

Landscapes in ruins. Palm-tree fields in Elx, UNESCO World Heritage

Paisaje en ruinas. Palmeral en Elx, Patrimonio de la Humanidad
de la UNESCO

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RESUMEN: El presente artículo plantea una reflexión sobre la evolución del palmeral de Elx partiendo del interés por mantener en vigor este espacio. El autor lo sitúa primeramente en su contexto histórico y geográfico para luego remontarse a sus orígenes, ligados al aprovechamiento de la palmera en la economía local y de la región. Sin embargo, los intereses culturales y turísticos predominantes en la actualidad pueden contribuir a la desaparición paulatina de los antiguos usos rurales de este entorno. En el artículo se examina la relación entre el palmeral y el desarrollo urbano de Elx, la conversión en suelo público y los riesgos de degradación inherentes a los cambios producidos.

Palabras clave: palmeral, Elx, turismo cultural, desarrollo urbano, paisaje.

ABSTRACT: The present article discusses the evolution of the palm grove of Elx, starting with the interest to maintain this alive. The author first situates the palm grove in its historical and geographical context and then goes back to its origins, linked to the use of the palm in the local economy and the region. However, the predominant cultural and tourism interests at present can contribute to the gradual disappearance of the old rural uses of this environment. The article examines the relationship between the palm grove and the urban development of Elx, the conversion to public land and the risks of degradation inherent to the changes produced.

Keywords: Palm tree fields, Elx, Cultural tourism, Urban development, Landscape.

«[...] lo sguardo lungo della geografia, che è scrittura della terra, ma dove anche la storia ha scritto il suo racconto. La geografia è disegnata dalla storia tramite le manipolazioni operate dall'uomo con le sue costruzioni, con i suoi insediamenti, con le sue città, che ospitano appunto la comunità civile».
Aldo Lino in M. Lucchini, *Oltre Babele*, Milano 2012, p. 10

1. INTRODUCTION: DIFERENT POSSIBILITIES ABOUT THE TITLE OF THIS PAPER

The subject of this paper may be looked at from different angles, so it can be given different titles. In fact, we will be looking at this subject from different perspectives: One perspective could be «We are going to talk about a Mediterranean landscape». But from the European point of view we can also talk about «A European landscape». However we must immediately add: «A South European landscape», so in general different terms, even opposite to Northern European landscape. We can go further and say that the landscape we are going to talk about is one area characterized by plants, by agriculture or by rural areas, not by mountains or cities or big rivers and big natural phenomena. We can also add that this place is under threat, that it is not in use anymore, or that soon it will be more or less in ruins, better or worst conserved. We can later talk about this place as a ruin, as an agricultural ruin.

Keeping in mind the previous possibilities about the subject of my paper, the title of it is finally going to be «Palm-tree plantations in Elx, South-East Spain, UNESCO World Heritage».

2. DOUBTS ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF LANDSCAPE

Firstly, let's have a look at this term, «landscape» or even «cityscape». I think that from the very start we should no longer have any trust in this word or concept. May be this distrust can lead us to reconsider it, or even omit it from our academic language, in spite of its being a word which has so much prestige in the academic and non-academic worlds nowadays.

But, it's a term which covers such a broad and often unsubstantial meaning and is used for so many different fields and intentions, so that in the end it has lost any substantial weight. In spite of all this, we will now continue using the term «Mediterranean Landscape» because it can be useful for our understanding.

3. THE LIMITED POWER OF IMAGES

It's likely that you are not familiar with palm tree fields. So, for example, if you were in Elx I could take you to visit those places and we could spend time familiarizing ourselves with this scene, because in a scientific method you need a direct visual knowledge of the subject you are approaching.

As that is obviously impossible today I'm going to show you a large quantity of images and later some pictures, designs, etc. which will properly substitute more or less the direct knowledge of the place.

The idea behind these images is not as you would expect from the widespread expression in Spanish «a picture is worth more than a thousand words».

On the contrary, as you can see these images are «dumb», so, as they are «dumb», they must be explained with words and that means giving them a voice.

When they have a voice and they have been explained you can better understand what is the subject of my research in the field (or area) of Spanish Town-Planning and Urban History.

4. GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Geography and History are the first areas we will look at to understand what the problem is. On the map of Europe by «Google maps» you can see where Bristol is and where Alicante is. The journey takes two hours by plane and costs less than 100 £, may be even less than 50 £.

You know perfectly where Spain is within Europe but may be you do not know that Spain in the Modern Spanish Constitution, but also in old times, is called «The Kingdom of Spain».

5. THE KINGDOM OF ARAGON

You probably also know that in the medieval times most of Spain was inhabited by the moors, and our modern kingdom of Spain was formed over five centuries ago, by expelling the moors from Spain and exiling them to Africa.

In the beginning, we had three large different Christian kingdoms: Catalonia-Aragon, which is an eastern part of the peninsula; Castile-Leon in the middle; and Portugal towards the west.

These three kingdoms are the origins for three «Hispanic» languages, derived from Latin language: Catalan, Spanish, and Portuguese which in many English universities are included together in the same department and learned by the same students.

Elx is situated in the far south of the kingdom of Aragon, which extended in medieval time as far as the southern region of Italy (Naples and Sicily) and even parts of Greece. One important point to highlight is that through this expansion towards the east, as a counterpart, the Renaissance reached Spanish territory through the city of Valencia.

We must remember that two Popes in the 15th century, from the Borgia family, were born in Valencia and while they stayed in Rome, at the same time, they were bishops of the Cathedral of Valencia, where they sent a lot of presents: pictures, jewels, relics, and even artists (in person).

6. THE ROMAN CITY OF ILLICI

We can go back in time and think about the Roman empire, which as you well know occupied the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, reaching the Atlantic Ocean, the Atlas mountains, the Arabian desert, the rivers Rhine and Danube and the north of England, where they built the famous Hadrian's Wall.

Elx was founded by Romans in the middle of a big flat area of about 30 by 30 kilometers. In that area the Romans established the Illici Centuriatio. Maybe you do not know what a Centuriatio is. I am going to tell you that it is a big division of the land by roads in a squared pattern to permit farmers and peasants to settle there and to cultivate or farm the land.

These pieces or plots of land were usually given to old surviving Roman soldiers who built large houses on their property and lived there with servants, slaves and whole families, producing the food, the clothes and the tools they needed.

The old city of Elx, called Illici, is situated in the middle of this large Centuriatio. Before becoming a Roman city, this settlement was Carthaginian and Iberian, and it is well-known around the academic and artistic world because of the famous statue of the so called «Lady of Elx», the highlight, the pinnacle, of Iberian art, which was discovered around 1900 and was kept in the Louvre Museum in Paris and is now in the Archaeological Museum of Madrid.

7. THE VINALOPÓ RIVER. THE WATERING SYSTEM

The question is that this whole large area, the whole Centuriatio of Illici, was irrigated by a rather small, almost empty river called the Vinalopó. It is about 100 kilometers long; it begins in the mountains towards the north (that is the end of the big Iberian Mountain system that crosses the center of Spain to the Mediterranean Sea) and ends in the area of Elx.

And this river, over thousands and thousands of years has shaped this large flat area in the middle of which the Roman city of Illici was settled.

I am going to describe how, as with most of the Mediterranean rivers, it is dry during the summer period. That's the behavior of typical short Mediterranean rivers or ravines, which are dry for a long period of the year and then suddenly after a big storm become full and overflow causing profuse and dangerous floods.

Another characteristic of this river is that the water is not good for drinking because of the high level of salts dissolved in the water. But, instead, that salted water is perfectly good for the palm trees, for the pomegranates and for other plants and trees that, on the other hand, love the sun and dryness. This is probably the origin of the large, extensive, numerous palm tree fields in Elx.

As you can see palm trees all around the Mediterranean Sea, but they are usually isolated trees, or trees in gardens, or just trees near the houses, like a holy presence, because it is a sacred tree in Christian tradition. But in no other place of Europe can you see such a vast extension of palm trees as in Elx, shaping the landscape so powerfully that it reminds us (even today and more so in the past) of the Arab countries like Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, etc.

