

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CITY OF LLEIDA

THE EARLIEST MENTION OF THE CITY OF LLEIDA APPEARS IN AVIÉ'S *ORA MARÍTIMA*, A GEOGRAPHICAL POEM OF THE FOURTH CENTURY B.C.

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The earliest mention of the city of Lleida appears in Avié's *Ora Marítima*, a geographical poem (fourth century B.C.) based on the voyage of Eutimes, a Greek sailor from Marseilles, who travelled around the Mediterranean 500 years before the birth of Christ. It situates the Ilergets near the Cap de la Nau and says that later, following the route taken by other Iberian tribes such as the Ilercavons, they crossed the Ebro and, on a hill over the *Sicoris* (Segre), built the city of Iltirida, known as *Ilerda* by the Romans, and nowadays as Lleida.

But Lleida really played a part in history around the year 218 B.C., when the Carthaginian leader Hannibal invaded the peninsula to attack Rome. He managed to win-over the Ilerget leaders Indibil and Mandoni. However, disappointed

by the treatment they received from the Carthaginian army, they made a pact with the Romans. Dissatisfied with them as well, in about 205 B.C. they and the neighbouring Iberian tribes rose in arms and were beaten. In this way, Lleida was incorporated into the Latin cultural dominion.

Lleida achieved universal fame in the civil war when, in 49 B.C., Pompey's and Julius Caesar's forces clashed on the banks of the Segre. Pompey's army was commanded by Afrani and Petrei. Caesar took part in the fighting in person. The battle is considered a model of military planning and cunning. After a few indecisive actions, Caesar completely routed his rivals. It was in Lleida, then, where the foundations of the Roman Empire were laid. The city received the title of *municipium*

and, at the beginning of the first century A.D., Augustus, considered the first emperor, authorized the striking of coins in *Ilerda*, though the technique had already been used in the time of Indibil and Mandoni.

Despite the small amount of information available, it is thought that a general weakening of the political and bureaucratic structures took place some time around the fifth century, and that the Christian influence became more and more noticeable. After the creation of the diocese of Lleida, in uncertain times, power was transferred to the bishop, whose presence did not seem to be a hindrance to the process of Romanization. On the contrary, this process continued in spite of the invasions and the disintegration of the Empire. In 546, the first provincial eccle-

siastic council was held in Lleida. The importance of this event has been mentioned by several writers. According to Hefele the assembly was held in the church of Santa Eulàlia d'Ilerda. At the council of Toledo, in 587, Lleida was represented by Polibi, a Greek bishop. In the last years of Visigothic rule, the name *Le-rida* appeared and, under the Arab occupation, evolved into *Larida* and *Lareda*.

The Arabs ruled Lleida for 435 years. According to Ramon d'Abadal's investigations, the city was occupied some time between 716 and 719, the period when the Emir al-Hur and his predecessor al-Sahm undertook the conquest of Barcelona and penetrated Afrank (France). Until the year 1149, the Saracen City of Larida formed part of the march country and was ruled by renegade families such as the Amrús (778-814) and the Banû Qasî (862-890); the Banû-Hud dynasty (1036-1095) was a cultured lineage of Arab origin, whose power extended to Saragossa, and who promoted literature and the arts until the invasion of the Almoravids from the Sahara.

The Christian conquest of the Lleida region was carried out by the counts of Barcelona and Urgell jointly, with the help of knights of fortune, amongst whom stands out the famous Arnau Mir de Tost (1030-1071), leader of the "New Catalonia". But the work was completed by Ramon Berenguer IV of Barcelona and Ermengol VI of Urgell. The first conquered Tortosa while the second overpowered Balaguer and the Segrià region, thus leaving the city of Lleida completely surrounded. The two counts' armies entered the capital of the Segre on 24 October 1149. With them was the bishop Guillem-Pere of Ravidats, restorer of the ancient Visigothic cathedral, who came from Roda d'Isàvena, ancient see of the Ribagorça region, whose prelates considered themselves to be the successors and descendants of the early *Constantinian church*.

The conquering counts gave Lleida and its area (including the former Segrià, a parish with four hamlets) its well-known *Carta de Població* or charter (1150), which was to be the basis of the *Consue-*



tudines Ilerdenses drawn up by Guillem Botet in 1227. Alfons el Cast, son of Ramon Berenger IV and Peronella, queen of Aragon, contributed to the Christian repopulation of Lleida, establishing the Thursday market and the first fairs between 1168 and 1172 and, in 1197, Pere I, his successor, formed the *Consolat*, which was the most direct forerunner of the municipal authority of the future *Paeria*. The *Paeria* was set up in 1264 by Jaume I el Conqueridor and was a representative body made up of "good men", *paciaris* or peace-makers, chosen from the leading men of the city. The *Paeria* existed until Philip V's *Nueva Planta* decree of 1717. It was precisely at the beginning of the thirteenth century that, under the influence of the repopulating Christians, the name *Lleida* was adopted for official purposes, instead of the old *Le-rida*. The present coat of arms of the city also dates from this period.

In 1278, a few years after the foundation of the *Paeria*, during the reign of Pere II, Bishop Guillem de Montcada consecrated the great cathedral, an example of the architecture of the transition from Romanesque to Gothic and, on 1 September 1300, Jaume II, with a bull from Boniface VIII, created the university, remarking that he had chosen Lleida because, as well as offering a good climate and delicious fertile land, it was in the middle of the dominions of the Crown of Aragon. For this reason, Lleida was to be the only centre of university learning. In 1386-1387, Pere II el Cerimoniós radically reformed the General Council of the *Paeria*. Instead of by parishes, the councillors were to be designated by rank: lower, middle and upper.

However, the city went through a century

of severe crises which were to have repercussions on the population and on social life: the plagues of 1348 and 1380, the struggle of the Count of Urgell, Jaume el Dissortat, as a result of the *Compromís de Casp*, with the destruction of the once glorious county and the establishment of the Castilian dynasty of the Trastàmaras (1410-1413). After some years of economic prosperity (1425-1460), came a period marked by the Catalan rebellion against Joan II (1460-1472), war in the Roussillon, banditry in the Pyrenees (1473-1476) and the subsequent disappearance of the county of Pallars (1490). Ferdinand II tried in vain to reform municipal life (1499), the *Generalitat*, the guilds and the nobility (1510). The city oligarchies, in their drive to consolidate their power, fought in the streets alongside the artisans' and farmers' guilds. The censuses for 1497, 1515 and 1553 show a marked decline in the population figures. Neither did a hundred years of peace avoid the great crises caused by the War of the *Segadors* (1640-1652) or the War of Succession (1705-1716), when the Bourbons came to power, and Lleida, along with the rest of Catalonia, lost its ancient privileges and rights. Two sieges (1646 and 1707) destroyed the old city and, furthermore, Lleida lost the three most prized jewels of its history: the old cathedral, the town-hall and the university. Neither the absolutism of the Bourbons, nor the attempts at democracy of 1836, 1868 and 1873 or the restoration in 1876 managed to restore the level yearned for by the romantics and autonomists of the nineteenth century. The *Mancomunitat* was a real hope, the dictatorships of 1923 and 1939 were serious reversals, although there was great faith in the two republics.

The trust in the democratic explosion of 1977 has led to great expectation. We have lost the opportunity to recreate the old quarter of Canyeret and adorn it with the art and taste of our ancestors. We have tried to overcome the town-planning of Manuel Fuster (1864). Can we really overcome it after so many terrible destructions of the Lleida of the past? Let us wait a little longer and see. ●