

COIMBRA, THE ROMANTIC CITY

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For those who have had the privilege of visiting Coimbra at least once in their lives, a picture will be for ever imprinted on their memories: that of a mediaeval city of white houses and narrow streets where the old University tower - the "ex-libris" of the city itself - emerges and stands vigilantly over the lower part of the city, with the Mondego river languidly flowing through the lines of poplars that grow along its banks.

Coimbra owes its origin to the Romans and stands in the site where previously existed the Roman *Aeminium*. However, for some curious and unknown reason, its name derived from nearby *Coninbriga*, a much more important Roman city. About 30 Km from today's Coimbra, we still can visit the beautiful ruins of the old *Coninbriga*, luckily preserved from the destruction of time and brought to light in around 1930. There we can see the thermal complex, a few private houses where in some of them the heating system by hot water circulation is still functioning, and everywhere the ancient pavements remarkably in a very good condition, a real work of art of which one of the most famous is the house of the "water jets".

However, Coimbra was not only famous during the Roman period; it played an extraordinary role in the early years of the history of Portugal as a cultural and political centre. Politically, when our first king, Afonso Henriques, moved his residence from Guimarães to Coimbra, the town became the most important in the country and remained so for many years even after the conquest of Lisbon from the Moors.

The existence of various churches and monasteries, among which we may cite Santa Cruz (built on the king's order and where he is buried) and Santa Clara-a-Velha (constructed about one century later by wish of Queen Santa Isabel who intended to be buried there), also added to the importance of Coimbra since the royalty in those days was still very much subject to the power of the church.

The first royal Courts of which there is written evidence took place in Coimbra in 1211 under Afonso II; and it was there that lived and died Santa Isabel, one of the most beloved and virtuous Portuguese queens, canonised in 1625 by the Pope. She was married to King Dinis, and her strong but affectionate personality played an important role in the religious, cultural and political life of the country; it is thanks to her that many of the disputes occurring between the king and the crown prince, later Afonso IV, could be solved for the best. She also made proof of a keen diplomacy and avoided, by her tactful action, the war with Castile. The people adored and glorified her. The legend tells that one day when she was distributing bread to the poor, the king came and asked her what she was doing. Fearing the king's anger, Santa Isabel told him that she was distributing roses from her altar in the church; she unfolded her pinafore and the bread had turned into roses. This is since known as the "miracle of the roses". She became the patron of the city and is buried in the church of Santa Clara-a-Nova.

From the cultural point of view, Coimbra had an enormous prestige too. In fact, the University of Coimbra, which in its early times was little more than a mere extension of the religious orders and teaching, was the first university in Portugal, created by King Dinis in

August 1290 through a Papal Bull from Pope Nicholas IV who authorised the payment of salaries, granted privileges to schoolmasters and confirmed the teaching of Arts, Medicine, and Canon Law, except Theology.

The university was also particularly important during the XVIII century, under King José I, because it is in Coimbra that the intellectual society of the time is educated and will soon force the establishment of the liberal regime that replaced, to a great extent, the nobility and its hereditary privileges.

The centre of the whole complex, known as the "University City", is still nowadays the old Alcáçova Palace, a mediaeval building surrounded by towers; the old tower with its clock of four faces, the "cabra", has been regulating the students' lives over the centuries and therefore became their traditional academic symbol. Two other exceptional buildings of a more recent construction, however, also make up part of the complex: the Main Library and the Archives. The Main Library comprises two buildings, one of which is the famous Joanina Library, considered a national monument due to its unique architectural beauty and magnificent golden carvings in baroque style; the Archives, in turn, constitute a repository of practically all the university documentation existing in Coimbra dating back to 1525.

The life of the students in this romantic city (either they live in the so-called "Republics", in flats or with their families) is also marked by centuries of bohemian traditions sociologically unique in the country, among which is the use of long black capes as a symbolic uniform; along their edges the students make incisions with scissors, symbolising each subject on their syllabus that they have already passed until graduation.

This romantic mysticism of Coimbra's tradition, and the enchanting "choupal" (the banks of poplars along the river Mondego) have been the background for most poems, songs, legends, and novels inspired by real-life passions that not only marked the Portuguese literature but also influenced the "Fado of Coimbra". Born in this context of romanticism, this typical song is a sort of lyric ballad, accompanied by the mellow trill of guitars, addressed to the young lady, source of inspiration of the singer.

Annually in May, as the academic year draws near, the students of the University of Coimbra who soon will be graduating organize the "Burning of the Ribbons"; these festivities will run for seven days and seven nights, and they are an exhibition of the allegoric traditions that keep the old Coimbra so young.

If the "High City" with its mediaeval environment and the old Romanesque Cathedral that reminds us of the early years of the history of Portugal is its intellectual centre, the "Low City" has a commercial vocation nevertheless rich in beautiful historical sites and monuments, where the past and the present live side by side in harmony.

To speak of Coimbra is also to remember Pedro and Inês whose tragic love inspired poets and dramatic writers of all times. But this is another story...

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