The last characteristic of this river which is relevant to our lecture and very important to our study is that the end of this river, before reaching the sea, forms an «albufera». Let me explain what an «albufera» is.

There are three possibilities for the rivers when they reach the sea: the first possibility is that the river forms an estuary (as the Thames in London and Tajo in Lisbon) where the river flows immediately into the sea and the ships can go into the estuary.

A second possibility is that the river forms a delta, where the land that mixes with water forms big areas of new lands penetrating the sea, like the Nile near Alexandria, the Ebro in Spain and the Amazon in the Atlantic Ocean. In this way, very fertile agricultural land is formed and farmers settle there.

The third possibility is that the river doesn't reach the sea at all, but spreads, forming a kind of lake with fresh water, close to but separated from the sea, called «albufera». The Albufera of Valencia, in Spain, is very famous. Usually these are big areas of shallows and marshes that are very rich in fauna and flora because there, the river water and the sea water meet and mix together with the movement of wind and rains and storms.

In this third case there are a lot of salts which accumulate in the soil. These salts make it possible to grow some hard trees and plants (like palm trees), and absolutely impossible for more delicate and non-adapted plants (like orange and lemon trees). The extreme image of these arid plants is what you can see in Arizona and other deserted lands of the world.

8. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PLANTATION. USES AND PRODUCTS

The first thing we must point out is that the main part of this plantation covered an extended area.

We can measure that area; it is about 5 km long and half a kilometer wide and shaped around the city in the shape of a crescent moon.

The whole extension is just agricultural land. It is no longer a forest. It is no longer a garden. It is not a forest because the trees need to be taken care of every now and then, for example pruning every year, watering every month, tying up the bunches of fruit in summer and cutting it in autumn. That's why this land is not a wild forest.

And it is not a garden because they are not ornamental plants but productive plants. Unlike in a garden, these plants have been planted by farming people, who try to get the most out of them.

On the other hand, as a whole the site is similar to a forest because these trees are very close together and very old, and the site is also similar to a garden, because it offers a beautiful view to look at.

All around the south, the east and the south east of Spain you can find palm trees for both their beauty and for their usefulness. Near country houses usually there are two, three or four palm trees and that is one of the typical images of the Mediterranean.

In the South-East of Spain, you can find them in rows close to or shaping pathways, marking the route in the distance, so you can see from afar the path or road they mark. That's very usual in relation to orange tree fields that need to be protected from cold temperatures and from strong winds. And it is a similar system of plantation protection as in other Mediterranean areas which are formed by oleanders or cypresses.

Later you can see a large extension of palm tree fields around the «albufera» of Elx we have just talked about, on the edge of the marshes (a huge extension of marshes) that the Vinalopó forms near the sea.

The most important historical and famous group of palm tree fields are around the city of Elx. This group creates an urban view (or vision) that has been the most celebrated view of the city over the centuries, and one of the most famous views in Spain, for more than two hundred years.

The close relationship between city and palm tree fields (so it is between city and non-city) started with the palm tree growers, which must be seen as one of the «urban professions» rather than a «rural profession», because of the high specialization of the skills their work involves, and because of the closeness of the palms themselves.

Over many centuries that close contact between city and palm trees has created a fossil border or frontier between them.

In our case, the classical Marxist contradiction between country and city, in my opinion, is rather a contradiction between city and non-city. We can even talk in some sense about «built city» and «non-built city».

From old times these were the richest land in the area. We can consider it as the richest land since the Christian conquest until the second half of the 20th Century. These lands were owned by the wealthiest bourgeoisie, richest landowners, and they had the first right to water, while other lands could only have access to the water left over.

When there was not enough water in summer, the water that reached Elx by the river (the only one available before the 20th Century!) was used for the palm trees. Other parts of the province were for dry land crops, like olive trees or barley or even wheat.

We are going to talk now about how the palm trees provide various valuable products which have many different uses which were the basis of the wealth of these plantations from the beginning. That was the reason why our ancestors planted them.

My English teacher Lorraine was once told that if she eats a date from Elx she will never leave. So she always refuses to eat dates, but the funny thing is she has never left Elx. In spite of my English teacher's attitude, dates were an important product for the local economy until recent times. Our ancestors used to sell dates from beautiful stalls, which they set up throughout the province on days of «fiesta», for example palm-Sunday, Saint Anthony's day, Saint Joseph's day, Saint George's day, etc.

