UDC: 003.071:2-5(262.3)

# 25

# IN SEARCH OF VENUS: A NEW APPROACH TO THE INTERPRETATION OF THE CULT OF VENUS ANSOTICA FROM NIN*

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*Abstract.* – The discovery of a votive inscription dedicated to goddess Anzotica on the peninsula bordering the Nin lagoon was followed by the excavation of a statue of Venus and Priapus and another inscription invoking Venus Ansotica in 1938. Based on the context of the find, M. Abramić proposed the syncretic name Venus Ansotica for the excavated sculpture, which recognises a fusion of Roman and Liburnian divine identities. Subsequently, N. Cambi provided a comprehensive description of the sculpture, and interpreted the associated cult as the embodiment of fertility, universal creation and motherhood, following the earlier suggestions of M. Suić. This paper aims to provide an alternative interpretation of the cult of Venus and Priapus in the Adriatic milieu that incorporates these significant archaeological discoveries. During the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, the worship of Venus in various Adriatic coastal settlements (e.g. Urium, Ancona, Dyrrhachium) is frequently documented in ancient literary sources and epigraphic evidence. While in Roman contexts she appears predominantly in Latin form, she is also attested under her Greek name – Aphrodite (e.g. Cape Leuca, Aphrodite Eutyches), or as a Latin variant with a Greek epithet (e.g. Venus Sosandra, Venus Pelagia). The maritime-oriented Greek cult of the Knidian Aphrodite is undoubtedly the basis for these different names and manifestations. Priapus, a deity inextricably linked to fertility and vegetation, has been mentioned in Greek literature since archaic times and he gained particular importance in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods as a protective figure for fishermen and sailors. Recent archaeological discoveries confirm his reverence in maritime contexts, as evidenced by sanctuaries on ships where he was worshipped as the protector of seafarers. Despite the known importance of the Adriatic for trade and communication with neighbouring coasts and the wider Mediterranean, scholarly discourse often lacks a detailed understanding of the maritime cults of the Adriatic, especially those of

* *In loving memory of my prematurely departed colleagues, Mate Radović and Martina Dubolnić Glavan, whose research was passionately dedicated to Nin.*

indigenous origin. The Liburni are consistently portrayed in the scholarly literature as central players in maritime activities and shipbuilding in the Adriatic. However, there is no concrete evidence of their maritime religious practises, which is remarkable given the frequency of such phenomena among other seafaring peoples, especially Greeks and Phoenicians. A new interpretation of the Venus Ansotica cult could open up new perspectives on this little-researched facet of Adriatic cultural history.

*Key words.* – Nin, Aenona, Venus, Ansotica, Anzotica, Priapus, Adriatic, Liburni, ports, maritime cults.

## Introduction

The Adriatic Sea, an elongated northern extension of the Mediterranean, served as a crucial conduit for prehistoric and historical trade and communication, effectively connecting Central Europe with the wider Mediterranean world. Its coastlines fostered seafaring communities long before they were mentioned by Greek and Roman authors. Among these, the Liburni, who inhabited modern-day northern Dalmatia, are consistently highlighted in scholarly discourse as key figures in maritime activities and shipbuilding in the Adriatic, especially during the late Iron Age and the early Roman imperial period.[1] Despite their prominent maritime identity, there is a notable lack of concrete evidence for the maritime religious practices of the Liburni. This is particularly striking given the widespread occurrence of such phenomena among other seafaring cultures. The inherent perils of seafaring profoundly impacted these communities, establishing it as arguably the most dangerous profession of antiquity. In ancient literature, the Adriatic itself is consistently portrayed as a wild and dangerous sea,[2] further underscoring the likely need for protective deities and rituals among those who sailed its waters. Consequently, the lack of archaeological or textual evidence for Liburnian maritime cults presents a compelling avenue for further scholarly investigation. This paper aims to fill this critical gap by re-examining an archaeological site and the associated finds from present-day Nin (ancient Aenona, see Map 1).

Specifically, it focuses on the sanctuary site itself, two inscriptions mentioning Anzotica and Venus Ansotica, and a sculpture depicting Venus and Priapus, all dated to the 1st century. These artefacts offer unique insights into the religious practices of the Liburni. This paper aims to provide an alternative interpretation of the cult of Venus and Priapus in the Adriatic milieu that incorporates these significant archaeological discoveries.

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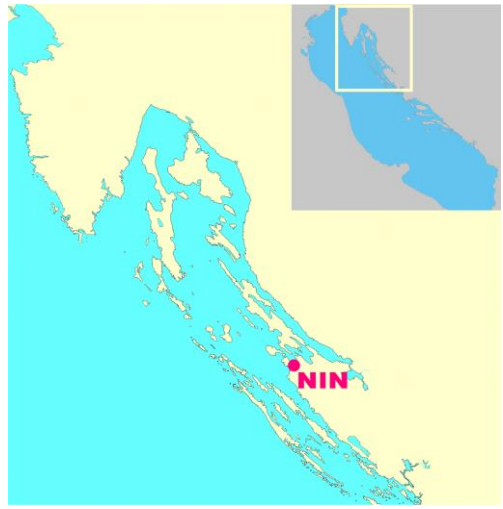
[1] Liburnia, as described by the Roman writers Pliny the Elder (Plin. *HN* 3.139, 3.140–141) and Florus (Flor. *Epit.* 1.21.1) in the 1st century, stretched between the rivers Raša (ancient Arsiae) in eastern Istria and Krka (ancient Titius) in northern Dalmatia. Today, this region includes northern Dalmatia, the coastal area below the Velebit Mountains, the Kvarner region with its islands, and part of eastern Istria.

[2] *…minacis Hadriatici…* Catull. 4.6–9.




Map 1. Geographical location of Nin (ancient Aenona) on the eastern Adriatic coast. (edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

I will argue for a potential connection between these deities and the maritime aspects of the Liburnian religion. To support this claim, I will: 1) provide a comprehensive overview of the site's exploration history and the discovered artefacts; 2) present and analyse less-examined evidence from archival documentation, particularly from Mihovil Abramić's field notebook, which allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the site and finds; 3) offer a reinterpretation of the sanctuary and the cult of Venus Ansotica as a patron deity of the Liburnian sailors.

The analytical framework for this study draws on recent research and comparative studies of the religious beliefs and cultic practices of ancient Mediterranean seafaring communities and anthropological studies of modern traditional seafaring communities, as well as the concept of the maritime cultural landscape.[3] This approach acknowledges that, despite the cultural, geographical, and temporal differences, the fundamental concerns about the sea and the dangers associated with seafaring remain remarkably common to all people living on and around the sea.

## Overview of site research and acquisition of finds

Our knowledge of the site itself, often referred to as the sanctuary of Venus Ansotica in Nin, remains significantly limited in published scholarship. Mihovil Abramić, the then-director of the Archaeological Museum in Split, conducted the initial inspection of the site in 1938. His subsequent

[3] Brody 2008, 9; McNiven 2004, 332–345; Westerdahl 1992, 5, 6.

publications, however, offer only a cursory description, stating that the discovery pertained to a Roman rural sanctuary with a rectangular apse where an inscription dedicated to Venus Ansotica and sculptures of Venus and Priapus were found.[4] Crucially, these publications provide no further detailed information regarding the sanctuary's structure or precise location. A detailed examination of the archival materials housed at the Archaeological Museum in Split has, however, yielded Abramić's original field notebook, which contains two pages of documented information pertaining to this specific locality. This primary source includes previously unpublished data, such as sketches of the walls and more extensive notes on the context of the finds. While the inscriptions and sculptures have been published in detail multiple times by various scholars, this paper presents, for the first time, a comprehensive compilation of all the available information about the site. This includes the sanctuary's appearance based on Abramić's field sketches and descriptions, his autopsy notes, and the finds themselves. This newly-integrated information is critical for a more thorough understanding and reinterpretation of both the site and the associated cult.

Given its significance as a primary source for understanding the sanctuary and its initial appearance, I provide a transcription of the original manuscript alongside scanned documents for a detailed examination (Figs. 1 and 2).

*Abramić's field notebook: unveiling new details*

The notes are dated July 10, 1938, in Nin. The first page of Abramić's notebook (Fig. 1) includes a drawing of the inscription dedicated to Venus Ansotica, alongside its dimensions (44.5 cm wide, 34 cm high), and letter details (3.1–1.7 cm, regular thickness up to 11 cm, frame 6 cm).

Inscription:
VENERI ANSOTIC
SACRUM
BAEBIA C F MAXIMILL
LA EX TESTAMENT
L CORNELI BASSI FECIT

Following this, Abramić describes the sculpture of Venus and its base. Base of Venus: simply made, 38 x 29 x 13.5 cm high. Oval shape. Statue (with head above base): 86.5 cm. Largest width near the head: 33 cm. Thickness of the statue at the buttocks: 17 cm. The statue stands on a 4 cm high base.

[4] Abramić 1939, 200–202; id. 1940, 174–175.

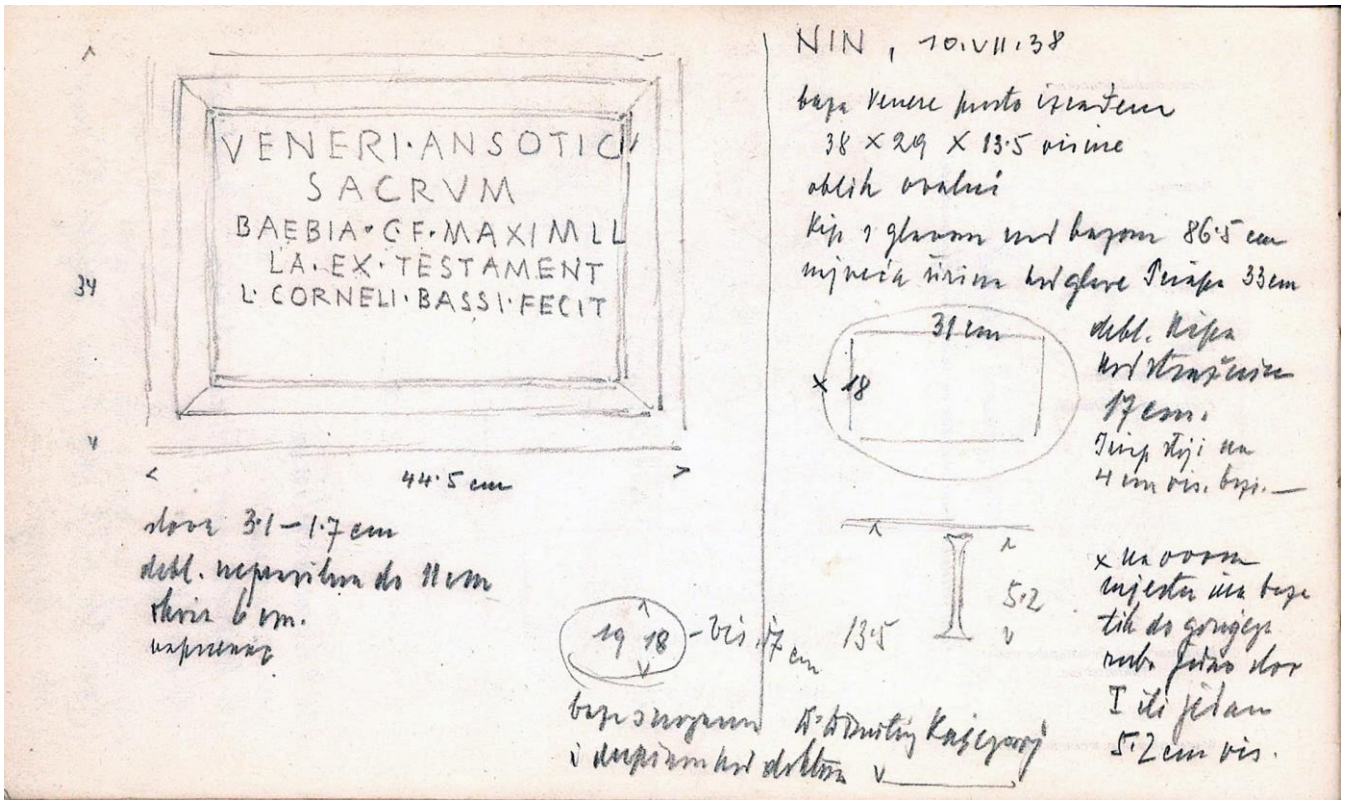



Fig. 1. Field notebook from the archive of M. Abramić at the Archaeological Museum in Split, with a sketch of the site and finds (notebook No. 10, Fol. 61v). Archaeological Museum in Split

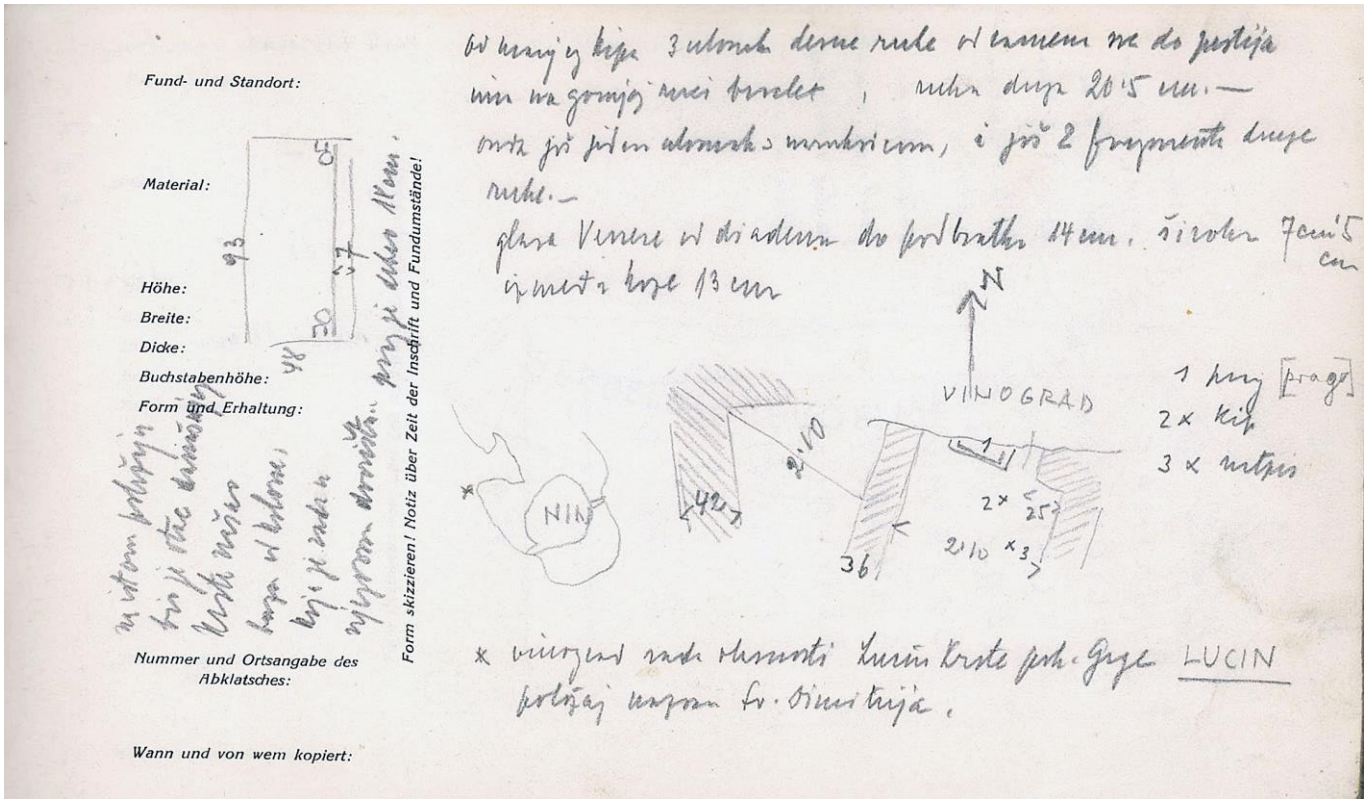



Fig. 2. Field notebook from the archive of M. Abramić at the Archaeological Museum in Split, with a sketch of the site and finds (notebook No. 10, Fol. 61v). Archaeological Museum in Split

A mark "X" on the base sketch near the number 18 indicates the point where the base extends to the upper edge, possibly marked with the Roman numeral "I" (5.2 cm high) within a 13.5 cm high base.

