

THE MYTH OF THE EMPORDÀ



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GREEK MOSAIC. RUINS OF EMPÚRIES (UPPER EMPORDÀ)

THE CATALAN REGION OF THE EMPORDÀ TAKES ITS NAME FROM THE OLD “EMPORION” OF THE GREEKS. ALL CATALANS FEEL IDENTIFIED WITH THE MYTHS THAT HAVE GROWN UP THERE.



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One of the best-known myths in Catalan culture is the story of the Empordà. I use the word “myth” in the sense both of human creation (either more or less concordant with reality) and of a basis for collective convictions. According to the writer Fuster, 30% of Catalan literature is devoted to the Empordà, and a study of the visual arts would also reveal a frequent use of the subject. But what does this myth consist of? From the geographical point of view, the two regions of the Upper (Alt) and Lower (Baix) Empordà are situated at the north-eastern tip of Catalonia. Together the Empordà covers 198 square kilometres and has some 170,000 inhabitants. But the myth of the Empordà is not based on geography. Let’s now try and

identify the specific features that have contributed to the creation of the submyths of the Empordà, which in turn converge in one broader myth, that of Catalonia.

The Empordà is formed by a plain bordered by the Mediterranean and by various mountain ranges. The combination of sea, plain and mountain, so attractive to tourists today, inspired the poet Joan Maragall to formulate the following myth about the region’s creation: the love between a mermaid and a mountain shepherd could only be consummated on neutral ground between the two lovers’ respective domains. The Empordà becomes a land of consensus.

Some historians believe that Rhode, today’s Roses, was the first Greek city in

Western Europe. Across the bay of Roses another wave of navigators founded *Emporion* (“market” in Greek), present-day Empúries, the most important Greek city on the Iberian Peninsula, from which the region takes its name. Later, the Romans also landed at Empúries in their fight against the Carthaginians and it was there that the Romanization of Iberia began. The names of many towns and villages in the area begin with the prefix “Vila”, which has its origin in the Roman *villae*. This is the Empordà as the submyth of settlement by classical civilizations.

With the passage of time, in the late Middle Ages, the territory of today’s Empordà came up against the expansionist policies of the diocese of Girona and,

above all, of the Counts of Barcelona, since in the twelfth century the County of Empúries was surrounded by the County of Barcelona. This feeling for home-rule connects with the political movement that impregnated the Empordà during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century: federal republicanism. The federalists of the Empordà advocated rational and productive anticlericalism and antimonarchism: the submyth of progressivism and individual and national liberties.

After Catalonia lost the Roussillon in 1659, the Empordà bordered directly on the French frontier. Since then, this land has been witness to the passage of political fugitives. To mention just two well-known cases, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, on the run from the Nazis, committed suicide in Portbou, and the parliament of the Second Spanish Republic assembled for the last time at the castle of Figueres on its way to France. During the long years of absolutism and dictatorship, the crossing over the Pyrenees at el Pertús represented the meeting point between Catalonia and liberal Europe. In the poems of Salvador Espriu, freedom is always to be found “to the north”, just a few kilometres north of the Empordà: the submyth of the borderland and Europeanness.

In a land inclined to individualism, there are bound to be conspicuous figures. The best-known is probably Salvador Dalí, the painter from Figueres who had such a powerful influence on the Surrealist movement. The Empordà also produced Josep Pla, the most popular and prolific Catalan writer and journalist since the war; it's been said that if Catalonia were to disappear, it could be entirely reconstructed from his writings. Figueres was also the birthplace of Narcís Monturiol, inventor of the submarine, and Alexandre Deulofeu, who discovered the mathematical rules that govern history: the submyth of imagination and creativity.

A land of painters rather than of writers, the Empordà is well known for its space,



CALELLA DE PALAFRUGELL (LOWER EMPORDÀ)

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its harmonious arrangements of fields, woods and hills. The most emblematic spot is undoubtedly the mineral landscape of Cape Creus, swept by the characteristic hurricane winds of the tramuntana. To the east we find Cadaqués, the fishing village the whole of the European avant-garde fell in love with: Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, René Magritte, Max Ernst, Federico García Lorca, André Breton, Man Ray... To the north, the monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes, the cradle of Romanesque art, a paradigmatic creation of the Empordà, according to Deulofeu.

The mythical power of the Empordà can be explained by the ease with which all Catalans can identify with its submyths, from the judicious love of the shepherd and the mermaid to the outbursts of violence of the tramuntana. Catalonia tends to look on itself as the Empordà of the Iberian Peninsula, and not only because it's also in the north-east corner; in general, the Catalans feel themselves to be more Graeco-Roman, bargainers, traders, home-rule advocates, individualists, Europeanists and creative than the rest of

the Spaniards. Perhaps this is why, when summer comes around –and more and more frequently at other times of year–, intellectuals, artists, politicians and tourists from the metropolitan area take up residence in a holiday home, hotel or camp site in the Empordà, following in the footsteps of Marlene Dietrich, Coco Chanel, Luchino Visconti and so many others who stayed at Mas Juny, the farmhouse belonging to the painter Josep Maria Sert in Palamós.

It has become commonplace to consider oneself “an adopted child of the Empordà”. In the more than one hundred towns and villages of the two regions, the art galleries, expensive home-cooking restaurants, restored farmhouses and new golf courses attract more and more people every year. The myth and the tourism feed each other in a spiralling dialectic relationship which constantly yields new fruits: any certified product from the Empordà (wine, onions, fritters, to name just a few) is an immediate best seller. In this way, over the ages, the *emporion* or market of the Greeks is renewed and brought to life in the myth of the Empordà. ■