Some dates were good as food for people but not all of them since we have many varieties of dates because of the genetic dispersion. That means that if you plant a stone or pip from a date, the new plant that is born never has the same genetic characteristic of the original palm tree, giving different quality dates, slightly different shape of palms, etc. The best dates were used as food for people and the lower quality varieties were used as food for animals, and the animals include big animals like pigs, sheep and goats, or even horses, mules and cows, but also small animals like rabbits and hens. This was the main use, the most valuable product, of the palm trees: the dates.

The second use was the palm itself, because you must remember there was a time when plastic still had not been invented. A time we lived without oil, and without the problems oil causes us every day, economic and environmental problems. So at that time (that seems so far but that really is so close to our present) with palms we used to make rooms, baskets, hats, mats, brushes, sun shades, and we even plaited it as a type of fence to shut the palm tree fields all around its perimeter.

Another important use of the palm-trees from the middle ages till nowadays, for both the Christians and the Jews, was the religious use. So they used to cut

the tender palms to celebrate Easter, the Christian Pascua, or the Jewish Pascua. In particular Palm Sunday, for Christians, became especially important to commemorate the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem, where he was received joyfully by people carrying olive branches and palm branches.

Another use for the day-to-day life was that the remains after pruning were used as fuel for the bakeries of the town or for make fire for domestic uses at the same farmer's home. Still another minor use was as fertilizer. The organic remains of some parts of the tree, the trunk and the base of the leaves were used mixed with depositions from people and animals as a good soil fertilizer.

In the fields of palm-trees there were plenty of different eatable grasses which were used in salads for people and to feed (to graze) the animals kept at home. These animals were from the sties, stables and sheds on the land.

But the whole of this rural world was condemned to disappear as a consequence of the spreading and development of the Industrial Revolution. Instead, after the beginning of the 20th century the uniqueness of this spectacular area of palm trees (unique to Europe) became a high cultural value.

While the common uses we have talked about were disappearing, this cultural value has become the only one to remain, transformed from a high cultural appreciation into a tourist attraction. Gradually all the original values disappeared, a thing that nobody seems to regret in Elx.

Because the tourist vision requires no more than the vision of a picture, the vision of what they are looking at, which can be true or false, real or unreal. But the tour operators and the UNESCO tell you that that picture is worthy and you believe them, and at the end your only goal is to take a picture of something which someone told you is important. The traditional uses and benefits have become obsolete, without any uses, but you can do without them.

9. LEGISLATION

One of the most amazing outcomes of this place is the extensive legislation that has been established to try to protect it. The ensemble of laws began in a very early period of the history of European environmental laws, when nobody thought that an agricultural crop should be protected. At that time the protection was only aimed at large natural areas like Yellowstone Park in the USA, or ancient stone monuments like roman buildings or Stonehenge.

Despite the world situation, in the 1920s the Spanish Government forbade the uprooting or cutting down of palm trees. Around 1900 Elx experienced spectacular urban and economic growth and businessmen started to cut down palm trees all around the city to build new housing estates and groups of factories.

The government of the 2nd Spanish Republic, which was a very progressive period, brought in a special law to preserve the palm trees in Elx.

After the Civil War, in 1945, Franco's Government included Elx palm trees in the list of artistic historical gardens of Spain, along with places as emblematic as the Alhambra and Generalife of Granada. In the eighties the autonomous government introduced a new law to safeguard and protect the plantations. Through this law they focused on legislation for a planted area for the first time. But remember that it was an artificial area, not a natural forest, not a garden planted for its beauty.

All the positive consideration of the laws about the palm trees of Elx culminated in UNESCO naming it World Heritage in 2000.

Meanwhile, between 1940 and nowadays, the Council of Elx has made a lot of town planning documents where they state how this area should be treated before becoming a part of the city. In some places you can build new houses (for rich families, of course), in other places you can build public social installations like hospitals, schools, parks. In some places you can build private installations like hotels, gardens, religious facilities, etc.