The lower center of the page features an oval sketch (diameter 19–18 cm, height 7 cm) with a pedestal with feet, referencing Dr Dimitrij Snjegovoj, and an inscription on the V_____, which is also in his possesion.

The second page (Figs. 2 and 3) includes a sketch and a description noting the discovery of a column base by Krsto's father,[5] now located in their courtyard. Its dimensions are a rectangular slab measuring 93 cm wide, 48 cm long, and 7 cm high, with a thickness of 18 cm.[6] The sketch also marks indentations resembling joints for brackets. Crucially, the field notebook also reveals information about the existence of other fragments of arms that Abramić himself never explicitly mentions in his later publications.[7]

Of the smaller statue, there are three fragments of the right arm from the shoulder to the fingers, with a bracelet on the upper arm. The arm is 20.5 cm long. Then, there is another fragment with a bracelet and two more fragments of the other arm.[8]

The head of Venus, from the diadem to the chin, is 14 cm long, 7 cm wide, 5 cm and 13 cm between the hair.

Following this textual description, the manuscript contains a schematic representation of the archaeological site (Figs. 2 and 3). This sketch uses asterisks to demarcate a key area of interest in relation to the island of Nin and the bridges connecting it to the mainland, giving the viewer a clear orientation by indicating the position of the north. The illustration also shows the spatial arrangement of the discovered architectural

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[5] Krsto Lucin, the owner of the vineyeard where the arhcaeological finds were discovered.

[6] These dimensions are similar to the stone which can be still be seen today on the surface in the olive grove, a former vineyeard owned by the Lucin family, which is the original location of the sanctuary, see Fig. 13.

[7] In the 1939 article, when describing the statue, he says that it is without arms, and a bit later in the text he emphasises that the right arm was raised; unfortunately only the upper arm adorned with a bracelet has survived. The left arm was lowered, at least the upper arm, as can be seen from the fragment reaching up to the chest.

[8] The late Svjetlana Pjaca, a then-employee of the Nin Museum of Antiquities, once pointed out to me the existence of other arm fragments and informed me that her father-in-law had been present when the statue fragments were transported in a wheelbarrow, and that arm fragments mentioned in Abramić's field notebook had also been brought to the Museum located in the St. Cross Chapel (Sv. Križ) at the time. However, Abramić himself does not mention the fragments of the arms in his publications. He only mentions the smaller statues of Venus. As far as I can tell from the existing documentation in the Archaeological Museum in Split, the arm fragments did not even leave Nin when the statue was resold and began its journey from Nin to Zagreb to finally be housed in the Archaeological Museum in Split. Nevertheless, it is certainly interesting to have confirmation from the archive of this story still known to the locals in Nin.

remains (walls), the location of a vineyard, and the positions of the inscription and the statue in situ within the identified building structure.

Following the asterisk on the site plan, the accompanying textual information clarifies that the vineyard depicted in the sketch is currently used by Lucin Krste, the heir of the deceased Grge, and is located opposite Sv. Dimitrija (St Demetrius).

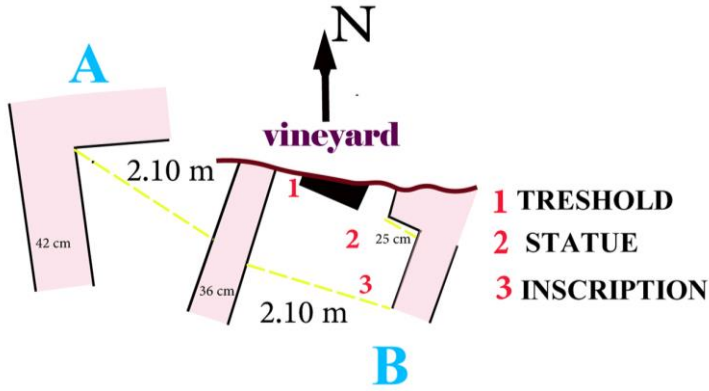


Fig. 3. Digitally rendered schematic representation derived from the data contained within the field notebook of M. Abramić (number designations in Croatian: 1 threshold – kraj (prag), 2 statue (kip), 3 inscription (natpis) (edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

### *Initial discoveries (1936–1938) and controversial acquisitions*

The initial discoveries pertaining to the site are linked to an inscription referencing Anzotika. In early 1936, this inscription, originating from the vicinity of Nin, was acquired by the Archaeological Museum in Zadar, then operating as the R. Museo Archeologico di Zara, under the Kingdom of Italy. At that historical juncture, Nin was under the jurisdiction of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Critically, the inscription arrived devoid of contextual information or precise provenance. Edoardo Galli subsequently undertook its initial publication, classifying the artefact as a funerary monument. He provided the following description: dimensions 0.465 m x 0.280 m x 0.90 m, letter height 0.055 m, yellowish limestone, and dated the inscription to the 3rd century.[9] He suggested the following reading of the inscription:

T APPVLEIUS T L L ANTICONUS
ANZOTICAE
V.S.

[9] Galli 1936, 481.

This inscription was subsequently mentioned twice more in Italian publications. In 1937, Attilio Degrassi commented on the dedication himself and suggested that it referred to a local goddess, Anzotica, and that it was not a funerary inscription.[10] In 1939, E. Galli discussed in an article new finds from Nin that had been discovered in 1938 – a statue of Venus with Priapus, which he attributed to Aphrodite and Silenus, and a newly-found inscription dedicated to Venus Ansotica, which he linked to the earlier discovered inscription from Nin, now kept in the museum in Zadar. On this occasion, he also published a photograph of these finds from Nin itself before they left the site.[11]

Archive correspondence from the museum in Split reveals that the museum in Zadar then tried to acquire the statue and the new inscription.[12] However, the landowner where these archaeological artefacts were discovered sold them to a higher bidder, a Zagreb merchant named Hinko Lederer. The numerous twists and turns – worthy of the best movie thrillers – which were followed by the media and the public at the time, brought considerable attention and popularity to the Nin Venus.[13] The statue of the goddess and Priapus, along with the inscription, eventually ended up in the Archaeological Museum in Split, where it remains in the permanent collection to this day.[14]

A detailed description of the finds was first published by Mihovil Abramić in 1939,[15] and in the same year, at the International Congress of Archaeology in Berlin, he presented the latest findings from then-Yugoslavia

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[10] Degrassi 1937, 287–288.

[11] Galli 1939, 50–53. The photo is on page 51, with a note where Galli himself states that he received the information and two small photos from a Mr. Tanino, a surveyor working for the civil engineering department in Zadar, who had acquired them from his superior, engineer Ettore Vacchi, on the basis of which he wrote the aforementioned article.

[12] In a formal letter addressed to the Nin Police Station (Sreska ispostava Nin), dated July 19, 1938, Dr Mihovil Abramić, the Director of the Archaeological Museum in Split, expressed his concern and warned of the potential danger for archaeological finds from the Nin area to be smuggled into Italian-controlled Zadar. Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol No. 261/1939.

[13] *Jutarnji list*, Zagreb, June 28, 1939, under the headline "Kip Ninske Venere izložen u Arheološkom muzeju"; *Štandarac*, Split, November 12, 1939, reports that the statue has finally arrived at the Archaeological Museum in Split from Nin and Zagreb.

[14] Extensive documentation on these events has been preserved in the archives of the Archaeological Museum in Split. Given the extent of this archival material, and its importance both as a historiographical and a museological phenomenon, it warrants its own scholarly publication. The partial presentation presented here serves as a valuable primary source for clarifying gaps in the archaeological finds and the contextual circumstances of their transfer to the museum in Split over the course of almost a year since the discovery. However, it is important to note that the accession register of the Archaeological Museum in Split does not contain a precise record of receipt of the inscription and the sculpture into the museum's collection. This lack of specific accession dates is particularly notable given the detailed documentation of the sculpture's journey from its departure from Nin to its arrival in Split.

[15] Abramić 1939, 200–202.

to the scholarly community, including a description of the statue found and the inscription dedicated to Venus Ansotica, which was subsequently published in 1940.[16]

He provides only a few sentences about the circumstances of the find and the site itself. In June 1938, on the edge of a vineyard belonging to Krsto Lucin, of the deceased Grgo, at location named St. Demetrius, not far from Nin, towards the northwest, rain washed away and revealed ancient walls. Abramić notes that an inscription had been removed from this place earlier, which he identifies as the same inscription of Anzotica that is in the Zadar Museum.[17] This prompted the villager to dig further at the location,[18] and he discovered the statue of Venus and Priapus, as well as an inscription, along with some smaller fragments, which Abramić assumes in his 1940 article to be fragments of other small Venus statues.[19] The discovered walls were only partially uncovered, and Abramić interprets them as a small rural sanctuary with a rectangular floor plan and a rectangular apse.[20]

### *Additional archival information*

The archival documentation from the Archaeological Museum in Split provides crucial details regarding the discovery and controversial acquisition of the Nin finds. Mihovil Abramić visited Nin from July 9 to July 11, 1938. During this time, he inspected the site, sketched the remains of discovered walls, noted the sanctuary's location, and sketched the finds located in the house of Krsto Lucin in Nin and at the residence of Dr Dimitrije V. Snjegovoj, all attributed to the same archaeological site. In a letter to the District Office in Nin dated July 19, 1938,[21] and again to the Royal Ba-

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[16] Abramić 1940, 174–175.

[17] Abramić 1939, 200; id. 1940, 174.

[18] While Abramić does not mention in his publications the identity of the persons responsible for the excavation of the above-mentioned archeological finds, archival documents from the Archeological Museum in Split show the involvement of two key figures in their discovery and subsequent sale: Nikola Štulić and Krsto Lucin. Lucin, the landowner, in particular, made an official declaration about the finds to the Biograd district authorities. This distinction is important, as the existing literature wrongly attributes the discovery of a particular sculpture in 1935 to Nikola Štulić alone (Štulić Boyan 2008, 17). However, a formal communication from Abramić to the Nin police station introduces another layer of complexity. In this correspondence, Abramić explicitly states that the sculpture was, indeed, discovered in 1938 by Nikola Štulić, known by the alias "Niconja". Abramić also characterises Štulić as a well-known smuggler who had sold artefacts in Zadar in the past. This raises the possibility that Štulić was responsible for the sale of the inscription dedicated to Anzotica, which entered the collection of the Zadar Museum in 1936. However, it must be noted that there is no explicit documentary evidence directly linking Štulić to the sale of the Anzotica inscription.

[19] Abramić 1940, 174.

[20] Abramić 1940, 174–175.

[21] Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol No. 261/1939.

nate Administration – Administrative Department on July 22 1938,[22] Abramić writes that a statue with a 1 m high pedestal of the goddess Venus, accompanied by a smaller statuette of the fertility god Priapus, was found in the vineyard of the farmer Krsto Lucin, son of the late Grga, in Nin. Krsto Lucin was the landowner and owner of the finds, but the true finder of the sculpture was Nikola Štulić. He states that on July 10, 1938, he personally inspected the statue and an inscription, which, at the time, were in the house of the aforementioned Lucin, and at the place of discovery west of Nin. On that occasion, he offered to purchase the statue in order to include the finds in the then-existing collection of the Holy Cross (Sv. Križ) in Nin, but the owner was not willing to sell, awaiting a more favourable offer.

Concerned about the finds upon, returning to Split he wrote to the office in Nin and warned: "Since the finder of this antiquity, the notorious looter of the prehistoric and Roman tombs of Nin, Nikola Štulić /also known as Niconja/, has already sold antiquities from Nin in Zadar /Italy/ several times without permission, and since he is now advising Lucin Krsto to smuggle the find to Zadar, the undersigned directorate requests that Lucin Krsto be officially warned about the regulations and orders concerning the protection of antiquities in our country and that he be cautioned..."

However, already on July 21, 1938, Abramić received a telegram from Maštrović[23] stating that the finds had been sold to private individuals and had left Nin (Fig. 4). The telegram and correspondence with the Biograd District Office in Nin dated July 22, 1938, indicate that the finds were sold to Professor Marko Lederer, Ilica 139 Zagreb, for 6,000 dinars and that he transported them to Zagreb by car.

Despite this, in a letter to the Royal Ban Administration – Split Administrative Department, Abramić states that both the statue and the inscription are located in the house of Hinko Lederer, Mošinkoga 7 in Zagreb, which is confirmed by the invoice for their purchase from the same individual (Fig. 5) as well as later statment given at police station in Zagreb March 14 1939.[24]

Later documents show that the actual buyer was Hinko Lederer, who claimed in his statement of May 31, 1939 that he had bought the statue from

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[22] Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol No. 261/1938.

[23] Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol from 1938. Based on the temporal context and the local knowledge, the Maštrović mentioned in these documents is likely Vjekoslav Maštrović, known as Slavko in the Nin community. His documented age of 25 in 1938 and avowed interest in history and archaeology, as well as his summer visits to Nin, which coincided with Mihovil Abramić's archaeological excavations, strongly suggest that he was involved in or aware of these events. The provision of this information by Petra Maštrović Kušić and her uncle, prof. Tihomil Maštrović, is gratefully acknowledged.

[24] Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol from 1939.

Nin,21.VII 938

Velecijenjeni gospodine Abramiću !

Danas sam primio Vaš list od 20.tmj.,a jutros sam Vam otpremio telegram koji Vas je sjegurno ne malo iznenadio.

