

LLEIDA, HISTORY AND CULTURE

LLEIDA IS THE MOST IMPORTANT CATALAN INLAND CITY AND ITS INFLUENCE REACHES NOT ONLY THE WESTERN REGIONS OF CATALONIA BUT ALSO THE AREA KNOWN AS "FRANJA DE PONENT".

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It has been said that Lleida's is a history stained with blood and this is no cliché although, unfortunately, it is a characteristic common to many European cities. Due largely to its condition as a frontier city between the principality of Catalonia and the rest of the peninsula, its history is one of urbanistic, demographic and social upheavals derived from the plague, the sieges and wars and the socio-political antagonisms. On the one hand, this explains why there is no important historical town-centre in Lleida and so few civil monuments like the former Santa Maria hospital —now the home of the *Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs*— or the *Paeria* palace, seat of the local authority. On the other hand, the reit-

erated forced exile of so many active citizens, who had to head for Barcelona or abroad, especially after each historical downfall, has made it very difficult to consolidate or even carry out many civic and cultural initiatives.

Lleida is the most important Catalan inland city and, as regards education and culture, its influence reaches not only the western regions of Catalonia but also the area known as *Franja de Ponent* (Western Strip), which has some 50,000 Catalan-speaking inhabitants and is administered by the autonomous government of Aragon although it sees Lleida as its cultural and economic capital. Catalan is the language most spoken in Lleida and the city identifies fully with the aspirations of the

Catalan community, even though it has certain special characteristics, amongst which one should point out its particular historical and linguistic links with Valencia and with the *Franja de Ponent* and a past connection with Occitania through the Vall d'Aran, an Occitanian-speaking area on the Atlantic slope of the Pyrenees but included in the province of Lleida. Obviously, the city could become more and more of an important cultural bridge between the lands of Aragon, Occitania, Andorra, Valencia and the Catalan coast. For reasons outlined earlier, Lleida is not one of those cities whose beauty strikes the visitor, and its cultural installations have just emerged from the bleakness of the last forty years. In Lleida, as in all small



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or medium-sized cities, social, economic, ideological and clerical censures were exerted with more effect than in the big cities. As was to be expected, the introduction of democracy and Catalan autonomy has favoured the revival and consolidation of numerous cultural initiatives and enterprises. In this respect, the influence of the institutions and the consolidation of university studies have been very important.

The *Paeria* —the traditional name by which the city hall is known— has carried out a considerable job of encouragement and diffusion of culture, the *Diputació* has made possible the present reform of the *Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs* and has supported the initiatives of the smaller towns of the province; the *Generalitat* has also made its influence felt in various initiatives; the *Estudi General* (a group of faculties and colleges that depend on Barcelona university) and the delegations from the *Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya* and the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, have become a powerful engine for the renovation of culture and research; various associations and entities —such as the *Ateneu Popular de Ponent*, with over one thousand active members and grow-

ing all the time— have ensured that this new start should not be an artificial phenomenon out of touch with the social environment, and at the same time they have insisted that the authorities make the necessary contribution.

The tendency is for Lleida's contribution to research, literature and cultural diffusion to grow, thus correcting a historic constant of the city and its surroundings: the predominance of outstanding figures in political and trade-union leadership over those who shine in academic, literary and cultural activities.

Lleida offers the visitor a discreet set of museums (the "Jaume Morera" Art museum, the I.E.I.'s Archaeological museum, the I.E.I.'s Numismatic museum, the *Paeria* museum, the Diocesan museum...), monuments such as the *Seu Vella*, the former hospital of Santa Maria, Sant Llorenç church or the *Paeria*, and a relatively important cultural life (exhibitions, congresses, conferences, lecture-courses...) which is mainly concentrated in the period from October to June. From July to September —just when the orchards that surround the city are living the frenzy of picking and export— the summer schools stand out alongside the popular festivals and out-

door events. It is then that one has to make the most of the evenings, if one enjoys walking, to get an idea of Lleida's transformation —the writer Miguel Delibes spoke this spring of a completely renovated city—, contemplate the sculptures by Leandre Cristòfol and others or drop in to any of the city's street cafés to sample its everyday life and that of its inhabitants.

In this case, the traveller would do well to accept the help of some of Josep Pla's writings on the city's trade or its attractive dark women with almond-shaped eyes, that he considered a sign —poetic, if you like— of the Arab heritage. Equally recommendable reading would be any book by Josep Vallverdú —one of the most important modern writers in Lleida or Catalonia— who has achieved an extraordinary insight into the character of this land and of its inhabitants.

Finally, the visitor must not lose the chance to compare this character with that of coastal Catalonia, nor must he forget that he is in one of the Catalan cities that remained under Arab domination for the longest time: four hundred and thirty-five years. ●