

Velez Malaga

The municipality of Vélez-Málaga, the largest and most populous in the La Axarquía region, lies mainly within the watershed of the River Vélez, which is formed by the Rivers Benamargosa and El Guaro and irrigates a broad and rich lowland. This territory as a whole, however, with its terrain of medium elevation (the highest peak is Veas on the eastern slope, at 703 metres) exhibits the typical characteristics of the La Axarquía region. Due to its large area, one seventh of the entire La Axarquía region, and to the fact that it possesses the most fertile land in the region, the municipality of Vélez-Málaga includes several centres of population. They include Torre del Mar (the most tourist-oriented and highly developed), Benajárfate, Triana, Trapiche, Almayate Bajo and Almayata Alto, Cajiz and Chilches, among others, as well as numerous tourist developments in the coastal zone and scattered farm communities in the interior. Thus, only half the population of the municipality is concentrated in the town of Vélez-Málaga.

This, the main municipality in La Axarquía – a name that comes from the Arabic ‘as-Sarqiyya’ (the East, or the east side) – has a long and complex history beginning with the first Phoenician settlements on the Toscanos hill on the right bank of the River Vélez in about 800 B. C. It should be pointed out that the mouth of the River Vélez, in olden times, formed a bay between the Peñón and El Mar hills that served as an anchorage, and that communications from there with the interior of Andalusia were relatively easy by way of the Boquete de Zafarraya (Zafarraya Gap).

At the foot of the Toscanos slope, next to the former bay that is now covered by a mud flat, a warehouse with Phoenician, Greek and Etruscan ceramics was discovered. This confirmed the commercial activity at the Toscanos trading post, whose population has been estimated at 1,500, a considerable size at that time. Some historians contend that this enclave may have been the ancient Mainake that was founded by the Greeks.

Smelting ovens and metal slag, materials confirming that minerals were exploited here, have been found at the nearby El Peñón hill. A little farther north, at the Alarcón hill, a rectangular building has been discovered that well may have been a fortress, while at the El Mar hill more than 30 tombs from the seventh century B. C. have been found. Likewise, the Necrópolis del Jardín (El Jardín necropolis) north of Toscanos has more than 100 tombs from the sixth to fourth centuries B. C.

At the El Mar hill, site of the ancient seafaring city of Maenoba in front of Toscanos, research that has been conducted so far has confirmed the existence of a trading post for the dried fish industry. In this area, the industry consisted of producing garum, a sauce that was introduced by the Phoenicians and extensively used by the Romans.

Nevertheless, the city of Vélez-Málaga was founded in the tenth century, at the height of the Muslim domination. The town grew up around the fortress-alcazaba and immediately spread towards the La Villa neighbourhood, which would become the ancient Muslim ‘medina’ or city centre. It was one of the most important medinas in the Nazarite kingdom between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was not a very large city but it was well fortified and defended by a solid set of walls. As the population increased and could not fit within the walled compound, a number of suburbs sprang up, which are now the neighbourhood of Arroyo de San Sebastián and the plazas of San Francisco and Constitución.

There is documentation of the existence in the thirteenth century of several ‘alquerías’ (rural population centres) whose residents were engaged in agriculture. These alquerías included Almayate, Benamocarra, Benajárfate, Iznate and Cajiz, among others, and were the origins of those villages. Vélez-Málaga’s importance between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries is shown by records left by such writers as El Idrisi, Abulfeda, Ibn Batuta and Abd-al-Basit, the Egyptian historian who in the mid-fifteenth century told of the commercial activity at the port of Mariyya Ballis (Torre del Mar).

The course of Vélez-Málaga’s history changed when in April 1487 Fernando the Catholic left Córdoba for La Axarquía for the purpose of taking its capital. Along the way noblemen and residents of the villages through which he passed joined his ranks and he thus arrived in the vicinity of Vélez-Málaga with an army of 50,000 infantry and some 12,000 cavalry, according to Hernando del Pulgar, chronicler of the War of Granada. In the meantime, the fortress of Bentomiz, practically the only place that Vélez-Málaga could look to for relief, surrendered to the Christian troops. Nor did the skirmishes of El Zagal, who left Granada to come to the assistance of the Veleños, help much.