Can we see the usefulness of all that extensive legislation for the real preservation of an agricultural area? Not really! Because, in the end, the only goal or possibilities for town planning is to build up the town, not to maintain its agricultural or rural uses.

On the other hand, through the constant consideration of the laws towards the area as a cultural landscape, a consciousness of its value has arisen which has made it impossible to directly destroy the place. The destruction, under the form of continuous degradation, is at present very slow, and can only be noticed if you have an attentive eye or a scientific method of observation, or of looking at the evolution and changing of the town over the years.

10. THE BIG LOSSES: LOSS OF ORIGINAL AGRICULTURAL VALUE, LOSS OF IRRIGATION SYSTEM, LOSS OF RELATED USES OF THE LAND

The city's proximity to the palm tree fields (in fact they border on each other) has caused the expansion of the city to change its direction. Since the 18th century the expansion was compulsory: the city occupied the fields of palm trees, especially because these fields were situated around the city to the north, south and east. On the west of the city there was a very deep ravine that stopped or prevented urban expansion in that direction, especially without bridges. The construction of a bridge in old times was not a common occurrence and we did not have any bridges crossing that deep ravine or river until the 18th century.

The first example of the modern city expansion was in the 18th century. The results were three new areas of urban land, which were obtained by cutting down palm tree fields, by flattening the land, by eliminating canals, old houses, old fences and by dividing the area into plots, selling them, and in the end building new houses there.

The process of forming new urban areas was stopped because of upheavals throughout Spain and Europe that took place at the beginning of the 19th century.

The first upheaval was caused by the Napoleonic wars or invasion that took place throughout Europe except in Britain. The war was particularly hard in Spain and in Elx, with the French occupation, murders, destruction. Secondly, an epidemic of yellow fever, which happened after the Napoleonic war, killed a third of the people living in Elx. It lasted only a couple of months but had consequences that lasted over seventy years.

The situation of the city after the war and the epidemic was of extreme misery and poverty. There was no food, the economy was ruined and many kinds of political problems arose between the old aristocratic political system, and the new bourgeois political system. The most shocking example of the bad situation was the new cemetery. The people who had died of yellow fever were buried. The cemetery was completely open, no fence or closure, with dogs digging up the corpses for food and the Council without money to fence off the place. There was no money for a simple fence around the cemetery to avoid the wild dogs coming in.

This situation of poverty lasted until the end of the 19th century. During that time they could not even think about building one single house or one single street, let alone build or develop new areas.

The new economy began to grow towards 1880, based on shoe factories (which is still the areas main industry in Elx). The prosperous situation and fresh money allowed them to start building new wealthy houses and factories. But the model for these new areas was the same model as that of the century before: cut down the palm trees, flatten the surface, divide the land into plots, sell them and build new houses.

11. A NEW MEANING AND A NEW VALUE OF THE SITE: TOURISTIC, CULTURAL, ANTHROPOLOGICAL. PUBLIC PROPERTY

In the middle of this new destruction of the agricultural surroundings, a new idea or new way of perspective arose: to consider the palm trees as having an important cultural meaning. That cultural meaning made them worth preserving. From the 16th century the travelers that arrived in Elx saw our landscape as

something original and different from the usual European landscape. Even if they compare these landscapes to the most recognized or well-known landscapes in the south of Italy, for example. But before 1900 there was no kind of danger of the site disappearing as there is now (after 1900). Furthermore, tourism was not extensive as it began to develop around the same period. The new value of the site was a novelty and became very typical in the 20th century all around the world, with a new economic basis being established.

We can talk about the whole century, and more specifically now, in relation to tourist, ornamental and cultural values. However, even the fields that were not destroyed (absolutely cut down for the city) began to enter a new situation because of the loss of the original values which had to do with the survival of people and with their everyday life.

Related to the new situation, from the twenties, the idea arose that the property of the palm tree fields should not be private anymore, it should not be the property of the farmers or the bourgeoisie or the nobility, who were the owners of the land, but must be the property of the Council. In contrast to this opinion, no council of any city in the world has been owner of agricultural property. Normally they own old buildings, new buildings, theatres, museums, urban areas (gardens, parks, streets) or even mountains or forests, but no council has been «a farmer».