Stvar se desila ovako:

Sinoć nenadno došao u Nin auto sa dva gospodina,koji su odmah pitali za Lucina.Interesirali su se odmah za kip i nudili mu do 4500 D.,ali ovaj nije popustao već stalno držao na 10.000:-D.,našto su ovi napustili i otišli u Zadar te se povratili nakon pola sata i dali mu odmah 10000 D. zatim sve nekako tainstveno i nekom trkom otišli put Zadra,ali kako nisu svi imali uredne isprave već samo jedan koji je od granice otišao pješke u Zadar,a ovima drugima kazao: idite u Biograd n/m doći ću po vas italjanskim autom."

Kako sam baš jučer imao jednog gosta i snjime iamo posla do sam sve ovo doznao "post faktum",tako da sam sinoć preko graničara i žandarma digao cijelu trku po granicama ede se sprijeći evantualni prolaz u Zadar.- Do ovog momenta kako sam saznao,izgleda da nije otišlo u Zadar,već izravno u Zagreb. Radi svega ovog jutros sam tražio telefonsku vezu Splitom da Vas o svemu obavjestim i da eventualno nešto na vrijeme poduzmete,ali od osam sati do 12 sati nemogoh dobiti i tako sam Vam brzojavio.

Naknadno sam saznao,jer su ih zandarmi srećom u zadnji momenat legitimisali,te se isti zovu Ovako:

1/Lederer Finko,trgovac - Zagreb
2/Lederer Marko,navodno profesor -Zagreb /Ilica 159/

Onaj prvi imade pašoš Br.25/1369/36.

Auta br.8229/III

Ovi su bili pogledati i zemljižte,te su vlasniku otvoreno rekli,da su vojlni oni kopati i platiti mu uvjek više nego li Vi,zatim su mu učinili ponudu za koju mu dali rok da razmisli.-Ovaj mi je jutros prkosno rekao: odlučio sam se i ponudu prihvačam te im odnah danas još pišem." Čuju se sada kojekakvi čakuli,tako i to da Vama neće nikako dati kopati itd.... Mislim,bilo bi uputno da odmah preko policije dadete utvrditi,tko je taj i spriječiti to kopanje po nepoznatim licima,jer nije isključeno da su u vezi sa Zadrom ili slično .....

Da sam ja znao samo momenat prije bili bi nekako spasili,ali velim Vam sve je išlo amerikanskom brzinom,a doznao sam kad je bilo sve gotovo

Ako zbilja imadete namjeru kopati,mislim bezobzira na kišu bilo bi dobro započeti,a šteta da niste odmah.

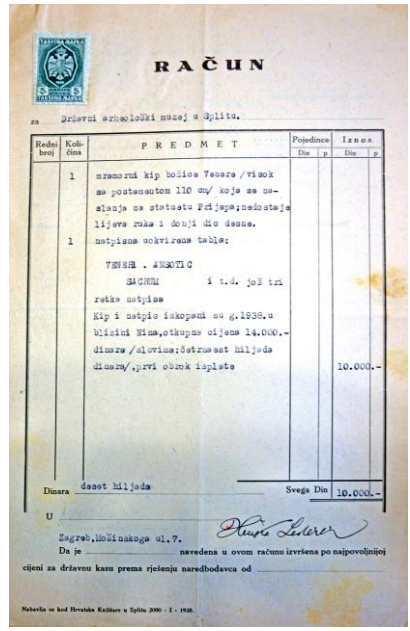
Pozdravlja Vas i poštuje

odani

J. Mustrović

Fig. 4. Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol from 1938

Marko Lederer on his way from Nin to Zagreb. This is not entirely consistent with his statement of September 2, 1938 in the report of the Nin District Office to Zagreb, where he himself, as quoted, stated that "Dr Ivo Maiksner and Marko Lederer... bought this statue for my account." On May 3, 1939, at Abramić's initiative, the Biograd District Office was ordered to confiscate the statue from Hinko Lederer, who had already owned it for 11 months. Lederer appealed against this decision and requested that the statue be kept in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb until a court ruling, a request confirmed by Viktor Hofiler, then-director of the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb.[25] Although legal proceedings were initiated, the criminal prosecution was dropped due to insufficient evidence of guilt. However, a settlement was reached regarding the purchase of the statue and inscription, which were acquired by the Archaeological Museum in Split.[26]



RAČUN

za Državni arheološki muzej u Splitu.

| Redni broj | Količina | PREDMET | Pojedince Din | p | Iznos Din | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | mramorni kip božice Venere /ženak sa postamentom 110 cm/ koje se nalazaja sa statuete Priapa;nedostaje lijeva ruka i donji dio desne. | | | | |
| | 1 | natpisna ukrivena ploča: VENERI . ANSOTI C SACRUM i t.d. još tri retka natpisa Kip i natpis iskopani su g.1938.u blizini Nina,ukupna cijena 14.000.- dinara /slovima:četrnaest hiljada dinara/,prvi obrok isplaćen | | | 10.000.- | |

Dinara deset hiljada Svega Din 10.000.-

U

Zagreb,Iločkoga ul.7. Dr. Ivo Lederer

Da je navedena u ovom računu izvršena po najpovoljnijoj cijeni za državnu kasu prema rješenju naredbodavca od

Fig. 5. Invoice of purchase, Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol

## Archaeological site: geographical location and topography

The peninsula (Fig. 6) on which the inscription of Venus Ansotica and the sculpture of Venus and Priapus were found, together with the Ždrijac peninsula, flanks the entrance to today's port of Nin (Usta) from the northwest and is known by the locals by the double name Rivine – Punta. (Fig. 7)[27]

The tip of the peninsula is called Punta, while the southern part, where the archeological site is located, is called Rivine. Apart from in the local oral tradition, in more recent literature and on topographic maps, the place is referred to as Belotinjak, although the cape itself does not have a unique name (Map 2). On cadastral maps from the 19th century, the

[25] Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol No. 1270/1939; Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol from 1939.

[26] Archaeological Museum in Split, Archive, Museum Protocol from 1939.

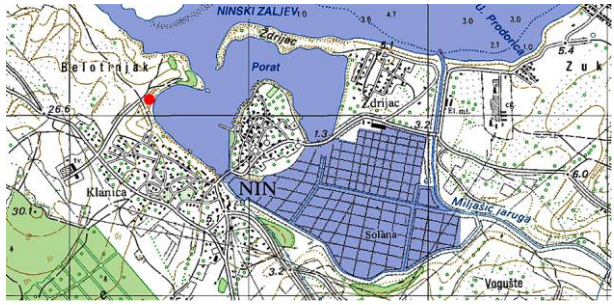
[27] Dubolnić Glavan 2015, 297–298; Štulić Boyan 2008, 17.

peninsula is called Draga (*Dragha*)[28] and is divided into parcels, while Belotinjak (or the variant Bilotinjak) is marked southwest of Klanica (historically *Borgho di Nona*) in the direction of Zaton and Zadar (Map 3).

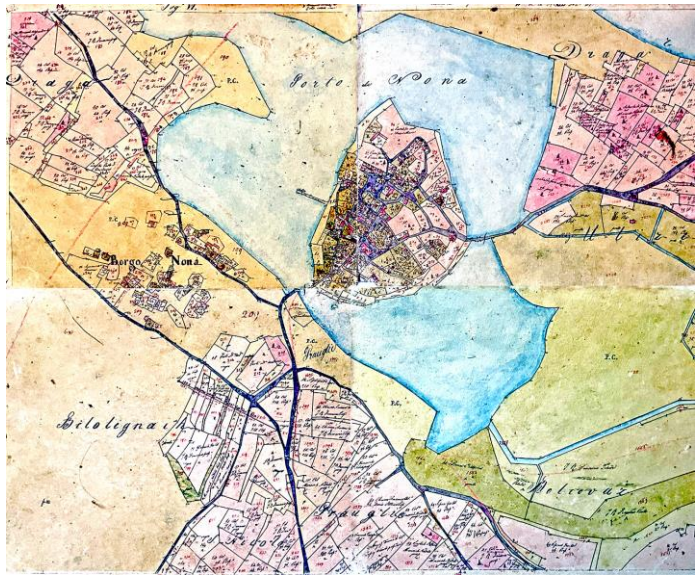
Fig. 6. Rivine – Punta, the peninsula with the site of the sanctuary of Venus Ansotica (photo by Boris Kačan, © Nin Tourist Board)

Fig. 7. Aerial photo of Nin, view from the southeast, the entrance to today's port of Nin (Usta) flanked by Rivine – Punta and the Ždrijac peninsula (photo by Boris Kačan, © Nin Tourist Board)

[28] The term *draga* is an important reference to the landscape of the time. It is a small bay formed by the flooding of the lower part of a valley of erosive origin.




Map 2. Topographic map of Nin at a scale of 1:25,000, the site is marked with a red dot (edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

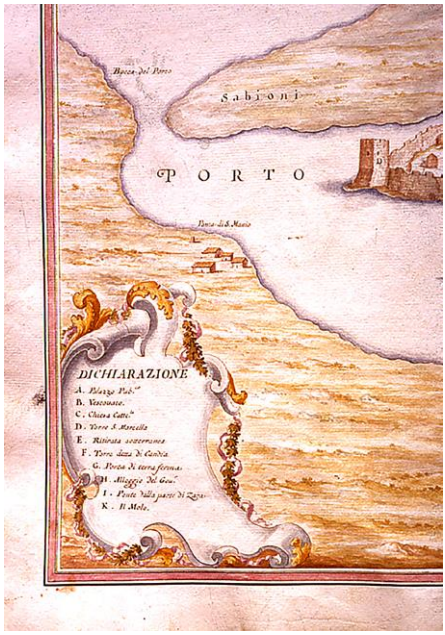



Map 3. Map archive from 1836, positions of Draga, Bilotinjak and Borgo di Nona (today Klanice), HR-DAZD-382, Administration for Cadastral Survey (1823–1839), No. 580-Nin, Sheets 2, 6 (edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

A particularly interesting source for studying the topography and location of Nin is a detailed drawing of a map from 1708 published by Pavuša Vežić (Map 4).[29] On the left side of the map, the harbour entrance is labelled Bocca del Porto (today Usta) and the harbour itself is labeled

[29] This is a particularly valuable cartographic source for the study of the historical topography of Nin. It is kept in the War Archive in Vienna (Kriegsarchiv Wien, G. I. a 6–5f. VII). It is an elaborate panorama of the lagoon and the town on the island, seen from the south, with many well-documented topographical details of both the lagoon and the town. In the upper part of the drawing there is a long vignette with the inscription: *Prospetto della città di Nona dalla parte d'Africo.* Vežić, 2020, 548, Fig. 9.

Porto (today Porat). Next to it is a promontory called Ponta di S. Mattio, with a hamlet and a small ruin – possibly the remains of the church of St. Mattio. This church is very close to the Roman archaelogical site of the sanctuary of Venus. This map from the early 18th century is the only one on which the name of the cape is recorded, and the name Punta locally used today is possibly a remnant of this original designation.




Map 4. Vignette of a veduta of Nin in aerial view from the southwest, 1708, Giuseppe Juster, Prospetto della città di Nona dalla parte d'Africo – War Archives in Vienna (Kriegsarchiv Wien) (Vežić, 2020, 548, Fig. 9)

Filipi refers to the area Rt Klanice (Cape Klanice) in his overview of the churches of Nin in early modern documents and quotes De Grassis, who says that the church once stood by the sea in the Bay of Nin, although it no longer existed in the 19th century. In 1603, Priuli mentioned that he had seen the location of this rural church, which was allegedly demolished during the war by order of the government, so it had already ceased to exsist in the 17th century, which could explain the loss of its name.[30] According to historical maps, the peninsula was neither built on nor settled in modern times, but was partly used for agriculture (Map 3). Public interest in the site was sparked in the 1930s by the discovery of archeological finds. At that time, the land was privately owned by Krsto Lucin, who also had a vineyard there.[31]

[30] Filipi 1969, 569. The loss of the name can also be explained by the fact that this area was no longer used in the context of maritime terminology. Based on historical maps, we can observe that over the next 300 years the area was mainly used for agriculture.

[31] The cadastre from the 19th century shows that part of the land on which the finds were discovered previously belonged to the Štulić family; in 1836, Mijat Antin's daughter, Tereza,

It is important to note here that a toponym or an ecclesiastical institution in Nin attributed to St. Demetrius, mentioned by M. Abramić to be an important geographical feature of the site "located opposite Sv. Dimitrija", is not documented in historical or archaeological records, nor is this name known among the local population. A plausible explanation for this discrepancy lies in a possible mix-up by Mihovil Abramić himself. An examination of his manuscript shows the notation "Sv. Dimetrija"; however, it is conceivable that this does not refer to the saint, but to the aforementioned Dr Dimitrije Vasiljevič Snjegovoj, who literally lived and worked on the other side of the archaeological site.[32] (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Location of the site across the Antimalaria Station where Dr Snjegovoj worked (photo by Boris Kačan, © Nin Tourist Board, edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

from the Štulić family "dovela je u vlaštvo Lucina", i.e., she married a man with the surname Lucin, Štulić Boyan 2008, 155.

[32] Dr Dimitrije Vasiljevič Snjegovoj (1882–1943) was born in Russia. Between the two world wars, he worked as a doctor and lived with his wife, Zinaida, in Nin. He was a collector of antiquities from Nin, especially Liburnian and Roman archaeological artefacts,. This valuable collection was donated to the Archaeological Museum in Zadar by his widow Zinaida (mentioned by Batović, 1965, 278; also https://hvm.mdc.hr/arheoloski-muzej-zadar,538:ZDR/hr/zbirke/?zbId=7436). He also painted watercolours of Nin vedute and drew motifs of gladiators and various animals from the Roman mosaic in Šalov's garden onto glass plates. This material is kept in the Archaeological Museum in Zadar, with the exception of the composition with two gladiators, which is in the permanent exhibition of the museum in Nin. The author would like to thank Marija Kolega for providing this information. For the location of Dr Snjegovoj's house in Nin, my thanks go to Ivan Čondić from the Archaeological Museum in Zadar, who provided detailed information with photos and location on the map, as well as to Professor Tihomil Maštrović, who confirmed that Dr Snjegovoj had actually worked at the Antimalaria Station.

*Present-day state of the site*

Aerial photographs (Figs. 9 and 10) from the 50's and 60's of the previous century[33] show a karstic terrain, which, unlike today, is used for cultivation. The plots have since been filled in and some planted with olive trees, while other areas are overgrown (Fig. 11).[34]

Fig. 9. Aerial photo of Nin, situation before 1955 (Archaeological Museum in Zadar)

[33] The dating of the photographs, lacking direct indicators, was accomplished through visual analysis conducted by Robert Maršić, Senior Photo Archivist at the Archaeological Museum in Zadar. This methodology involved the identification and contextualization of buildings and landscape characteristics depicted in the images. Fig. 9 was also published by Batović 1965, 3, T. 1.

