

The Origins

The origins of the city of Barcelona date from the 1st century A.D., when the Romans established a small colony around the Taber mount. In this way Barcino started, to form part of Eastern Hispania, the capital of which was Tarraco (currently Tarragona).



The Roman cities in Catalonia were small -with the exception of Tarraco- but they formed a compact and well-linked net which covered the whole country.

In the surroundings of the colony named Barcino

remains of old native settlements have been found, even from the late Bronze Age. The remains of the two Roman Walls, nevertheless, clearly show that Barcino was the first structured urban nucleus in the whole plain. A nucleus which would be kept walled -with different outlines- until well into the nineteenth century, when the Cerdà plan of the so called "eixample" tore down the last walls to start the urban development of the rest of the plain.

Between the IV and the XIII Century the city nucleus founded by the Romans was consolidated, and a process of expansion began. After many political upheavals and the retreat of Moorish Spain, Barcelona experienced feudalism and a growing maritime trade, which allowed it to strengthen its position as a political, religious and trade centre.

At the end of the XIII Century a second city wall was built to give protection to the new ravals around the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar, where the thriving viles noves of the Mercadal, the port and the Rec Comtal were to be found.

In the picture, roman amphitheatre at Tarragona

Gothic Barcelona

Barcelona emerged from the Middle Ages as a city that had reached the limits of its possible growth in area and in the long centuries of stagnation that followed there were some attempts to bring order to the city and its social fabric.

The walls of the XIII Century sheltered the viles noves (new houses) built outside the area of the Roman city, and from the XIV Century on Barcelona gained a third stretch of walls around the cultivated fields of the Raval area.

After the departure of the royal court, the Mediterranean seemed small and insignificant alongside the Atlantic trade. Within the confines of the newly established city, Barcelona erected a Gothic city around its geometric and political centre, the Plaça Sant Jaume, while artisans flourished around the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar, in the neighbour of La Ribera, turning Barcelona into a city of merchants, navigators, traders and professionals. Especially noteworthy about the city was the level of



participation, its corporate identity, its selective and gradual approach to affairs. This was the Barcelona of the “gremis” (guilds).

In the picture, remains of the third stretch of walls and Santa Madrona gate

Neoclassical Barcelona

In Barcelona the XVIII Century opened and closed with the country at war: in 1714 defeat in the War of the Spanish Succession and in 1808 the struggle against Napoleon's army in the Peninsula War. The XVIII Century was the Age of Enlightenment and enlightened despotism; the century that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant summed up as "dare to think for yourself"; a time of many changes across Europe that came to a head with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.



After the military occupation of 1714 Barcelona experienced a period of economic revival promoted by the Bourbon administration, military spending in the city, the opening of cotton and calico mills, and authorisation to trade with the Americas. It was still a walled garrison city with the newly-built fortress of the Ciutadella to protect it and keep it under firm control. Now, within those city walls reforms led to the development of the neighbours El Raval and la Rambla, and the embellishment of the main streets of the city with neoclassical façades and buildings.

Barcelona at this time was a city in a state of flux, where old rural ways of life were making way for a modern city and industrial centre. It was the passing of the Antic Règim (ancien régime) and the beginning of the Capitalist era.

In the picture: “El desconsol”, by Josep Llimona (Parc de la Ciutadella)

Modernist Barcelona

From the proclamation of the new Cadiz Constitution in 1812 till the Republic of 1873 Barcelona experienced the various social and political upheavals that were felt throughout Spain. There were riots, strikes, the burning of convents, bombardments of the city and other kinds of confrontation resulting from the great strains within the city.

The city itself passed from being made provincial capital in 1833 to being governed by “*Juntas Provisionals i Revolucionàries*” and “*Comitès de Salvació Pública*” (Revolutionary Councils) later in the XIX Century.

Nevertheless, these struggles brought about further developments that radically changed the city: the most obvious was the demolishing of the city walls that still encircled Barcelona, which in turn made possible the growth of the city and the absorption of neighbouring towns, and the destruction of the Ciutadella Militar (site of the military garrison) to make way for the 1888 *Exposició Universal* (Universal Exhibition). Within the old walled city the



first reforms were made to deal with the decay and lack of public areas. And the properties of religious orders along the Ramblas and in the Raval were reclaimed.

As regards industry, Barcelona - which was known as "little Manchester" - inaugurated the first railway in Spain in 1848 and later saw the founding of the labour unions UGT in 1888 and CNT in 1910.

The "*Febre d'or*" (literally, gold fever, referring to the economic boom) of the end of the XIX Century saw the founding of companies such as Transatlàntica and Crèdit i Docks, and the English *Renaixença* (cultural revival) saw the revival of the medieval "*Jocs Florals*" (literally, floral games; in reality, a poetry contest).

In the picture: Parc Güell (Antonio Gaudí)

Noucentist Barcelona

At the beginning of the twentieth century Barcelona became a capital of the cultural avant-garde, a city where the new advances in science and technology made an impact on every aspect of the daily life of its people. A new generation of industrialists and politicians started out on ambitious industrial and development plans to turn Barcelona into a modern metropolis. But 40% of the city's inhabitants were still illiterate in 1900 and 18% in 1920. There were fresh initiatives in schooling and professional training; new market necessities and the city's housing problems were dealt with; the first city trains were built, the tramway was electrified, the streets were lit and lifts were installed in buildings; Barcelona was on its way to becoming a fast-moving vibrant city, a city characterised by the media and mass consumption.



During this period the football clubs, Barça and Espanyol, were founded, the mountains of Montjuïc and Tibidabo were developed, and the city grew to the east.

The barricades and sacking of religious buildings in the Setmana Tràgica (Tragic Week) of 1909, the gangsterism of the 1920s, the Second Republic, the military revolt and the bombs of the Civil War (1936 - 1939) left behind a defeated city, without energy or memory, to confront the long post-war period.

After the Spanish Civil War Barcelona made a dramatic break with its immediate past, with the dreams and aspirations of the 1931 Republic.

In the years that followed the war the day-to-day life of the city was one of rationing and smuggling, and cinemas and street festivals were the only escape from the shortages and repression of the long years of the dictatorship.

In the Barcelona of the fifties, surrounded by shanty towns that grew up in the shadow of new industrial complexes such as SEAT and ENASA (which had replaced the Vella Hispano Suïssa), Seat 600 cars and television sets began to be seen in the streets and houses. Among the great events of the decade were the tram strike of 1951 and the Congrés Eucarístic of the following year.

The city went on growing until the whole metropolitan area took in Barcelona itself and 26 neighbouring boroughs. The decaying city centre was surrounded by commercial and

residential areas and the burgeoning outskirts with great industrial estates. In this city the first protests were heard as the new waves of migrants were chaotically squeezed in.

The Barcelona of the 21st. Century

The Barcelona of the 21st. Century is a city shaped by the '92 Olympics, a city transformed for and by the need to do justice to that great international event, with the effort involved in carrying through this transformation allowing the city to overcome a series of historic disadvantages and make major quantitative and qualitative advances in its services and its physical fabric.

The Barcelona we see around us now, the Barcelona we enjoy today, is a new Barcelona, Mediterranean in keeping with its traditions, with its face to the sea and its arms open to other cultures and peoples, giving and receiving, happy to make and to share its riches.

At the same time the Barcelona of the 21st century, for all its transformations, has not severed its ties with a proud history in which so many generations of cultural diversities have built the firm foundations on which the innovations of modern times have constructed an utterly unique city with a personality that is all its own.

In the picture, Trade Buildings by J.A. Coderch



Source: Barcelona City Council, <http://www.bcn.es/english/laciutat/barcelona/>