



CATALONIA AND THE FIRST MEDITERRANEAN CULTURES



THE GREEKS AND PHOENICIAN-CARTHAGINIANS ARRIVED ON THE COASTS OF CATALONIA DURING THE EIGHTH, SEVENTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES B.C., AND THE ROMANS IN THE THIRD CENTURY B.C. THESE THREE CULTURES PLAYED THE BIGGEST PART IN THE FORMATION OF OUR COUNTRY.

VICENÇ PAGÈS JOURNALIST



During the eighth, seventh and sixth centuries B.C., the Phoenician-Carthaginians and Greeks came to the coasts of Catalonia from the Eastern Mediterranean in search of metals. These two peoples' cultural level was far ahead of that of the local inhabitants, known collectively as Iberians, who were divided into a number of tribes between whom relations were not always good.

The first Greeks to settle in Catalonia came from the island of Rhodes, in the Aegean. They founded Rhode –present-day Roses–, the first Greek city in the West, according to some historians, on a gulf in Catalonia's northern coastline.

The Rhodians minted their own coin, established commercial relations with the natives –to whom they sold manufactured goods in exchange for raw materials–, and introduced more modern tools. Sometime around 600 B.C., a second wave of Greeks, from Phoea, in Asia Minor, founded their most important city on the Iberian Peninsula, Emporion (the Greek word for a market or commercial centre), at the other end of the Gulf of Roses. The two cities were originally simple commercial establishments like Massalia, later to become Marseilles. Emporion had an agora or porticoed square where the market was held and a temple precinct in which was found one of the most beautiful statues of the West, that dedicated to Asklepios, the god of Medicine. It has been said that Emporion was the most Greek city outside Greece and Magna Grecia. Before long it was minting its own drachmas, which have been found in archaeological sites all over Catalonia and which bore the symbol of the city, the winged horse Pegasus. In this way, Catalonia was the first area in the West to have a monetary economy. The Greeks also introduced the potter's wheel into Catalonia, along with the use of salt-pans and certain crops that were to become characteristic, such as vines and olives, and their derivatives, wine and oil. In general, the Greeks were an economic stimulus for the locals and drew them towards city life. On a less



EMPÚRIES

material level, the newcomers introduced the Iberians to the possibilities of a more refined life and to aesthetic pleasures.

The Phoenician-Carthaginians competed with the Greeks on the coast of Catalonia with products manufactured on a large scale and sold in bulk. Purple fabrics, jewellery and silica-paste recipients were the most important of these products. In 654 B.C., they settled on the island of Eivissa (Ibiza), bringing with them the ass and the mule and introducing agriculture and stock-raising. This is reflected in the architecture, dances and dress of Eivissa today.

During the war against Hannibal, in the third century B.C., the Romans landed at Empúries and, led by Scipio, they founded Tarraco (Tarragona), in the south of Catalonia, as a stronghold and naval base. The conflicts that took place between the Romans and the Carthaginians, the indigenous tribes and even rival factions of the Roman Empire lasted until 49 B.C. Romanisation –more cultural than ethnic– started then and continued for three centuries of peace and prosperity until the arrival of the Visigoths. Without forced conscription, the manufacturing world continued to develop amid a succession of social, economic and cultural transformations. Cities and city life as we know them today date from this period. In fact, the metropolises of the present-day Països Catalans, Barcelona (Barcino) and Valencia (Valentia), reflect the arrangement of eight centuries ago. The layout of the cities was inherited from the Greek *polis* (parallel streets) and the Roman *castra* (four exterior gates and two main streets that met at the forum). Administration, bureaucracy, taxes, the



© ELOI BONJOCH

organisation of workers according to their trade –the origin of the medieval guilds and today's trade unions– all date from this time. The country's love of baths and spas is another Roman influence. For the first time ever, Catalonia had stable communications routes, the Roman roads, which played an important part in overcoming tribal rivalries and in unifying the country. Away from the cities, the Iberian hill-top towns were abandoned and scattered settlements of farmhouses (*villae*) began to spring up on low ground. These small and medium-sized farming centres were the origin of the masies, or typical Catalan farmhouses. The Romans also introduced the use of irrigation into what is now the País Valencià.

Neither the Germanic peoples nor the Huns, who started the crisis in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, nor the Arabs, who arrived in the País Valencià in the eighth century –all of whom invaded by land– had the same influence as the Phoenicians, Greeks or Romans –seafaring colonisers and traders. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Catalonia reversed her earlier role and conquered a series of points in the Mediterranean: Majorca, Valencia, Sicily, Sardinia and Naples. After 1492, when the Spaniards discovered America and expelled the last Moors from the Peninsula, the cultural and economic epicentre shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. However, now that the countries of the Mediterranean shoreline have even lost their military and commercial predominance in the area, the Mediterranean and the Mediterraneans are slowly but steadily recovering their international leadership of peace and civilization. ●