[34] The parcels are still owned by the descendants of Krsto Lucin, most of whom have emigrated to the USA and Australia, while only a few have remained in Nin and Croatia. The parcels are located in the building zone of the town of Nin according to the town's spatial development plan (PPUGN), so it is expected that this entire area – an attractive place by the sea – will be built on in the future. This is important due to the archaeological site itself and the potential remains that have survived since the 1930s. Although literature often claims that the site has been completely destroyed, this should be taken with caution, and a re-excavation should be carried out to determine the actual condition of the site. http://grad-nin.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/list-4.1-gp-nin-i-grbe-sggn-05_22.pdf

Fig. 10. Aerial photo of Nin, situation between 1958–1965
(Archaeological Museum in Zadar)

Fig. 11. Present-day situation of the site, with an olive grove (photo by Lucijana Šešelj)

A recent survey of the site revealed several small heaps of stones, piled along the edges of the plots during clearing, which may mark old plot boundaries or even be associated with archeological remains (Fig. 12).[35]

[35] A superficial examination of the stones in the piles shows no traces of binding material, so it is unlikely that they were part of the remains of the aforementioned Roman sanctuary.

A large limestone left on the surface may possibly correspond to the remains documented by Mihovil Abramić, who examined and recorded the finds either on site or in the possession of the landowner (see description in Abramić's notebook, Fig. 2). Dimensions of the stone: length 104 cm, width 43 cm, height 15–18 cm (Fig. 13).[36]

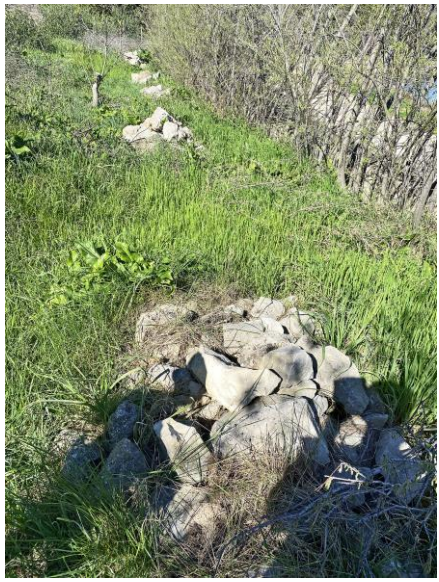


Fig. 12. Piles of stones at the site (photo by Lucijana Šešelj)

Fig. 13. Stone on the surface in the olive grove, possibly part of the Roman sanctuary (photo by Lucijana Šešelj)

It is assumed that the site was considerably, if not completely, destroyed and that the sanctuary mentioned in the literature no longer exists. This must be taken into account when considering whether remains of a Roman sanctuary still exist and how any future archaeological re-evaluation should be conducted.

*Analysis of archaeological remains and finds*

Based on the available archival evidence, it is evident that at least two architectural units attributable to a sanctuary existed on the Rivine – Punta peninsula (Figs. 2, 3, 14). These structures appear to represent two distinct chronological phases.

[36] The stone lies partially in the ground and should be turned over and examined more closely.

*Architectural structures (Structure A and Structure B)*

The schematic representation shows the remains of a corner formed by two walls, one of which has a measured width of 42 cm. The adjacent section of wall is recognizable, but was not excavated in its entire width. For simplicity, these elements are designated as **Structure A** in the digitised sketch (Fig. 3). A distance of 2.10 m separates Structure A from a second architectural unit labelled as **Structure B**. Structure B consists of the remains of two parallel walls, which are also 2.10 m apart, with one wall being 36 cm wide. The second wall has an extension of 25 cm. As there are no specific measurements for this second wall beyond the extension, it is reasonable to hypothesise that its original width was comparable to the first, resulting in a total width of 61 cm for the extended section, which probably corresponds to Abramić's description of a rectangular apse. The lack of an implied extension on the opposite parallel wall is remarkable, which makes the interpretation of an apse appear questionable. The original sketch (Fig. 2) marks an unexcavated terminus or threshold with the numeral 1, the exact nature of which remains unclear. The walls of Structure A are thicker and aligned at an angle of about 45 degrees to the two parallel, narrower walls of Structure B, strongly suggesting that they do not belong to the same architectural complex. A hypothetical extrapolation of the wall lines based on the existing sketch (Fig. 14) clearly shows them overlapping, indicating that the walls probably belong to distinct phases of construction. Furthermore, the extension observed on one wall cannot be definitively accepted as irrefutable evidence for the existence of a rectangular apse, as proposed by Abramić in the literature, and certainly does not correspond to later interpretations of a semicircular apse or niche. While the possibility of a decorative extension for the placement of a statue cannot be completely ruled out, the lack of corroborating data leaves these hypotheses open to further investigation. Given the limited extent of the excavated area and the incompleteness of the excavation, a definitive determination of the exact nature and chronological phases of these architectural features remains a challenge, especially in the absence of associated archeological finds beyond the aforementioned inscription and sculpture linked to Structure B.

With no systematic professional excavation of the site and no contextual information on the finds, it is impossible to definitively assign a chronological framework to Structure A. Accepting Abramić's interpretation regarding the placement of the inscription and sculpture in relation to Structure B, the latter could be tentatively dated to the 1st century AD. As the walls of Structure A lie at least partially beneath Structure B, it is inevitably older than the latter; however, further chronological resolution is unattainable without additional archeological evidence. The data presented in the field notebook clearly indicate the discovery of architectural frag-

ments and several additional sculptural fragments at this site, but the lack of precise descriptions or photographic documentation precludes their definitive chronological attribution to either architectural structure.

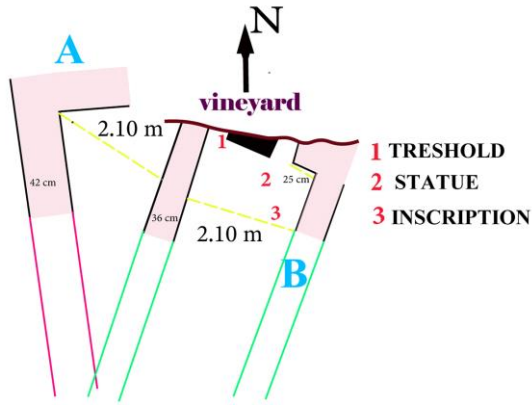



Fig. 14. A digitally rendered schematic, derived from M. Abramić's field notebook and incorporating a hypothetical extrapolation of the wall lines, indicates the presence of two distinct architectural units representing two separate construction phases (edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

*The votive inscription of Venus Ansotica*

The inscription attributed to Structure B, its position marked by number 3 in the sketch, is a votive inscription dedicated to Venus Ansotica by Baebia Maximilla (Fig. 15).

*Veneri Ansotic(ae) / sacrum / Baebia C(ai) f(ilia) Maximil/la ex testament(o) / L(uci) Corneli Bassi fecit.*[37]

The inscription is made of yellowish limestone, measuring 34 cm high, 44.5 cm wide and 13.5 cm thick. The inscription is now broken into three parts, with clamps and adhesive applied to the top and sides for preservation.

*The votive inscription of Anzotica*

According to Abramić, the other inscription found earlier and published originally by Galli, which is now deposited in the Archaeological Museum in Zadar, comes from this same site.[38] It is a votive inscription dedicated to Anzotica (Fig. 16).

[37] Galli 1939, 52–53; Abramić 1939, 202; id. 1940, 175; AE 1940 6; Suić 1969, 73; Cambi 1980, 276–277; Kurilić 1999, No. 2931; EDH 020721; EDCS 15700109; Lupa 32857.

[38] This inscription should be dated in 1936 according to a publication by Galli, and not in 1938 as noted in the Museum inventory records, Inv. No. A7284.

*T(itus) Appuleius T(itti) L(iberti) L(libertus) Antigonus / Anzoticae / v(otum) s(olvit).*[39]

The inscription is made of limestone, measuring 28.2 cm in height, 46.2 cm in width, and 9–10 cm in thickness.


Fig. 15. Votive inscription from Aenona dedicated to Venus Ansotica by *Baebia Maximilla*, (photo by Tonći Seser, © Archaeological Museum in Split; Inv. No. A-5374)


Fig. 16. Votive inscription from Nin dedicated to Anzotica by T. Appuleius Antigonus, (photo by Ortolf Harl, © Archaeological Museum in Zadar; Inv. No. A7284)

[39] Degrassi 1937, 287–288; AE 1938, 31; Galli 1939, 52; Abramić 1940, 174; Suić 1969, 73; Kurilić 1999, No. 2876; EDH 021960; EDCS 15900045; Lupa 24147.

*The sculpture of Venus with a small Priapus*

The sculpture was initially described and published by M. Abramić in 1939, followed by a subsequent publication in 1940.[40] Later, M. Suić devoted more attention to it,[41] and a detailed stylistic-artistic and iconographic analysis was conducted by N. Cambi in 1980.[42] An addendum to Cambi's analysis was provided by M. Kolega in her doctoral dissertation.[43] However, to resolve ambiguities surrounding the notes from the field notebook and the entirety of Abramić's observations, I deem it necessary to briefly describe the sculpture once more, emphasising specific elements and, in particular, dimensions of the sculptures, for the purpose of interpreting other mentioned finds.

The goddess is fashioned from white Carrara marble and is depicted in a standing pose upon a rectangular marble base, which is inserted into an oval base made of yellowish limestone. The maximum height of the sculpture is 100.5 cm and the base width is 40 cm. The body's weight rests on the left leg, while the right leg is bent at the knee and slightly extended backward. The right arm is raised to shoulder height and extended, possibly having been bent at the elbow, displaying a visible bracelet. The left arm is preserved only in a smaller section extending from the shoulder towards the elbow, showing rust marks from a clamp that once held it. It is not apparent on the statue itself that it touched the body at any point. The goddess's body is nude, with draped clothing covering only the area below the hips, falling to below the ankles and resting on the plinth. The preserved arms of the Venus have the following dimensions: one arm, preserved from the armpit to the elbow and displaying a bracelet, measures 11.5 cm and was never detached from the body. The width of its fractured section is 5 cm. The other arm, which extends from the top of the shoulder to the break, is 10.5 cm long. A trace of rust can be seen here, a remnant of the metal connection that held the lower part of the arm, which was positioned away from the body. The fractured section of this arm is approximately 6.5 cm wide (Fig. 17).

These detailed measurements are significant as they indicate that the discovered arms mentioned by Abramić belonged to a different sculpture.[44] This other, probably a Venus figure, also featured bracelets on the

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[40] Abramić 1939, 200–202; id. 1940, 174–175.

[41] Suić 1968, 39; id. 1969, 75–76; id. 1986, 72–76, 80.

[42] Cambi 1980, 273–278.

[43] Kolega 2003, 125–130.

[44] As mentioned above, the field notebook from the archive of M. Abramić in the Archaeological Museum in Split (notebook No. 10, Fol. 62r) also mentions fragments of the arms found, namely three fragments of the right arm preserved up to the fingers, and two fragments of the left arm. The author would like to take this opportunity to thank the late Svjetlana Pjaca for her invaluable insights into the circumstances of the discovery of the statue and the inscription, and for pointing out that the arm fragments came to the Nin

upper arms like the preserved one, but was demonstrably smaller in size. Abramić's notes report three fragments of the right arm from the shoulder to the fingers, with a bracelet on the upper arm 20.5 cm long. There is another fragment with a bracelet, and two more fragments of the other arm. It is probably these remains that Abramić refers to when he mentions a smaller Venus statues in the literature.[45]

Her hair is parted and gathered into a chignon, and she is adorned with a diadem. The width of her hair is 13.2 cm, the length from the diadem to the chin is 13.5 cm and the width of her face from ear to ear is 7.3 cm. The chignon measures 5 cm in length along the head and 6.5 cm in width. The thickness from the stomach to the buttocks is 15.8 cm (probably Abramić's measurement of 17 cm).

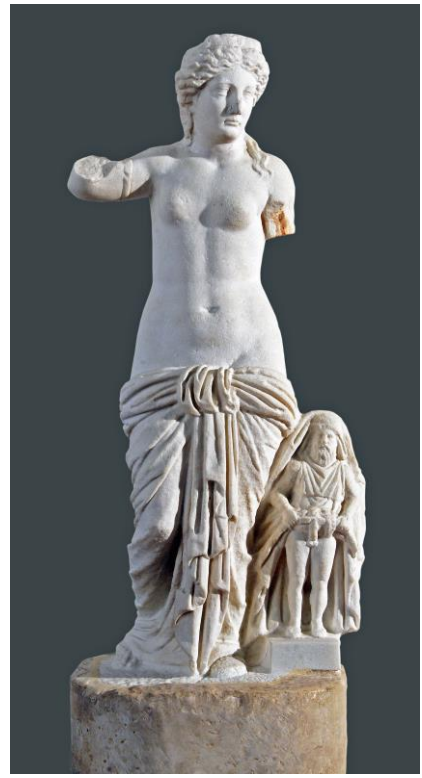

Fig. 17. Statue of Venus and Priapus from Nin (photo by Tonći Seser, © Archaeological Museum in Split; Inv. No. AMS-38100)

To her left stands a figure of Priapus (Fig. 18), crafted from the same marble, positioned on a rectangular base that curves at the rear. He and the goddess together form a unified sculpture.The goddess's figure has a slight inclination to the left, thus Priapus does not serve as a support. Priapus is depicted here as a mature male with abundant hair and a curly beard. His body is clad in a long, sleeveless tunic, belted below the chest. With his hands, he holds up a piece of fabric, revealing the front of his body at hip level with a visible hypertrophied phallus and legs. A cloak is draped over his head and shoulders, reaching down to his ankles and falling in folds along the sides of his body. His height with the pedestal is 34.5 cm and without it is about 30.7 cm. The maximum width of Priapus in the area where he holds the cloak is 14 cm. The base is rectangular and

museum together with the statue. Gratitude also goes to Arsen Duplančić, the librarian of the Archaeological Museum in Split, now retired, for his assistance in navigating and locating pertinent information in the Abramić and museum archives, which made it easier for the author to research the unique history of these Nin finds.

[45] Abramić 1940, 174.

Fig. 18. Details of the Priapus figure, statue of Venus and Priapus from Nin (photo by Tonći Seser, © Archaeological Museum in Split; Inv. No. AMS-38100)

closed at the front, while it curves backward and merges into the pedestal of Venus. The width of Priapus's pedestal is 9.4 cm and its height is 3.8 cm.

