

L'ALGUER AND ITS HISTORICAL CENTRE



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FRANCESC MANUNTA POET

LAlgier –let me make it quite clear– is more than just sea and sunshine for the tourists on holiday, set in a beautiful landscape under a clear blue sky. L'Algier is also Mediterranean, Catalan, Sardinian, Italian and at the same time European culture.

The possible presence in this area of palaeolithic man, and certainly of neolithic man, is a source of research and subsequent archaeological excavations. The history and prehistory of this Catalan city in Sardinia are extremely rich, and there are a number of aspects which are yet to be studied.

Recent research by Professor Francesco Bertino has definitively discarded the traditionally accepted date of 1102 as the year the city was founded by the aristocratic Doria family of Genoa, while suggesting the second half of the thirteenth century –almost certainly 1276– as the founding date for l'Algier (see F. Bertino: *Notizie e ipotesi su un borgo sardo-ligure del basso Medioevo: l'Alghero dei Doria*, vol. I, edizione del Sole, Alghero 1989).

Although traditional etymology has related the name to the Latin “alga” (and algae are found in abundance in the gulf and off the coasts of l'Algier), the origin is more likely to lie in the surname “Algierius” or “Aligerius”, which appears in a number of official medieval documents in Genoa and Pisa (see F. Manunta: *Cançons Líriques Religioses de l'Algier Catalana*, vol I, pp 3-6, note 1).

1354 is undoubtedly the date of birth of Catalan l'Algier. That l'Algier has preserved her Catalan cultural identity is clear not only from her language and her civic and religious traditions, but also from the monuments in the historical centre, which often “speak Catalan”. It can be seen in the two elegant bell-towers and the architecturally most significant parts of the cathedral and church of Saint Francis, as well as in many stately buildings in the Catalan gothic style.

L'Algier and Càller were the two centres from which this style –a form of French gothic influenced by Moorish architec-



ture, very common in Catalonia and Spain– penetrated the whole of Sardinia, where we can often find doorways with floral motifs, ornamental plant motifs, human and animal figures carved in stone and a liking for majolica. In l'Algier, we find buildings in this style dating from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Of the old walled city, 60% of the walls remain standing, as well as the towers: the Gate Tower (or “Porta a terra”), the Saint John Tower (or “Torre de mig”), the Royal Spur Tower (or “Torre de Sulis”), the Saint James Tower (known as the “Torre dels Cutxos”), the Saint Barbara Tower, the Bell Tower, a half tower and, finally, the tower of Saint Elmo (which has the only Catalan coat of arms –with the four stripes– to be found on the present walls) and Mary Magdalene, or “Garibaldi” Tower.

After the construction of the Catalan gothic church of Saint Francis, a number of stately homes were built in the same style. Although the whole of the walled city could be given the name

“Gothic Quarter”, the town square (or “Plaça del Pou Vell” or “Plaça de la Ciutat”) marks the centre of a gothic quarter specific to l'Algier. Today, when the plaster specially added last century falls from some of the stately homes, the Catalan gothic structure is revealed, with the characteristic floral motifs. The most important Catalan gothic stately homes are to be found in the streets around the town square. In the square itself are the “Palau de Ferreira”, today officially known and signposted as “Palau d'Albis”, the “Palau de la Meridiana” and, almost opposite the “Portal de la mar”, the former Royal Customs House. In the Carrer de la Mercè (officially Via Roma) is the “Palau Guió i Duran” (now “Peretti”); and there are buildings between the Carrer de Sant Francesc (Via Carlo Alberto) and the Carreró Serra (Vicolo Serra); in Carrer de Sant Francesc itself are the Palau “Llorino” or “Rossi” (now “Adami”) and the “Palau Ross”, on whose secondary façade, in Carrer Mallorca, the floral patterns have recently been restored.

In Carrer de Sant Elm (Via Sant'Erasmo) is one of the town's most beautiful Catalan gothic stately homes. Originally possibly the property of the Jewish Cassona family, it became the “Palau Reial” after the expulsion of the Jews by the Catholic monarchs in 1492.

There is also the “Palau Tarragona” (now “Guillot”, in the present-day Via Gilbert Ferret), with fifteenth century Catalan gothic structures, though the results of reforms in the last century prevail; the “Palau Vinci” or “Tibau”, now referred to officially as “Palau Machin”, in the Carrer del Bisbe (Via Principe Umberto), with late Catalan gothic structures and a Renaissance gateway; and finally, after its very recent restoration, the “Palau del Pou Salat”, commonly known as “Pou salit”.

Certainly, we can say that, just as there is a Gothic Quarter in Barcelona, there is also one in the historic centre of the “Barceloneta sarda”, the little Barcelona of Sardinia, as l'Algier is traditionally known. ■