1563, they amounted to over 11% of a population of about 7,500.

Sans died in Játiva sometime between October 1604 and 21 October 1605. The only heir to his estate was his nephew, Tomás Sanç (González Baldoví, 2013).

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Primary

- N. Antonio, *Bibliotheca hispana nova*, Rome, 1672, vol. 1
 J. Rodriguez, *Biblioteca valentina*, Valencia, 1747
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 L.J. Velasquez, *Origenes de la poesia castellana*, Malaga, 1754

Secondary

- M. González Baldoví, 'Private email communications with contributor', November 2013
 M. Llorens Serra (ed.), *Gran enciclopedia valenciana*, vol. 10, Valencia, 1991
 M. Mas (ed.), *Gran enciclopedia de la región valenciana*, Valencia, 1973, vols 6 and 10
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Enciclopedia universal ilustrada Europeo-Americana, vol. 53, Madrid, 1958
 L. De Salazar y Castro, *Los comendadores de la Orden de Santiago*, Madrid, 1949
 A.L. Javierre Mur, *Pruebas de ingreso en la Orden de San Juan de Jerusalén*, Madrid, 1948
 V. Pascual y Beltrán, *Játiva biográfica*, Valencia, 1931, vol. 2
 P. Cucarella, *Setabenses ilustres*, Carcagente, 1916
 V. Vignau, and F.R. De Uhagon, *Indice de pruebas de los caballeros que han vestido el hábito de Santiago desde el año 1501 hasta la fecha*, Madrid, 1901
Ruolo generale 1555-1797, Lista dei cavalieri, cappellani e serventi d'arme ricevuti nell'Ordine di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme dal 1555 al 1797, Malta, 1886 (MS in National Library, Malta)
 M.G. Ticknor, *Historia de la literatura española*, Madrid, 1854, vol. 3
 M.G. Ticknor, *Historia de la literatura española*, Madrid, 1851, vol. 1

WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

La Maltea

DATE 1582

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Castilian

DESCRIPTION

This work is a fully-fledged epic poem built on the model of the classical tradition deriving from Virgil. The text itself is preceded by two sonnets, an *epistola* addressed to King Philip II of Spain (r. 1556-98) and a prologue addressed to the reader.

In the *Prologo al lector*, Sans explains that his intention in the work is to recount the glory and heroic deeds of the Knights of St John, who had withstood the fierce onslaught of the Ottomans during the Great Siege of Malta in 1565. It has traditionally been accepted that what had spurred Sans on to write was the killing of a young Maltese woman (G.F. Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta*, 1684; G. Bosio, *Dell'istoria della sacra religione et ill.ma militia di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, 1684; I.S. Mifsud, *Biblioteca maltese dell'avvocato Mifsud*, 1764; Galea, *Bibliography*). However, this prologue makes plain his real purpose.

Following the model of the Virgilian epic, *La Maltea* is made up of 12 cantos. Unlike the Aeneid, however, it does not start *in medias res*, nor does it contain a proper love story. The first Canto deals with the Sultan Süleyman's decision to attack Malta, and Grand Master La Valette's preparations to defend the island, while the second Canto gives the numbers defending Malta, and describes the landing of the Turks on the island and the initial skirmishes between Christians and Muslims.

The third Canto highlights the disagreement between the Ottoman leaders Piali Pasha and Mustapha over where to launch the first attack, the attack on St Elmo and the loss of the outer fortification. The fourth Canto relates the completion of the construction of the bridge, mentions a letter sent by the defenders at St Elmo to the Grand Master, portrays the knights going to the defence of the fort and recounts the continuation of the assaults on St Elmo.

The fifth Canto catalogues some of the successes of the Christian defenders, which included the killing of the Bey of Tripoli, Dragut Reis, by means of a flying rock, skirmishes involving the cavalry, and other successful events. The sixth Canto proceeds with the description of the siege, the departure of the *piccolo soccorso* (small relief force) from Sicily

and the fall of St Elmo, and then also digresses into the history of the Order of St John, its foundation, and the procedure followed for the election of the Grand Master.

Cantos 7-9 describe the progress of the siege, and Canto 10 focuses mainly on the arrogant behaviour of the Janissaries, who refuse to obey their general Mustapha's order to continue their attacks, and then describes the eventual defeat of the Turks, because they lacked sufficient troops prepared to fight.

The last two cantos detail the defeat and final retreat of the Turks from Malta, Canto 11 recounting the disenchantment of Mustapha and his troops, and his decision to abandon Malta, and the arrival of the fleet from Sicily to relieve Malta, and Canto 12 describing the final victory of the knights.

SIGNIFICANCE

Sans's epic provides an eyewitness account of the events of the siege, though with the central emphasis always on the Knights of St John; the episode of the young woman which gives the poem its title is a single element within the larger narrative.

The fighting between the Knights Hospitaller and the Ottoman Turks is depicted as a battle for possession of territory. While their respective faith allegiances are not ignored, little is made of these in what is essentially a narrative of a bloody military encounter. This being said, the Ottomans are seen as the aggressors, haughty, fractious and badly led by commanders who disagree, while the Hospitallers are depicted as fighting for what is justly theirs, upholders of the right values, and defenders of Christian Europe. The fact that Sans does not emphasise any of this overmuch indicates that he does not need to because it would be generally accepted by the vast majority of his readership. His reference at the end of the poem to *la antigua religion, invicta, y santa* ('the ancient religion, undefeated and holy') is sufficient to express his sentiments about his own faith and the faith that would presume to overturn it.

PUBLICATIONS

Hipólito Sans, *La Maltea*, Valencia, 1582; Universidad de Santiago de Compostela 1, *3, A-V8, X12 (digitalised version available through *Biblioteca Virtual del Patrimonio Bibliográfico*)



Illustration 10. Detail from *The siege of Malta: Assault on the post of the Castilian knights, 21 August 1565* by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio

STUDIES

- F. Gutierrez Medina, 'El Gran Turco a la caza del halcón maltés. *La Maltea* de Hipólito Sans, Valencia, 1582', in P. García Martí and J.M.D. Borque (eds), *La Peñola y el acero. La idea de cruzada en la España del Siglo de Oro*, Seville, 2004, 129-45
- A. Cassola, *El Gran Sitio de Malta de 1565*, Valencia, 2002
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Arnold Cassola