The less refined workmanship on the back of the sculpture indicates that it was originally placed in a niche, which prevented a comprehensive all-round view. There is an incised symbol on the base, "I", whose interpretation as a letter or Roman numeral and the associated meaning remains undetermined. The sculptural group is dated to the second half of the 1 century, but it is assumed that it was executed in the style of classical Greek and Hellenistic models.[46]

## The maritime landscape of Nin and the cult of Venus Ansotica: a new interpretation

### *Conventional interpretations and their limitations*

As widely recognised in previous research, the sculptures of Venus and Priapus are fully in line with Roman and Hellenistic mythological and iconographic traditions, with Venus usually understood as the mother of Priapus. The figure of Venus corresponds to the iconographic type of Aphrodite Pudica, who represents the classical, modest Aphrodite in her Roman iteration. Priapus, on the other hand, is depicted as a mature man, usually interpreted in Roman sources as a symbol of agriculture and general fertility. Consequently, all previous interpretations have consistently associated these deities with a fertility cult. This cult primarily emphasised the fertility of the land, whereby these deities were also seen as representatives of creative powers, and fertility in a broader sense. In the case of Venus, her chthonic nature has also been noted, which has parallels with ancient Mediterranean female deities such as the Magna Mater. Some analyses go so far as to take the dimensions of the sculptures into account and interpret the larger Venus figure as the predominance of the female principle of fertility over the male, which is represented by the half-sized

[46] Cambi 1980, 273–276.

Priapus sculpture.[47] While I recognise the validity of these established arguments, and the basic interpretations regarding their role in fertility cults, I contend that an exclusively terrestrial focus overlooks crucial contextual factors. The inscriptions found alongside the sculpture, particularly the explicit mention of the indigenous deity Anzotica and her syncretisation with Venus, signal a deep connection to the local Liburnian population and their unique religious practises that require a more nuanced approach. Therefore, I suggest that the cult of Venus Ansotica, especially given the visual evidence of Priapus and the unique geographical context of its discovery, warrants re-examination through the lens of Aenona's prominent maritime identity.

### *Methodology: a holistic and contextual approach to ancient maritime cults*

This study's analytical framework integrates recent research on the religious beliefs and cultic practices of ancient Mediterranean seafaring communities with the theoretical concept of the maritime cultural landscape. This interdisciplinary approach is essential for a comprehensive understanding of specialised maritime religious phenomena. Maritime religion, while a component of broader ancient societal belief systems, constitutes a distinct and specialised field. It emerged directly from the unique uncertainties and inherent dangers associated with life and travel at sea, with its beliefs and practices fundamentally shaped by the specific occupations and societal roles of seafarers.[48] Common elements defining this specialised religious domain include: the worship of patron deities possessing maritime, celestial, or meteorological attributes crucial for seafarer welfare; the establishment of seaside temples and shrines with particular associations for mariners; the performance of religious ceremonies specifically aimed at ensuring voyage safety; the perception of the ship itself as possessing a divine spirit and containing sacred spaces onboard; and the integration of the sea into burial practices and death rituals.[49] Furthermore, a critical, yet often overlooked, element is the toponymy of places significant to seafarers – ranging from named parts of the sea reflecting meteorological conditions to navigational landmarks such as capes, islands, and rocks, frequently named after deities worshipped at these locations. This naming convention underscores the principle that "places used are places named".[50] The concept of the maritime cultural landscape (MCL) provides a crucial contextual lens, emphasising the profound relationship between

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[47] Abramić 1939, 202; id. 1940, 175; Suić 1968, 39–40; id. 1969, 73–76, id. 1981, 260; Cambi 1980, 273–275; Medini 1984, 10–13; Šašel Kos 1999, 75–80.

[48] Brody 2008, 9; id. 2021; McNiven 2004, 332–345.

[49] Brody 1998; 2021.

[50] McNiven 2008; Arnaud 2005; Morton 2001.

the nautical environment and its cultural and socio-economic context, as shaped by human interaction. While material remains are undoubtedly significant, the immaterial, cognitive dimension of the MCL is paramount, with the placename landscape serving as a fundamental component. As Westerdahl elaborates, the MCL encompasses the entire network of sailing routes – both ancient and modern – including ports, harbours, and all related human constructions and activities, both underwater and terrestrial. This holistic perspective mirrors the full spectrum of maritime economies and extends to the cognitive "mapping and imprinting of the functional aspects of the surroundings in the human mind."[51] Consequently, the MCL necessitates a total topographical vision of the waterfront area, recognising the equal importance of features on adjacent land and submerged depth curves. Applying this holistic methodology, the current study reinterprets the sanctuary on the Nin peninsula within the specific context of the local Liburnian-Roman community. This approach is founded on two main principles. Firstly, it involves understanding the sanctuary's geographical position and the economic function of Nin's port within the broader network of Adriatic maritime routes (i.e., Vorland and Hinterland),[52] alongside the unique meteorological conditions characteristic of this part of the Adriatic Sea. Secondly, it entails a reinterpretation of the iconography of discovered sculptures, focusing on their mythological and cultic meanings with particular attention to their nautical dimension. By integrating these principles, this research aims to offer a novel reinterpretation of the cult of Venus and Priapus within the Adriatic milieu, thereby opening new perspectives on this under-researched facet of Adriatic cultural history. A comprehensive interpretation of the cult necessitates a broader contextual framework, extending beyond solely the material remains, epigraphic evidence, and sculptural representations. This framework must account for the site's geographical location, the potential antiquity of any autochthonous cult, the appearance of deities not explicitly mentioned in inscriptions but represented in sculpture, and other material remains discovered both on land and within the submerged littoral zone of Nin itself.

### *Nin (Aenona) as a maritime centre*

Understanding Nin's role as a maritime centre necessitates an examination of its geographical and physical characteristics, particularly given the scarcity of explicit archaeological evidence for a dedicated cult. Situated on a peninsula that today functions as the port of Nin, the site's paleolandscape differed significantly 2000 years ago, as indicated by archaeological and geological findings. While hypotheses regarding sea-level changes in the Adriatic and Mediterranean exist, a definitive scientific re-

[51] Westerdahl 1992, 5–6
[52] Karmon 1985, 1.

construction of Nin's ancient maritime capabilities, including whether it possessed a functional port during the Iron Age and Roman Imperial periods, remains elusive due to insufficient research.

Pliny the Elder[53] notably mentions Aenona, present-day Nin, in his coastal descriptions, placing it within a list of *oppida* beginning with Nesactium and concluding with Aenona.[54] Despite scholarly literature often referring to Nin as an important maritime hub – a claim supported by imported archaeological material and shipwreck finds – concrete details regarding its port infrastructure or its precise function as a port in the Iron Age and Roman Imperial periods are limited.[55] It is generally assumed that a shallow-draft harbour existed, facilitating local trade and the utilisation of marine resources, with connections extending to the Velebit Channel, northern Adriatic islands, and inland routes towards Lika and Bosnia.

The development of a port is contingent on two primary factors: its physical conditions (terrain, currents, waves, prevailing winds) and its geographical position. A port is functionally defined as a naturally or artificially protected area deep enough to accommodate vessels. From an economic geography perspective, a port's geographical location signifies a convergence point for transportation routes – land, sea, and inland waterways – facilitating the transshipment of goods and passengers. The relative importance of these factors fluctuates historically, primarily dictated by prevailing economic and political conditions. Notably, vigorous transport demands can necessitate port construction even in naturally unfavourable locations, while conversely, naturally excellent harbours may decline due to adverse political or economic shifts. Modern maritime discourse frequently employs the German terms "Hinterland" and "Vorland". The Hinterland denotes a port's inland catchment area, from which transport demands originate and which is connected to the port via land or riverine communications. This area supplies the port with export commodities (raw materials, agricultural products) and receives necessary imports. The extent of the interland is influenced by political factors (e.g., border relations, transit fees) and inland transport infrastructure (rivers, roads). It can range from a port's immediate urban area to an entire region, potentially serving as a transit zone for landlocked territories. This connectivity defines the scope of traffic as local, regional, or broader continental.[56]

Vorland, translated as "sea front", describes the maritime sphere of a port, encompassing shipping links and routes connecting the home port to other destinations. For Mediterranean ports, the vorland extends across the entire Mediterranean basin. Maritime traffic can be categorised into

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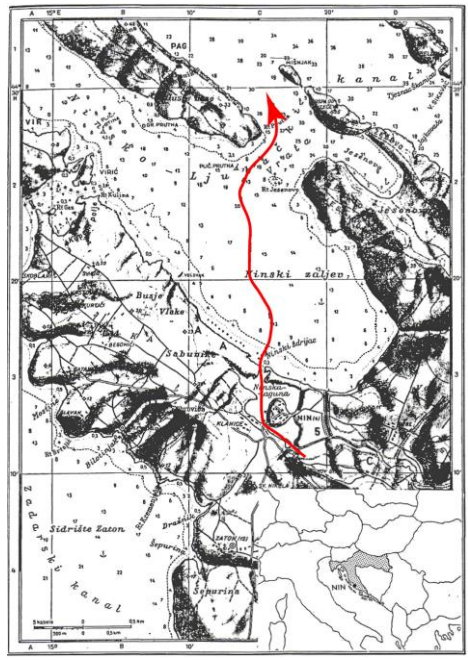
[53] Plin. *HN* 3.140.
[54] Čače 1993, 13–14.
[55] Suić 1969, 61–104; id. 1986, 54–86; Brusić 2002, 237–240; id. 2006.
[56] Karmon 1985, 1.

local traffic, involving regional ports typically one day's sail apart, often located in estuaries or small bays, and requiring minimal infrastructure due to small vessel sizes. Long-distance traffic, conversely, involves extended voyages across open seas, necessitating larger vessels with greater capacity for cargo, provisions, and crew accommodation. The profitability of long voyages is linked to the transport of high-value goods (strategic consumer goods, luxury items). An intermediate traffic category exists, characterised by a diverse range of ship sizes, frequently identified in archaeological underwater contexts.[57]

Considering these definitions, the initial analysis will assess Nin's physical conditions, location, and geographical position to ascertain its potential as a protected area capable of accommodating ships.




Map 5. Ilakovac's hypothetical reconstruction of the palaeochannel of the Miljašić Jaruga (Ričina) and its geomorphological influence on the formation of the Nin peninsula (map edited by Lucijana Šešelj)

The current state of Nin's harbour, marked by significant siltation and a shallow lagoon, strongly suggests a considerably different landscape approximately 2000 years ago.[58] The sole significant reconstruction attempt

[57] Karmon 1985, 5.

[58] For a reliable reconstruction, interdisciplinary approaches including detailed geological investigations, analysis of sediment composition, stratigraphy, and dating are crucial.

by Ilakovac posits that Nin could have functioned as a town harbour situated on a river flowing into the nearby sea (Map 5).[59]

The Miljašić Jaruga (Ričina) watercourse is recognised as the primary contributor to coastal sedimentation in the area, with geological drilling revealing substantial alluvial deposits – over 15 m near the Lower Bridge[60] and 13.7 m in more recent investigations.[61] These deep alluvial deposits underscore a significant fluvial presence, though a comprehensive reconstruction demands further detailed geological and paleogeographic research, potentially integrated with hydrological modelling and robust archaeological contextualisation.

The existence of a Roman inscription in Nin attesting to bridge construction, thereby overcoming a water barrier, suggests that ancient Nin was at least a peninsula during the Roman period.[62] Another critical challenge lies in precisely locating the ancient coastline and sea level. Reconstructing these features within the Nin lagoon and Nin Bay requires paleogeographic studies integrating geological and archaeological data, while acknowledging the non-linear and spatially variable nature of sea-level changes and sedimentation. Recent research indicates that the traditional assumption of a two-metre lower sea level in Roman times, implying a coastline 150 m further out, is an unreliable calculation.[63] This issue is particularly complex in Nin due to extensive bay silting.

The question of Nin's early Roman and Liburnian port is further complicated by the confirmed existence of a port in Zaton. Nin presents a unique case on the Croatian coast: the Roman town of Aenona was connected by a 2.5 km road from its southern gate to a port at Cape Kremenjača, situated on the opposite side of the Zadar Channel/Vir Sea, active from the mid-1st to the late 3rd century.[64] This port, discovered in the 1960s, featured a 200-metre breakwater protecting it from westerly and south-westerly winds. Remains of structures, likely quays and storage facilities, are still visible on the cape and further inland, within the modern Zaton Tourist Resort. Archaeological finds include Roman merchant ship remnants (thin sheet metal, specialised rivets for hull sheathing) and, notably, three vessels constructed using a "sewn" technique – a method atypical of Roman shipbuilding, involving hull planks joined by plant-fiber ropes and wooden pegs.[65] These ships, often referred to as *seriliae* in anci-

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[59] Ilakovac 1995, 76, 78.

[60] Ilakovac 1995, no. 16.

[61] *Geotehnički elaborat istraživanja temeljnog tla Donjeg mosta u Ninu*, E-139-17-01 v 1.0., 3–3, 2018; *Geotehnički elaborat istraživanja temeljnog tla Gornjeg mosta u Ninu*, E-140-17-01 v 1.0., 3–3, 2018.

[62] Ilakovac 1995, 82, 84.

[63] Parica 2023, 122.

[64] Brusić 1968, 204–205; Ilakovac 1999; Gluščević 2011.

[65] Brusić, Domjan 1985; Brusić 1995, 39–59; Glušćević 2011, 7; Pomey, Boetto 2019, 8–12.

ent texts, also featured double masts.[66] The Zaton site yielded non-local oval ballast stones and a large quantity of movable archaeological material, primarily pottery, dating from the mid-1st to the late 3rd century, with origins spanning Asia Minor, the Near East, North Africa, northern Italy, and Greece.[67] The discovery of sewn ships, alien to Roman techniques, initially drew significant attention and reinforced perceptions of the Liburni as highly skilled shipbuilders and seafarers.[68]

Contemporary scholarship frequently analyses the Liburnian civilisation through the lens of seafaring, largely influenced by the Greek and Roman literary traditions.[69] These historical accounts portray the Liburni as a formidable naval power whose influence extended across the Adriatic and Ionian Seas.[70] Regardless of rhetorical strategies, it is evident that the Liburni had consolidated their maritime position in the Adriatic by at least the late 6th century BC, coinciding with the Greek expansion into the northern Adriatic and the establishment of regular trade. Archaeological evidence from the Italian coast, particularly the Picenum region (modern Marche), attests to robust trans-Adriatic connections throughout the Iron Age, dating back to the 8th century BC.[71] Extensive early interaction also occurred with the Apulian territory, notably the northern Daunian sector, with intermittent contact noted with the Po Delta and Venetian areas.[72] Later, Roman historiography, such as Pliny,[73] further substantiates early trans-Adriatic connections by mentioning a Liburnian presence in Picenum (around Ancona) and near the river Truentus.[74]

The Greek geographer Strabo reports a conflict with the Liburni on Corcyra (modern-day Corfu), leading to their expulsion.[75] Hellenic epigraphic evidence from the 4th and 1st centuries BC directly confirms a Liburnian presence and interests in central and southern Dalmatia, with conflicts with the Greek entities transitioning into cooperation and commercial engagement during the Hellenistic period.[76] The distribution of Hellenistic pottery in Liburnian territory and the emergence of Greek coins towards the end of the 4th century BC clearly indicate a shift in relations.[77] Significant changes occurred in Italy in the 3rd century BC with a Roman annexation of much of the western Adriatic coast, and early Republican coins in

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[66] Romanović, Krajcar Bronić 2022.
[67] Brusić 1999; Glušćević 2011, 14; Taras, Taras Šelendić 2024.
[68] Brusić 1995, 40–58.
[69] Šašel Kos 2005, 182–188.
[70] Čače 2002, 83–97; Batović 2005, 53; Brusić 1968; id. 1995, 39–40.
[71] Batović 2005, 19–21, 62–63; id. 1986, 48.
[72] Batović 2005, 48.
[73] Plin. *HN* 3.110, 112.
[74] Čače 1985, 12–14.
[75] Strab. 6.2.4.
[76] Gaffney et al. 1997, 236–237; Kirigin et al. 2006, 141–143.
[77] Šešelj, Ilkić 2015, 419–433; Šešelj, Ilkić 2022, 41–66.

