

TARRACO AND THE ORIGINS OF TARRAGONA

THE ARRIVAL OF SCIPIO'S ARMY AT EMPÚRIES IN 218 B.C. AND THE IMMEDIATE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MILITARY *PRAESIDIUM* OF TARRACO MARKED THE BEGINNING OF A LONG PROCESS BY WHICH THE WHOLE OF THE PENINSULA WAS GRADUALLY INCORPORATED INTO THE NEW POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC RULE OF ROME.



FRANCESC TARRATS BOU DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF TARRAGONA



The incorporation of the Catalan lands into the Roman world took place at the end of the third century B.C., as a result of the battles of the Second Punic War, when Romans and Carthaginians fought to impose their control over the Mediterranean.

The arrival of Scipio's army at Empúries in 218 B.C. and the immediate establishment of the military *praesidium* of Tarraco marked the beginning of a long process by which the whole of the peninsula was gradually incorporated into the new political, cultural and economic rule of Rome. Throughout this process, Tarraco played an important part in two different ways:

during the time of the Roman republic (third to first centuries B.C.), the city was an important base for the reception of human and material reinforcements and a command centre for the conquest's military operations; during the imperial period (first to fifth centuries A.D.), it became the capital of an important part of the Iberian Peninsula, the *Provincia Hispani Citerioris*, and a showcase of what was meant by Romanism in all its complexity.

Little is left of the original republican city; one must remember that it was a powerful centre during the imperial period and those elements which were representative of the earlier period were extensively re-

placed. Nevertheless, there is evidence that a port existed in the same site as the present one, through which all troops, merchandise and military equipment passed on their way to the front-line operations. But the most important urban remains from this period belong to the monumental walled city, built at the beginning of the Roman legions' presence to protect the military encampment.

It is probable that by Julius Caesar's time the city had already been given the rank of *colonia* with the name *Colonia Iulia Urbs Triumphalis Tarraco*. However, it was after the emperor Augustus's time that it received its characteristic urban structure.



In the year 27 B.C., Augustus divided the peninsula into three provinces —*Tarraconensis* (the former *Hispania Citerioris*), *Baetica* and *Lusitania*. Tarraco was made the capital of its province, which remained under the direct control of the emperor himself. From that moment, an important town-planning project was set in motion, equipping the colony with a whole series of monuments and architectural elements befitting its importance and significance. So far as we can make out, this programme was carried out in stages throughout the first century A.D.

Tarraco's urban lay-out is formed by two sectors which are clearly differentiated according to their functions: the Upper District, given over to the administrative tasks that corresponded to a provincial capital, and the Lower District, or commercial and residential sector, organized rigidly along "civic" lines.

The Upper District, built on three different levels, where the uneven terrain had been especially terraced, consisted of three basic architectural nuclei: the precinct devoted to the provincial imperial cult, the provincial forum and —on the lowest level, leading to the lower city— the

circus. In spite of the city's stormy history and the continuous process of building over earlier structures, these three architectural sites have conserved their basic form and even now provide clear evidence of their grandiosity.

With the knowledge we have at present, it is difficult to give a detailed description of the lay-out of the rest of the city. Not far from the port, near the primitive indigenous nucleus, which is pre-Roman, was the commercial quarter, which determined the location of the Municipal Forum, focal point for the three principal facets of city life: commerce, religion and justice.

The theatre, situated near the port, has come down to us very badly damaged. However, successive excavations have given us a wealth of sculptural and architectural remains which make up a representative sample of its original splendour. We also know that in the sector now known as the "Port Quarry" there was a residential area in this same high-empire period, made up of luxurious town-houses.

On the eastern slope of the hill on which the city is situated, there is the amphithea-

tre. A Visigothic basilica was built on the arena to commemorate the martyrdom that Sant Fruitós and his deacons suffered there in 259 A.D. and, later on, a Romanesque church was consecrated to Santa Maria del Miracle on the same site.

The area known as the *Camp de Tarragona*, also full of monuments, is another indication of the city's grandeur and its sphere of influence throughout its history: the Les Ferreres aqueduct, the *Torre dels Escipions*, the *Arc de Berà*, the Vila-rodona columbarium, the Constantinian mausoleum at Centelles, the Roman villa at Els Munts, the *Pedrera del Mèdol*, etc. All of them spring from a single reality —Tarraco—, at once opulent and complex. In the National Archaeological Museum of Tarragona, an impressive collection featuring all kinds of sculpture, mosaics, coins, ceramics, jewellery, inscriptions, architectural elements, etc. tells the visitor the story of the energy and vitality that made the city seethe so many centuries before. A heritage which has become the root and sap for the Tarragona of later ages and a badge of identity for the community. ●