Despite this nonsensical idea, over the century the idea spread and became more and more dominant in the political circles of the city, the region and the state, the three levels of public administration. The process of becoming public property grew so much in the last six decades to present day that all the fields of palm trees close to the city are owned by the Council of Elx.

In the process converting these fields into public territory, only the fields that had become gardens, and have been cared for, are now in more or less acceptable conditions, as gardens. However the rest (a vast amount) have been and are treated improperly and converted more and more, day after day, year after year, into an agricultural ruin.

When these agricultural characteristics are lost, everything in that land changes day by day. People stop living there in a traditional way, animals stop grazing there, fruit is no longer collected and palms are no longer collected either.

This means that weeds grow out of control, trees become weaker and weaker and even fall down very often; to kill the weeds and the insects more and more herbicides and pesticides are used. The uses of poisonous products turn the land more and more into a waste land, into a desert.

The appearance or the arrival of two new dangerous plagues in the last two decades of the 20th century was particularly devastating. The two plagues, unknown to our ancestors, have attacked trees as the insects eat the trees until they die.

The first plague came with a fungi that entered the base of the branches, and infected them until it spread to the rest of the branch and until big parts of the canopy of the tree became dry or rotten.

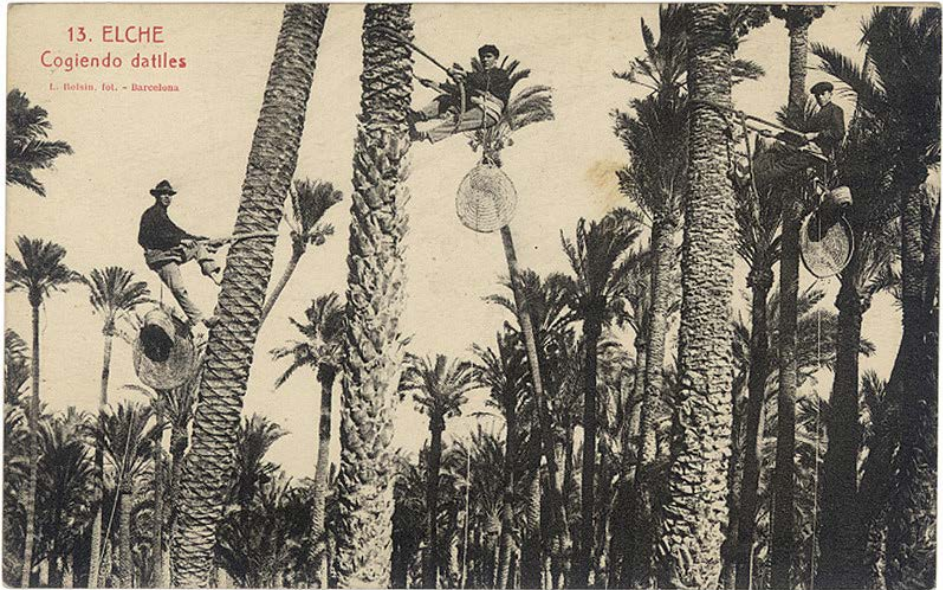
The second one, and much more dangerous plague, is a kind of red beetle that usually perforates the trunk of the tree at the top or at the base, instinctively going into the core and nesting there, living, eating and reproducing a large quantity of baby beetles. At the end of the process, just in some months, the palm tree dies without any remedy. Unlike the previous plague, which just affects the trees condition, this plague kills it.