Liburnian contexts provide evidence of these interactions.[78] While earlier research presumed a dominance of Roman Republican coins in northern Dalmatia from the 3rd century BC, recent analyses highlight the predominance of North African coinage (Carthaginian, Numidian, and, to a lesser extent, Ptolemaic). The widespread circulation of North African coins, alongside sporadic Greek and Apulian issues, remains an unsolved problem despite early recognition.[79] Later sources describe very active Liburnian piracy in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas,[80] a dominance so pronounced that Augustus had confiscated their ships by the end of the 1st century BC.[81] The Romans adapted these fast, light vessels into double-banked oar ships, calling them *liburnians*.[82]

Although scholarly literature often highlights Zadar (ancient Iader), a major Iron Age Liburnian centre, as a prominent maritime hub, archaeological investigations also underscore the importance of Nin (ancient Aenona).[83] The Iron Age in the region is best understood through Nin's extensive archaeological record, with necropolis finds indicating continuous settlement from the 9th century BC onwards, and settlement strata showing continuous occupation to the present day.[84] Nin was a crucial Liburnian settlement that not only survived the transition to the Roman Imperial period, but also experienced a remarkable phase of urban development, likely marking its historical zenith.[85]

The prevailing scholarly discourse identifies the port of Zaton as the primary port for Nin during both the Liburnian and the Roman period, primarily due to the presumed lack of suitable natural harbour features in Nin itself (Fig. 19). The key arguments against a significant ancient port in Nin include: (a) the contemporary geomorphology, characterised by extensive silting and a shallow lagoon, deemed unsuitable for substantial maritime activities; (b) Nin's perceived peripheral geographical position relative to the main Adriatic sea routes (consistently placed within the Zadar Channel), exacerbated by the presumed absence of Privlaka shoals that would have shortened the route around the island of Vir; and (c) challenging local weather conditions, particularly strong bora winds, which impeded navigation, especially in winter.[86]

Notwithstanding these arguments, it is contended herein that the aforementioned factors do not definitively preclude the existence of Nin as

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[78] Šešelj, Ilkić 2015, 419–433; Šešelj, Ilkić 2014, 43–53.
[79] Čače 1985, 484–494.
[80] App. *Ill.* 3.7.; App. *BCiv.* 2.39.
[81] App. *Ill.* 16,47.
[82] App. *Ill.* 3,7; App. *BCiv.* 2,39.
[83] Čače 1985, 725–730; Čondić, Vuković 2017.
[84] Batović 2005, 17, 25.
[85] Suić 1969, 87–99; id. 1986, 53–86; Kolega 2019.
[86] Brusić 1968, 205; Ilakovac 1997, 92, 98; Glušćević 2011, 7; Dubolnić Glavan 2015, 106.

a functional port capable of accommodating local and regional maritime requirements during the Iron Age and Roman Imperial periods. While environmental and geographical factors undoubtedly influenced navigational practices, they do not provide decisive evidence against Nin's maritime utility. A holistic understanding of ancient port activity requires considering both a port's physical attributes and its economic significance within its broader regional context. Evaluating Nin through this lens reveals that the requisite conditions for its port development would have emerged in response to prevailing economic and strategic imperatives, as exemplified by the establishment and subsequent landward connection of the port at Zaton. The ensuing analysis will underscore Nin's inherent strategic advantages as a naturally protected harbour and explore its nautical accessibility to other significant settlements, secure bays, and anchorages within the wider geographical area.

Fig. 19. Aerial view of Nin documenting its spatial configuration in relation to the neighbouring geographical features, including the port in Zaton, the Zadar Channel and the Vir Sea (photo by Ivo Pervan, © Nin Tourist Board )

Considering navigation within this sector (the modern Bay of Nin, the Povljana Channel, the Bay of Stara Povljana, the Bay of Ljubač, the Podvelebit Channel, and the Novigrad Sea), Nin's role is paramount. The Bay of Nin and its modern port – Porat – represent the most protected area in the entire region, offering shelter from all winds and waves, with contemporary concerns limited to sandbanks that necessitate marked waterways (Fig. 20).[87]

[87] Peljar I 1952, 200–225.

Fig. 20. Aerial photograph of Nin, documenting its spatial configuration in relation to neighbouring geographical features, including the island of Pag and the Velebit mountain range (photo by Dinko Denona, © Nin Tourist Board)

Assuming sufficient draught for unhindered entry, Nin remains the safest harbour in the coastal area. Attributing an important port function to Nin in the Roman Imperial period or Iron Age requires a careful study of the paleogeographical conditions. Hypothetically, such a role could be justified by assuming a deeper river channel than today and a potentially lower relative sea level. Under these conditions, the Miljašić Jaruga could have been navigable, at least in its lower course extending to the present-day Donji Most (Lower Bridge). This hypothesis, of course, requires further geological and geomorphological research to determine the exact fluvial and marine conditions during these historical periods.

Analysing nautical distances from Nin to important Liburnian centres and sheltered bays during the Late Iron Age and Roman Imperial period reveals that most destinations were accessible within a day's sail or row, with many reachable within a few hours. Even when the modern-day island of Vir was part of the mainland, necessitating circumnavigation from Zaton port, the journey to Nin would still constitute a relatively short half-day sail (Tab. 1).[88]

Considering a port's economic function as a crucial hub where sea routes intersect with land and inland waterways for goods and passenger transshipment, the role of Aenona's ports becomes clearer (Map 6).

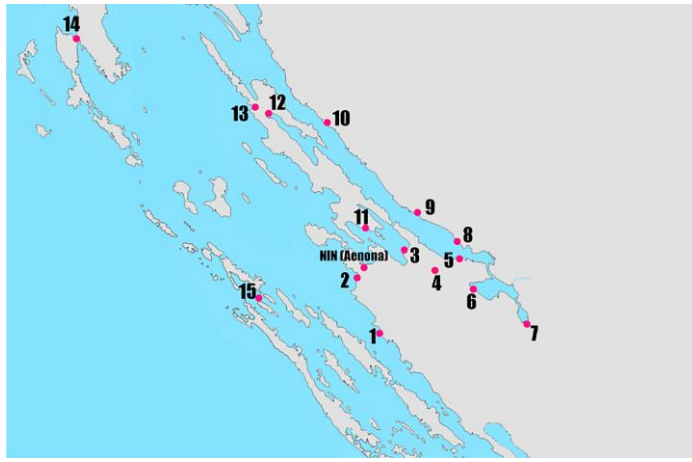
[88] Arnaud 2005, 74–83.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Nin (Aenona) | Zadar (Iader) | 28 Nm |
| | Zaton, around today's island of Vir (Roman port of *Aenona*) | 20 Nm |
| | Ljubač, the Bay of Ljubač (several Liburnian and Roman settlements reachable from this bay – Radovin, Venac, Ljubač) | 9 Nm |
| | Vinjerac (presumed port of Lergova Gradina, a Liburnian settlement) | 19 Nm |
| | Budim, the Novigrad Sea (a Liburnian settlement and port) | 27 Nm |
| | Karin (Corinium) | 30 Nm |
| | Starigrad (Argyruntum) | 17 Nm |
| | Tribanj, the Podvelebit Channel (probably the harbour of Gradina, Sv. Trojica, a Liburnian settlement) | 12 Nm |
| | Karlobag (Vegium), through Ljubačka Vrata | 25 Nm |
| | Stara Povljana (Bay), the island of Pag, Gradac, Smokvica (a Liburnian Iron Age settlement) | 5 Nm |
| | Caska (Cissa), Pag | 30 Nm |
| | Novalja, Pag (Navalia) | 25 Nm |
| | Osor (Apsorus) | 45 Nm |
| | Sedmovraće[89] | 17 Nm |

Tab. 1. Nautical accessibility of Nin: distances to regional centres and sheltered anchorages in the Late Iron Age and Antiquity (Lucijana Šešelj)

The harbour within the settlement itself provided a safe and well-protected environment, particularly suitable for shallow-draft vessels common in regional shipping, capable of entering shallow waters and beaching in adverse weather, as evidenced by finds from Zaton and Caska. However, from the mid-1st century, Aenona experienced significant urban expansion, transforming from a small Liburnian settlement into a growing *municipium*. This growth necessitated a considerable increase in demand for goods and maritime traffic, exceeding the capacity of the original city harbour. This period of urbanisation directly correlates with the construction of a sanctuary (based on dated inscriptions and sculptures) and the development of extensive port infrastructure in Zaton. The port of Zaton, at Cape Kremenjača, was established out of demonstrable economic necessity and appears to have been actively utilised until its decline in the late 3rd century. With the decline of Aenona, demand for the Zaton port diminished, leading to a resurgence of maritime activity in Nin's city harbour, a trend that continued into modern times.

[89] The Sedmovraće is an important sea passage and the most direct overseas route connecting Italy with northern Dalmatia. Although it is commonly associated with the Zadar (Iader) to Ancona route, the strategic importance of the Sedmovraće for Nin (Aenona) becomes clear when the distances involved are considered: Zadar is 17 nautical miles (Nm) from the Sedmovraće, while Nin is 21 Nm away and the port of Zaton is only 12.5 Nm away. This proximity highlights the fact that, contrary to what is often assumed in the literature, Nin was not geographically isolated from the main sea routes.




Map 6. Nin and regional centres and sheltered anchorages in the Late Iron Age and Antiquity (edited by Lucijana Šešelj): 1 Zadar, 2 Zaton, 3 Ljubač, 4 Beretinova gradina, Radovin, 5 Lergova gradina 6 Budim, Posedarje, 7 Karin, 8 Starigrad, 9 Gradina, Sv. Trojica, 10 Karlobag, 11 Gradac, Smokvica, 12 Caska, 13 Novalja, 14 Osor, 15 Sedmovraće

The archaeological topography of Nin's littoral frontage and hinterland reveals its strategic positioning as a secure maritime base. From Nin, efficient navigation was facilitated towards key coastal settlements, the island of Pag, and inland centres at the foot of the Velebit Mountains, which served as vital nodes connecting to extensive inland road networks. Furthermore, its connection to the Novigrad and Karin Seas, as well as the navigable section of the Zrmanja River extending inland, underscores Nin's broader communication importance. This interpretation is supported by the spatial distribution of archaeological finds from the late Liburnian and Roman Imperial periods, indicating continuous maritime activity in this navigational area. A remarkable distribution of Iron Age hillforts along this sea route, including Gradac near Smokvica on Pag (which yielded early Hellenistic numismatic finds and Greek pottery fragments), further evidences these maritime connections.[90] The strategic location of Gradac above the Stara Povljana Bay also points to its choice for protection from bora winds. Conversely, the remains of Castrum Liube are found at the prominent Cape Ljubljana on the mainland.[91] The wider region encompasses several important Liburnian settlements, including Ljubljana, Ljubač, and Radovin.[92] In the sub-Velebit area, the Gradina hillfort above Sveta Trojica,[93] and further south the Roman settlement of Argyruntum (Starigrad),

[90] Oštarić, Kurilić 2013, 91–94; Ilkić, Kožul 2017, 89–96.
[91] Vujević et al. 2023.
[92] Šešelj, Vuković 2013; Šešelj, Silvestrelli 2013; Vuković 2014.
[93] Radman-Livaja, Tonc 2016; Tonc 2011; Ead. 2013; Ead. 2014; Tonc, Radman-Livaja, 2017.

are noteworthy.[94] On the mainland, the Lergova Gradina and its probable harbour Vinjerac, offering protection from all winds except the bora, illustrate the interconnectedness of the coastal and inland locations.[95] Important Liburnian centres were also located in the inner Novigrad and Karin Seas, such as the hillfort of Budim, where the earliest Liburnian port in the region has been identified.[96] Significantly, coinage was concentrated mainly at important coastal centres that also functioned as ports for hinterland trade. Several of these (Nin, Dračevac, Gradina Gornji Karin) were strategically located, controlling maritime traffic via internal canals and seas. Terrestrial routes connected these maritime hubs with the interior. Spatial analysis of numismatic finds demonstrably indicates that coin discovery sites were important indigenous centres located on key transport routes connecting northern Dalmatia (southern Liburnia) with the Velebit Lika region (southeastern Iapodia). For instance, the archaeological site of Budim, opposite modern-day Posedarje, represents an important Liburnian hillfort with robust defensive structures and evidence of a Liburnian port dating from the late 4th to at least the mid-2nd century BC, confirmed by radiocarbon dating of harbour construction elements and associated pottery.[97]

In conclusion, while traditional scholarship often relegates ancient Nin's primary port function to Zaton due to perceived geomorphological limitations, this analysis argues that such factors do not definitively preclude Nin's own maritime utility. The historical imperative of economic and strategic demands likely fostered a functional harbuor within the settlement, particularly for shallow-draft vessels. Ultimately, a definitive reconstruction of Nin's ancient port capabilities necessitates further comprehensive paleogeographical and geological investigations.