The last Muslim castle commandant of the city, Abul Cacim Venegas, on 26 April 1487, sent an emissary to draw up the terms of surrender, which occurred on the following day. The Muslims also undertook to prepare the city to receive the Catholic Monarchs, which it did on 3 May of that same year.

The new political authorities tried to make Vélez-Málaga into a different city from what it had been under Muslim rule,

and for this purpose planned an architectural renewal programme that included a new arrangement of public spaces and the construction of secular and religious buildings. This idea was hindered by the rugged terrain in the urban district, so the intended restructuring of the city only got so far as a few public spaces (Plaza de la Constitución and the suburb of San Francisco), a few houses of the nobility and to quite a few churches and convents. Thus, the sixteenth century was remarkable mainly for the construction of new religious buildings.

The urban character of the city remained the same during the seventeenth century and construction of churches and convents received even greater emphasis, resulting in what some have chosen to call a “convent city”. This is nothing unique to Vélez-Málaga, however, but has happened in many Andalusian towns in such a way that the most spacious public plazas may also be used for staging large religious demonstrations such as the Semana Santa (Holy Week) and Corpus Christi.

The port of Torre del Mar, in the meantime, experienced such an increase in business that in the eighteenth century its expansion was planned in order to better route the grape and citrus harvests that were being shipped to northern Europe.

Vélez Málaga supported the Bourbon dynasty in the War of the Spanish Succession and it was in its waters that the naval engagement that some call the Battle of Málaga and others the Battle of Vélez-Málaga was fought. This historic event occurred on 23 August 1704. On that day, the Spanish-French fleet confronted the Anglo-Dutch one, with the former suffering 1,500 casualties and the latter losing 3,000 men. In total the two sides had 146 craft in combat, with 3,577 cannon and more than 46,000 men. Modern opinion is that neither side gained anything from the battle, but some students of the subject, point out that the Spanish-French fleet’s losses were fewer.

The eighteenth century was especially favourable for the city, with notable growth in all sectors: churches and public buildings were built or repaired, the city’ infrastructure was improved and its accesses beautified, and the ideas of the Enlightenment even began to be known, due in large part to the creation in 1783 of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País (Friends of the Country Economic Society).

The next century began on a bad note. The yellow fever epidemic of 1804 severely devastated the population, with more than half of the residents dying. The Municipal Government also suffered the consequences of the epidemic and its powers were assumed by the military. The Napoleonic invasion and the installation of a French puppet government divided the population into two factions that would oppose one another for control of the government throughout the nineteenth century. Later, there were several cholera epidemics, the phylloxera pest destroyed the vineyards and the earthquake of 1884 completed a dismal picture whose only ray of light was the expansion of the sugar cane fields under the auspices of the Larios family.

Surface Area:156 square kilometresPopulation:more than 60,000What the natives are called:VeleñosMonuments:The Royal Convent of Santiago or of San Francisco, Beniel Palace, Casa de Cervantes (Cervantes House), Nuestra Señora de los Remedios hermitage, Cruz del Arrabal (El Arrabal cross), San Sebastián hermitage, San Juan Bautista parish church, the “Pósito” (old granary), fountain of Fernando VI, Virgen de la Piedad chapel, Nuestra Señora de Gracia monastery, the Jesús, María y José monastery, medieval city walls, Puerta Real de la Villa (La Villa Royal Gate), Santa María de la Encarnación church, the Fortress or Alcazaba, the hospital of San Juan de Dios or of San Marcos, Cruz del Cordero (El Cordero cross).Geographical Location:in the La Axarquía region, of which it is the capital. The urban district is 60 metres above sea level and is 28 kilometres from the city of Málaga. The municipality has an average rainfall of about 470 litres per square metre and the average annual temperature is 18° C
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