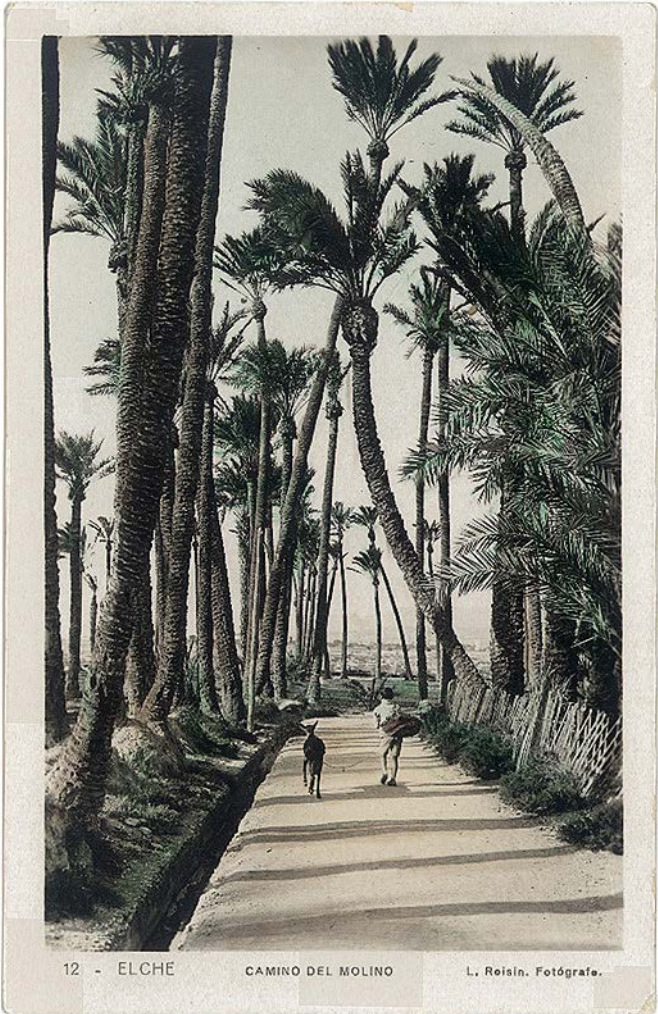
The red beetle killer has spread out throughout the Mediterranean and is eating and killing large extensions of all types of palm trees in gardens and parks. all around Spain, France and Italy. In places like Nice, Sicily or Sardinia, you can see a very depressing panorama of the remaining trunks of the dead palms, as if they were the columns of ancient Greek or Roman remains.

This killer beetle has been reported to come from Egypt, where it has extenuated great areas of palm tree crops. However I have no information about the harm that the insect has made on the oasis or other places of Africa or Asia, where the biggest palm tree fields can be found.

12. CONCLUSION

In the end, what we need to focus on as students and teachers of town planning is to think about: What we are seeing? How we can act? What we can do? What has been useful in the past? What has not been useful? I am trying to show how important the analysis of the link between this agricultural place and the city is. Like so many sites in the world, it is a sensitive place where we can intervene as a specialized surgeon just designing or defining ways of action, as with a scalpel, and think deeply about what the town planner's possibilities are and what can be excluded from these possibilities.





12 - ELCHE

CAMINO DEL MOLINO

L. Reisin. Fotógrafo.



BIBLIOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES

You can find a lot of books and articles about the palm trees of Elx, especially immediately before and after it was declared World Heritage by UNESCO. Unfortunately, most of this literature does not contain enough scientific essays that could be useful for our work as town planners, or for research from a geographical, economic or sociological point of view. They are not useful because they have usually been developed in an evocative, journalistic or non-literary way.

The most interesting papers written about agricultural landscape and gardening in this area maybe have been produced by the Polytechnic University of Valencia, University of Alicante and Miguel Hernández University.

Before our time, numerous papers were written between 1920 and 1960, but these papers aimed mainly at defending or saving the area from total disappearance, under the strong threat from the expansion of the city which was pushing against its limits. Since 1975, the vision of agricultural geography has become very important and, for example, my first studies between 1974 and 1982 were from this discipline (agricultural geography related to architecture and town planning). However, I immediately changed my vision towards Urban History and my Doctoral Thesis was about the modern formation of the city of Elx and its relation to the palm trees that surrounded it. Later, several scholars like myself have made studies and given lectures about this place.

My most significant primary source was my own personal background, because all my family worked with palm trees. All my childhood was spent in the palm tree fields, so I was able to get first-hand information about the agricultural way of life and way of production in the 1950s, when the place was still sufficiently alive. My father, my relatives and my grandparents were able to give me first-hand information about life in Elx in the years before that time (at the beginning of the century). I dedicate this lecture to them.

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