### *The role of Venus/Aphrodite as a divine protector of seafarers*

Aphrodite, the goddess of the sea and the sky, was particularly popular with seafarers. According to the most popular myth, a beautiful maiden (pontogenes), was born from the sea foam, created by the castrated genitals of the sky god (Uranus). She arrived first on the island of Kythera and then on Cyprus and is, therefore, referred to as Kythereia and Cypria in Greek texts.[98] Homer's hymn also sings of her journey from Kythera to Cyprus and her power over the sea and the sea foam.[99] A temple was built in her honour on the island of Kythera, opposite the Peloponnese, which

[94] Dubolnić, 2007; Dubolnić Glavan, Glavaš 2011.
[95] Ilkić Čelhar 2018; Ead. 2024.
[96] Ilkić 2024.
[97] Parica 2023, 120–123
[98] Hes. *Theog.* 188–200.
[99] Hom. *Hymn.* Ap. 6.

controlled the most important sea passage to the west.[100] Pausanias says that the temple of Aphrodite Urania (Heavenly) on Kythera is the oldest and most sacred place in Greece.[101]

On the island of Cyprus, she is also known as Aphrodite Paphia because she was worshipped both in Paphos and in Golgoi. Her temple is located in the harbour of the town of Palaepaphos, which is a little further from the sea.[102] She was also worshipped at numerous capes on the island, even if they were not named after her, such as Zephyria, Dinaretum, and Pedalion.[103]

Aphrodisias, a promontory and harbour city of Cilicia, present-day Cape Tisan in southern Turkey, is mentioned by numerous Greek and Roman authors. Pliny the Elder calls it the promontory and city of Venus and says that it is not far from the island of Cyprus.[104]

In Israel, a figure of Aphrodite Venus of the Pudica type was discovered in the shallow water opposite Haifa beach among the Roman bronze figurines from the shipwreck of Kfar Samir South. Her left hand protects the pudenda, while her right protects the breasts. The crowned head is turned to the left. She seems to be completely naked except for the bracelets and the crown. Her height today is about 10.3 cm.[105] From the Ashkelon North shipwreck (1st–2nd century AD) comes a 20 cm high, one-piece cast bronze figure of a nude female identified as Aphrodite/Venus. The depiction shows her lifting her left leg, which is bent over her right knee, while she extends her right hand towards the heel of her left foot. Her partially preserved left arm stretches outwards and upwards, probably resting on an object that is now lost, possibly a column. Her head is slightly inclined and turned to the right. Her hair is pinned up at the back, with a few strands falling over her left shoulder. The eyes are inlaid with silver lace. This figurine represents the iconographic type of "Aphrodite removing her sandal".[106]

In the Attic port of Piraeus, situated directly on the coast, Conon had a sanctuary built for her after defeating the Lacedaemonian fleet in the sea off Knidos in 394 BC during the Corinthian War. This was very significant, as the Knidians had a special reverence for the goddess, whom they worshipped under various epithets (Doritis – Generous; Akraia – of the Cape), but she was best known as Aphrodite of Knidos, or as Pausanias

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[100] Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.50.1.

[101] Paus. 3.23.1.

[102] Strab. 14.6.3. It should be emphasised here that the Cypriot Aphrodite is often equated with the Phoenician Astarte. Dedicatory inscriptions have been found in Cyprus confirming this deity as the Phoenician Astarte Paphia and as the Greek Aphrodite Paphia or Cypria. Smith, Pickup (eds.) 2010, 170.

[103] Ulbrich, 2010, 168–169.

[104] Ps.-Scyl. *Peripl.*, 102; Diod. Sic. 19.64.5; Plin. *HN* 37.5.92.

[105] Galili, Rosen 2015, 46, Fig. 13b.

[106] Galili, Rosen 2015, 46, Fig. 9.

says, the locals simply called her Euploia.[107] This epithet was particularly popular with sailors and became synonymous with their protector, so she was simply the goddess of Good Sailing.[108] This cult was known in numerous cities on the west coast of Asia Minor. From there it probably spread throughout the Mediterranean and remained popular throughout Antiquity.

In March 1929, the statue of "Aphrodite Thalassias" or "Venus Pudica",[109] dated to the third quarter of the 2nd century BC, and currently kept in the Archaeological Museum of Rhodes, was recovered in the sea off Punta della Sabbia near dismantled structures. Notably, a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, the patron deity of seafarers, was situated near the harbour, reminiscent of similar sanctuaries, such as the temple of Aphrodite Pontia near the closed port of Kos and the temple of Aphrodite Euploia in Knidos. During the Hellenistic period, the sanctuary of Aphrodite on Rhodes was strategically located between the eastern harbour, which was mainly used for commercial activities, and a military harbour.[110]

On the island of Aegina, an island of famous seafarers and merchants, she was called Limenia or Epilimenia, where she was worshipped as the goddess of the harbour,[111] though she was also known as Eutyches – the goddess of Good Fortune.[112]

Pausanias says that in the city of Hermione in Argolis, there was a famous temple with a large marble statue of hers, where she was also called Pontia (of the Sea) and Limenia (of the Harbour).[113] Several dedications to this goddess were found in the harbour sanctuary of the Etruscan Gravisca, engraved on ceramic vessels and graffiti,[114] as well as in the Greek Naukratis in Egypt, where she is believed to have been the protector of seafarers together with the Dioscuri.[115]

The Roman counterpart to Aphrodite was the goddess Venus, who is often mentioned as the protector of seafarers in the Roman Republican and Imperial periods. Although the Roman Venus originally had no connection to the sea, numerous inscriptions and mentions in literature often note Greek epithets alongside this Latin name, so we can rightly ascertain that the original Greek deity associated with the sea is Aphrodite.[116]

Judging by the mentions in the literary sources, the Adriatic-Ionian area was extremely rich in toponyms and areas dedicated to Aphrodite/Venus throughout Antiquity, as evidenced by the inscriptions and well-

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[107] Paus. 1.1.3.
[108] Sandberg 1954, 8.
[109] Its appearance strongly resembles the Venus of Nin.
[110] Rocco 2018, 9–11.
[111] Polinskaya 2013, 197.
[112] Paus. 2.34.11; Larson 2007, 123, 197.
[113] Paus. 2.34.11.
[114] Johnston, Pandolfini 2000, 19, Nos. 47–52.
[115] Höckmann, Möller 2006, 15 and n. 61.
[116] Rougé 1981, 197.

known archaeological sites. However, only a few of them can be directly linked to the maritime cult.

In the Adriatic, several different sources indicate that the cult of Aphrodite and her Roman counterpart Venus was very important for both foreign traders and the local seafaring communities.[117] On the small island of Santa Eufemia/Eugenia on the north side of Monte Gargano, which guards the entrance to the port of Vieste (probably the ancient Urium), dedications to Venus Sosandra (Savior of Man) have been found. Her sanctuary was located in a cave that was visited from the 3rd century BC until the late Roman period and even later in the Middle Ages as a Christian sanctuary.[118] The 1st century BC poet Catullus associated the goddess with the Adriatic ports of Urium, Ancona and Dyrrhachium:

> ... to sacred Venus ...
> Now, O Creation of the pale blue sea,
> you who dwell in sacred Idalium
> and in storm-beaten Urium, and foster Ancona
> and reedy Amathus, Cnidos and Golgos
> and Dyrrhachium, the tavern of the Adriatic...[119]

The poet Juvenal also mentions a temple of Venus in Ancona in the 2nd century AD.[120] This probably refers to the cult of Aphrodite of Knidos, which is confirmed by the coins of the city of Ancona from the 3rd/2nd century BC, which show on the obverse the bust of the goddess as protector of the city and on the reverse the inscription AGKON and an arm bent at the elbow, which is believed to be a figurative representation of the location of the port itself or the cape that encloses it.[121]

On the Italian side, in the sanctuary on the Japygian promontory, at the Grotta Porcinara site, there is a dedication to Aphrodite Eutyches, the goddess of good Fortune, written in Greek and in the Greek alphabet.[122] It is possible that the Latin name Fortuna, which is also attested by an inscription, refers to this goddess, which would simply be a translation of her Greek

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[117] Šešelj 2025.

[118] Russi 1998, 97–102; Auriemma, Frisone 2018, 286–287. Venus Sosandra is associated with the Greek Aphrodite Sosandra, whose famous bronze sculpture by the sculptor Kalamis adorned the Acropolis in the 5th century BC and was immensely admired and copied in Antiquity, and is described by Lucian of Samostata in his work *A Portrait Study*, Luc. *Imag.* 4.6.

[119] Catull. 36. All translations into English language are from the Loeb Classical Library.

[120] Juv. 4.39–40. For discussions of Venus/Aphrodite as protector of the city and its temple, see: Cellini 2004, 357–367; Coppola 1993, 189–191. On the port of Ancona and its topography, Ugolini 2020, 8–10, Fig. 1.

[121] Semple 1931, 614; Head 1977, 23; Colivicchi 2002, 112, Fig. 10.9. Such a coin of Aphrodite from the city of Ancona was also found in the sanctuary of Diomedes at Cape Ploča, Bonačić-Mandinić 2004, 158.

[122] Cremonesi et al. 1978, 205–206.

epithet. Not far from this cape, Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions a place where Aeneas first set foot on Italian soil, a cape which, he says, was named after the goddess Athena, but the port has since been called the Port of Aphrodite.[123]

On the east coast of the Adriatic, in Potirna on the island of Korčula, an inscription dedicated to Venus Pelagia – of the Open Sea – was found at the site of a Roman villa, to whom a sanctuary was erected, dated to the 2nd century AD (CIL III 3066 = 10083): *Signia Ursa Signi / Symphor(i) f(ilia) ------ templum / **Veneri Pelagiae** a / solo fecit et signum / ipsius deae posui(t) / sac(erdote) L(ucio) Cornificio Secundo K(alendis) Mai(i)s.*[124]

Although the inscription itself and the place where it was found say nothing about a maritime cult, its epithet Pelagia (Marine, of the Open Sea) suggests that it referred to the maritime aspect of the goddess, whom we know from Greek myths and tradition as Aphrodite of Knidos.[125]

Among other known finds dedicated to the goddess Venus, there is a temple in the Istrian region, in the Bay of Verige on Brijuni, which, according to the inscription, is dedicated to the goddess Venus and is considered in the context of maritime beliefs from the Roman Imperial period. This is one of three temples located in the same area, while the other two are dedicated to Neptune and Jupiter. [126]

*The role of Priapus as a divine protector of seafarers*

Priapus is a deity whose origin is associated with the city of Lampsakus, a Phocaean colony on the Hellespont in northern Troas.[127] The city itself is also called Priapus. Strabo even says that both the city and the port are called Priapus and that they were named after this god, who was particularly worshipped there and whose cult later spread throughout the Greek world.[128]

There are several versions of Priapus's birth, the best known of which states that he is the child of the goddess Aphrodite and the god Dionysus.[129] He is usually depicted as a dwarf-like man with a large erect phallus, by which he is particularly recognisable. It is precisely because of this characteristic that he is associated with fertility and vegetation and is the protector of gardens and vineyards, to whom gardeners dedicate the

[123] Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.51.3.

[124] The inscription was found in the 19th century and is now lost. Ljubić 1887, 69–71.

[125] It should be noted that the word itself can also denote a wooded expanse, as in the description of the oak forest between Mantinea and Tegea, where it is called Pelagos, Paus. 8.11.1, but this is rather rare when it comes to describing the features of the mainland.

[126] Girardi Jurkić 2012, 130–131.

[127] Paus. 9.31.2; *Anth. Pal.* 16.242.

[128] Strab. 13.1.12.

[129] Diod. Sic. 4.6.1; Paus. 9.31.2.

fruits of everything they grow – pomegranates, figs, grapes, pine nuts, almonds, garlic, etc.[130]

In the ancient literature and more recently in archeology, however, this deity is also recognised as the protector of fishermen and seafarers.[131] As protector of the coast for a good catch, one fisherman gives him a bowl of driftwood from the beach, a chair, and a glass of wine so that he can rest and refresh himself after a strenuous dance,[132] another gives him a lobster shell that he has just baked and eaten, asking only for a good catch and that his nets continue to be full so that he can fill his belly.[133] Older fishermen who can no longer fish dedicate their fishing gear, nets, hooks, and traps to him.[134]

Priapus is mentioned in several poems in the Palatine Anthology as the deity of the harbour (limenon daimon or daimoni). Sailors throw themselves under his mercy for a favourable voyage and a successful trade. He is the one who advises when the sailing season begins, when the storms cease, when young leaves appear on the branches, and when the gentle Zephyr begins to blow. Then, says Priapus, seek your fortune in trade and spread your sails, whether you are sailing to Syrtis or to the coasts of Sicily.[135] He protects the ships because, as the sea goddess Thetis says, she gave refuge to his father Dionysus.[136] He advises seafarers to bake some fish at his altar before setting sail, and to leave him a piece, then they can set sail without fear.[137] The verses also testify that altars were erected to him at important sea passages:

"Stranger, I, Priapus, was set up on this sea-beaten rock to guard the Thracian strait, by the sailors, whom I had often rushed to help when they called upon me, bringing from astern the sweet Zephyr. Therefore, as is meet and right, thou shalt never see my altar lacking the fat of beasts or crowns in the spring, but ever smoking with incense and alight. Yet not ever a hecatomb is so pleasing to the gods as due honour."[138]

The sailors and fishermen seem to have erected not only altars to him, but also certain objects, probably pillars, which served as markers as well as symbols of Priapus. As the poem says, he dwells on the beach, an inhabitant of land and sea, with a pointed head and no legs, and his image is carved by fishermen on deserted shores.[139] This probably refers to the marking of certain places that either symbolise dangers to navigation,

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[130] *Anth. Pal.* 6.21, 22, 102; 9.437; 16.86, 236–238, 240–241, 243.
[131] Good overview in Ephrem 2018, 147–160.
[132] *Anth. Pal.* 6.33.
[133] *Anth. Pal.* 6.89.
[134] *Anth. Pal.* 6.192, 193.
[135] *Anth. Pal.* 10.2, 4–9, 14–16.
[136] *Anth. Pal.* 10.15.7–8.
[137] *Anth. Pal.* 10.16.11–14.
[138] *Anth. Pal.* 10.7.
[139] *Anth. Pal.* 10.8.

such as straits or shoals, or indicate the exact direction in which navigation is safe. Arrian also writes about wooden pillars having this function when discussing Alexander's Indian campaign, and compares these pillars to those erected in the strait between the islands of Leucas and Acarnania to prevent ships from running aground in the sandy shoals around Leucas.[140] These pillars mark the boundary between danger and safety, areas that are navigable and those that are not, and for this reason they were often regarded as sacred or, as in the case of Priapus, they were even considered gods.[141]

Sculptures and ithyphallic symbols of Priapus have been found in several shipwrecks from the Roman Imperial period, suggesting that he may even have had his own sanctuary on board and that his function was to protect the ship and its crew.[142] The question of the introduction of the cult of Priapus into seafaring has still not yet been fully resolved. While the older literature associates it with the Hellenistic period, more recent archeological research shows that his cult already existed in the Archaic period, when the Phocaeans from Lampsakus brought it to the western Mediterranean and founded their colony in Massalia.[143] But finds from the eastern Mediterranean are particularly interesting for our topic. The shipwreck finds from Ashkelon North, in Israeli waters (1st–2nd century AD), contained a 10 cm high, one-piece cast bronze statuette of a nude, bearded male figure wearing a high hat. The weight is on the right leg, and the left leg is slightly outstretched. The right arm is raised, while the left elbow is slightly raised and the hand is pressed to the chest in a dancing gesture. The figure exhibits a prominent, exaggerated phallus. The bearded head is tilted slightly to the right and forward and the facial features are marked by sea erosion. This figurine probably represents Priapus.[144] The most interesting finds, however, come from underwater investigations in the southern anchorage of Caesarea, which brought to light a bronze figurine of Venus/Aphrodite in connection with Priapus. This statuette has a total height (with base) of 16 cm. The pedestal and the statue were found at a depth of 3 m in association with artefacts from the Roman period, including coins, dating the find to the second half of the 1st century AD. It depicts the goddess removing her sandals before a ritual bath. Priapus, her son, in his usual depiction as a dwarfish nude man, stands on a pillar next to her. This type of goddess seems to have been very popular in

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[140] Arr. *Ind.* 41.2–4.

[141] For a detailed discussion of Priapus and his function in the navigation of ancient peoples, see Neilson 2002, 248–250.

[142] Neilson 2002, Fig. 1. Terracotta phallus from the Pisa E shipwreck, Fig. 2. Statue of Priapus from the Planier A shipwreck, Fig. 3. Bronze preamble from a Rhine ship.

[143] For archaeological finds from the Archaic period, see Neilson 2002, 252 with additional literature cited.

[144] Galili, Rosen 2015, 41–42, Fig. 10.

the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. As already mentioned, both Venus/Aphrodite and Priapus were associated with the sea, sailors and ports, and their figures were used as apotropaic objects by sailors, commercial travellers and seafarers in general.[145]

In Croatia,[146] in the sea near Cape Škuljica, close to present-day Baška on the island of Krk, a lamp in the shape of Priapus from the Roman Imperial period was found, dated to the 2nd or 3rd century AD, and fragments of ceramic and glass vessels were found alongside it.[147] A similar lamp was found at the bottom of the sea near Makarska.[148] Excavations on the north side of the Salamandrija plateau on Palagruža also brought to light a fragment of a lamp in the shape of a human body with a phallus. The fragment comes from mixed layers containing prehistoric, Greek, Roman-Republican and Late Antique material, so it is difficult to say to which exact context the find belongs.[149] A lamp resembling the shape of a phallus also comes from the shipwreck near Cape Plavac on Zlarin.[150] During the excavations of the shipwreck near Cape Uljeva, near Ližnjan, in eastern Istria, fragments of a vessel in the shape of a large phallus were found. The finds are associated with the Uljeva A shipwreck, dated to the 1st century BC, along with other archaeological finds, amphorae, fine and coarse pottery.[151]

*Discussion: the maritime dimension of the Venus Ansotica cult at Nin*

The evaluation of the archeological finds from Rivine – Punta indicates at least two construction phases, which may represent different building episodes. Epigraphic evidence confirms dedications to the deity Anzotica, a local Liburnian goddess, who is equated with Venus in an inscription, while the sculptural representation emphasises the importance of Priapus. Archival documents indicate the existence of at least two structures at this site, which can plausibly be interpreted as a sanctuary complex. The Venus and Priapus sculpture, now preserved in the Archeological Museum in Split, and the inscription Venus Ansotica probably originate from this site, from the structure referred to here as Structure B. The discovery of arm fragments belonging to a smaller, distinct Venus statue and architectural remains indicating a temple structure support the interpretation as a sanctuary. The inscription dedicated to Anzotica, which is now in the Archeological Museum in Zadar, is also associated with Rivine – Punta. It is plausi-

[145] Galili, Rosen 2015, 49–50, Fig. 16.

[146] Jadrić 2025.

[147] Dugonjić 2010, 220–221.

[148] Currently housed in a private collection, Cambi 2002, 194, F. 304.

[149] Kirigin, Miše, Barbarić 2010, 50, 51, Fig. 9, 8. It is possible that it belongs within the context of the Sanctuary of Diomedes.

[150] Vrsalović 2011, 211, Figs. 132–133; Podrug et al. 2016, 57–58, Fig. 11.

[151] Bekić 2020 34–34, Cat. No. 102–104, Fig. 33 a–c.

ble that the pedestal fragments with feet mentioned by Abramić and another inscription documented by Dr Dimitrije Snjegovoj also come from this site.

The sanctuary, at least in the phase documented by the sculptures and inscriptions, is dated to the middle of the 1st century AD, which coincides with the urbanisation of Nin itself and the construction of the port of Zaton. It is significant that the sculptures from Rhodes, which are located in a maritime context, show striking similarities with the depictions of the Venus of Nin. In addition, the bronze sculpture group from maritime Caesarea, which depicts Venus and Priapus together and is dated to the same time as the assemblage from Nin, points to their association as protectors of seafarers. Numerous literary and epigraphic sources confirm the role of these deities as patrons of maritime activities. Although the sculptures and inscriptions are dated to the second half of the 1st century AD, the syncretic association of the Roman Venus with the local Liburnian Anzotica likely represents a continuation of an earlier indigenous cult tradition.

Considering the geographical location of the peninsula and its function within the Liburnian and Roman nautical system centred in Nin, the possibility that it is a sanctuary with a maritime dimension should be seriously considered. Considering the fact that the ancient coastline was at least 70 m further seaward than the present-day coastline, the navigability of today's Miljašić Jaruga and its role in Nin's function as a river port in close proximity to the sea should be considered. There are several analogous cases, especially along the Italian coast, such as the outstanding examples of Spina and Adria in earlier times, and later Aquileia.

Peninsulas and promontories are important spatial markers, often associated with temples dedicated to maritime protectors, which underlines the importance of such sites, even if it is not the only determining factor. It is important to recognise that purely maritime sanctuaries, at least those for which there is archeological evidence, are relatively rare and they often served the wider community, with seafarers as occasional visitors. The perception of space by the seafarers is a crucial factor in understanding the location and significance of such sites.

In order to understand the diverse religious practices of ancient mariners and their worship of different deities in different places, an understanding of their cognitive mapping of the voyage is of paramount importance. Poetic expressions offer valuable insights into this conceptualisation: "Blest god of the harbour, accompany with gentle breeze the departing sails of Archelaus through the undisturbed water as far as the open sea, and thou who rulest over the extreme point of the beach, save him on his voyage as far as the Pythian shrine. From thence, if all we singers are dear to Phoebus, I will sail trusting in the fair western gale".[152] These lines

[152] *Anth. Pal.* 10.17.

reveal a sequential invocation of divine patrons: first the harbour deity, who is asked for favourable winds to facilitate the departure,[153] followed by the deity presiding over the land implored for protection across the open sea to the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. The latter point signifies a critical navigational point, necessitating a change of course around a promontory towards the open sea.[154]

Ancient mariners viewed their voyages as a series of transitional stages, a rite of passage as it were. Ritualised behaviours were performed at these transition points: in port before departure, on board during departure, when passing capes, headlands or significant landmarks, when entering port on arrival and in moments of perceived peril.[155] The sea itself represented a transitional zone, a spatial "in-between" where those at sea were considered neither alive nor dead. At these transitional points, libations – ritualized acts of drinking and pouring wine – were performed. The libation itself functioned as a rite of incorporation, intended to ensure the safety and protection of the invoked patron deity. It served as a preparatory act for the subsequent transitional phase, through which the sailor sought to ensure the well-being of the ship and its crew throughout the voyage.[156]

Looking at the voyage from this perspective, it becomes clear that numerous sanctuaries were visited in the harbour, above the harbour, on elevated terrain, on promontories, and in coastal caves. These acts served to strengthen the sense of security and to request the constant vigilance and help of the tutelary deities during potential crises. Although some of these sanctuaries were not located directly by the sea, they were important as visual aids to navigation. Shrines on mountain peaks often served as landmarks visible from afar, especially when approaching dangerous maritime zones. Sanctuaries on slopes or hilltops above the harbour had a similar function, enabling safe entry. Sanctuaries at harbour level, on the other hand, were visible on arrival at the port. These harbour sanctuaries were omnipresent in various ports, whether home port, port of call, or final destination.

It is important to emphasise that these sanctuaries were not exclusively dedicated to maritime cults. Rather, they typically belonged to a wider local community and fulfilled multiple functions, but were also frequented by seafarers, giving them a secondary maritime significance. Such sites are identifiable through explicit mention in literary sources or through the archeological recovery of maritime votive offerings, such as anchors, ship models or dedicatory inscriptions by seafarers. The patron gods

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[153] Roberts 1995, 312–314.
[154] Morton 2001, 177–180.
[155] Brody 2008, 6; Kapitän 1985, 147–148; Van Gennep 1977, 15, 18, 24, 25.
[156] Van Gennep 1977, 20–21, 24.

of these port sanctuaries often had epithets that indicated their association with harbours (Limenia) or the coast (Epaktaios). Deities worshipped on terraces above the port or on hills overlooking the harbour frequently carried the epithet Akraia, indicating their prominent position on the headland. Those who ruled over capes and remote islands and protected the open sea were typically associated with the epithets Pelagios (of the sea) or Pontios (of the deep), as well as Akraia, denoting their promontory location. While temples were sometimes erected at these remote locations to serve as beacons for navigation, the sanctuaries on the capes usually lacked buildings. As they jutted out into the sea from the mainland, they were visually conspicuous and thus effective as landmarks.[157]

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that seafarers also conceptualised important places through cognitive maps and remained aware of these places, especially dangerous ones, regardless of their immediate visual presence.[158] In the seafarer's mental landscape, such places functioned as navigational cues, much like visible structures. Sanctuaries on promontories and remote islands are known primarily through literary evidence and are less often documented archeologically, possibly due to the logistical challenges of their discovery in remote areas.[159] Our understanding of maritime ritual activities comes largely from sanctuaries that were located in ports that were not exclusively maritime, but were occasionally visited by seafarers.

The presence of numerous wooden piles discovered during various surveys and underwater excavations in the wider Bay of Nin and the harbour area suggests that at least some of these finds had a maritime function.[160] Literary sources suggest that Priapus played a protective role, especially in shallow lagoons, with wooden pylons often serving as his symbols and as navigational markers signalling the safety of sailors.

Given the strong maritime tradition of the Liburni, their mention in written sources, the findings of ships built in a local tradition characteristic of this Adriatic region (Zaton, Caska) and the function of Nin as the sa-

[157] Morton 2001, 201–206.

[158] Gladwin 1970, 33–34.

[159] Brody 1998, 41.

[160] Archeological investigations carried out underwater in Usta (historically called Bocca), today's entrance to the port of Nin, provide evidence of its use in the Middle Ages. Archeological excavations have revealed the remains of two medieval ships, as well as the discovery of wooden piles, Brusić 1978, 5–12; Radić Rossi, Liphschitz 2010, 257–270; Surić 2019, 38–39. These finds indicate maritime activities and a possible port infrastructure during this historical period. The exact function is still unknown. In the wider coastal area of Ždrijac, multiple wooden constructions have been identified, consisting of a series of thinner and thicker wooden pylons of undetermined function. Adjacent to the beach rocks (locally referred to as Ploče), two parallel stone ramparts were documented, perpendicular to the submerged sedimentary rock formations, the purpose of which has not yet been definitively established, possibly being the remains of breakwaters. Radić Rossi 2009, 512–514; Ead. 2011, 271–272.

fest port in this coastal section – along with its maritime and terrestrial connections to both the island area and the hinterland – the existence of maritime cults in this area is to be expected. Indeed, a maritime cult in Caska on the island of Pag is attested by at least two inscriptions, one of which clearly refers to the Egyptian deity Isis as "Mistress of the Earth and the Sea" (*Terrae Marisque Dominatrix*), while the other inscription is interpreted as a dedication to the local goddess Heia, who is equated with the Roman Bona Dea, although the reading of this inscription remains a matter of debate.[161]

For a comprehensive interpretation of the sanctuary on the Nin peninsula, it is essential to consider the wider maritime context and the role of Nin itself within the complex system of maritime routes, as well as coastal ports, their connection to underwater and terrestrial constructions, and the remains of human activity – what is referred to as the maritime cultural landscape.[162] Only such a holistic view can help in the identification of individual sanctuaries and the role they played within the community. Without direct confirmation from the archeological finds themselves, most of these sites will remain unrecognised, and the interpretation of the cult of the gods discovered in these sanctuaries will inevitably remain incomplete.

## Conclusion

This re-examination of the sanctuary at Rivine – Punta and its associated cult of Venus Ansotica, through a detailed analysis of previously overlooked archival documentation and a contextual understanding of Aenona's maritime geography, strongly suggests a profound connection between this indigenous-Roman syncretic deity and the seafaring activities of the Liburni.

The precise location of the sanctuary at the strategic entrance to Nin's harbour, coupled with the established maritime identity of the Liburni, offers a compelling geographical rationale for a cult focused on nautical concerns. Furthermore, a nuanced reinterpretation of Venus and Priapus reveals their broader classical roles, which extend beyond purely agricultural fertility to encompass protection and good fortune, qualities vitally sought by ancient seafarers. The presence of the indigenous Anzotica, fused with Venus, underscores the local adaptation of this cult to the needs of the Liburni. The newly-revealed details from Abramić's field notebook, including evidence for additional sculptural fragments, highlight the potential complexity and multi-faceted nature of the cult, further justifying a re-evaluation of its function.

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[161] Grisonic et al. 2022, 233–235

[162] Wasterdahl 1992, 6.

By stepping beyond the traditional interpretation of Venus Ansotica solely as an agricultural fertility deity, this study offers a novel perspective that better integrates the archaeological evidence with the socio-economic and geographical realities of ancient Aenona. It proposes that Venus Ansotica served as a crucial patron deity for Liburnian sailors, providing spiritual succor and protection in a profession fraught with peril. This interpretation fills a significant gap in our understanding of Liburnian religious practices, providing concrete evidence for their maritime cults.

Despite these new insights, the full extent and nature of the sanctuary remain challenging to determine due to its likely destruction and the limited scope of early interventions. Future archaeological re-evaluation, perhaps employing non-invasive methods as well as exavations, is essential to further delineate the sanctuary's architectural phases and spatial organisation. Such investigations would undoubtedly enrich our understanding of this unique Liburnian-Roman maritime cult and its vital role in the lives of Aenona's seafaring community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Arsen Duplančić for his invaluable assistance with museum archive documentation. Acknowledgment is also due to Mario Radaljac, Damir Kliškić, Zrinka Buljević, Boris Čargo, Nino Švonja (Archaeological Museum in Split), Irena Radić Rossi, Mate Parica, Mato Ilkić (University of Zadar), Morana Vuković, Kornelija A. Giunio, Timka Alihodžić, Majda Dadić, Ivan Čondić and Robert Maršić (Archaeological Museum in Zadar) for permission to use and publish inscriptions, sculptures and photographs, and for valuable information. In addition, the author would like to thank Jozo Mustać from the Municipality of Nin and Ivan Matković from the Department of Monument Protection in Zadar for their help in obtaining relevant materials about Nin, as well as the Nin Tourist Board and Marija Dejanović for providing beautiful aerial photographs of Nin. Special thanks also go to Marija Kolega for her insightful advice on questions concerning ancient Nin and Pavuša Vežić for his support. The author would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments and valuable suggestions, which significantly improved the quality of this manuscript. Last but not least, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the editor Feđa Milivojević for the invaluable opportunity to conduct this research and for his exceptional patience throughout the writing process. I truly hope it was worth the wait.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AE = *L'année épigraphique*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1888–
CIL = *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*, Berolini, 1863–
EDCS = Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss / Slaby, (http://www.manfredclauss.de/)
EDH = Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg, (http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/inschrift/suche)
Lupa = Ubi Erat Lupa, (https://lupa.at/)

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