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# From Roman Tarragona to petrochemical, metropolitan Tarragona. An overview

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According to figures from December 2023, the city of Tarragona is the seventh largest city in Catalonia, with more than 138,000 residents and a density higher than 2,300 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> in the city's 55 km<sup>2</sup>. It is also situated in one of the most populous areas in Catalonia due to its coastal location and its good connections with and proximity to other cities.

The historic city is nestled on a rocky outcrop on a stepped hill, the prolongation of materials from the Precoastal Mountain Range which divides the small Francolí and Gaià River basins. It is located on the inner part of a small gulf running between Cap Gros Cape in Torredembarra and Salou Cape, which makes it a prime location for a port. In the second half of the twentieth century, the city started to spread towards the right bank of the Francolí River, where the petrochemical industry and Ponent (Western) neighbourhoods are located. The latter consists of large apartment buildings developed through public and private initiative, alongside low-rise houses, many of them self-built. The housing estates in Llevant (Eastern) neighbourhoods are comprised of residential areas featuring single-family homes with gardens located in a hilly area in the direction of the Gaià River. North of the historical centre, where the former Carretera de Santes Creus road flattens out, is Sant Pere i Sant Pau neighbourhood, consisting of apartment buildings. Unconnected to the previous zones, Sant Salvador and Sant Ramon neighbourhoods, also consisting of apartment buildings, are located on the N-240 road heading towards Valls, very close to the oil refinery.

The historical city dates back to the arrival of the Roman army in 217 BC. The location, which had been occupied by the Iberians until then, was convenient because the rocky outcrop offered sound defences. Furthermore, the Romans could easily reach the central high plains of Catalonia via the Francolí River and from there advance into the Ebro River basin towards the north and centre of the Iberian Peninsula.

The new settlement created by the Romans became the capital of Hispania. Julius Caesar granted the city the status of a colony, and in the first and second centuries AD major civil infrastructures were built, remnants of which can still be seen today. It started to suffer invasions by barbarian tribes in the third century, and was destroyed by Arab and Berber troops in 717, falling under the authority of Tortosa. A new era of reconstruction got underway in the twelfth century under the countships of Ramon Berenguer III and IV. By the mid-century, only the upper part of the old city had been occupied while the remainder was still abandoned.

The city was a military garrison in the seventeenth, eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries. Its walls were enlarged, and battlements and forts were built. The city also faced the Reapers' War (1640-1652), the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1714) and especially the Napoleonic War (1808-1814), when it was looted and set fire, and many buildings were destroyed. During peacetime, an enlightened man from the eighteenth century defined Tarragona as "a huge convent, a large fortress and a living archaeological museum".

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the lower part of La Marina neighbourhood was urbanised, and construction began on what would become the modern port, with the road from the port to Reus being paved to help transport goods. The port, along with trade in agrarian products – especially wine and spirits – helped to revive the commercial city and gave rise to a bourgeoisie made up of landowners, merchants and professionals, three branches of activity that were often found within the same family.

Having become the capital of the province in 1833, by the mid-nineteenth century the new bourgeoisie were promoting the initial plans for an expansion of the city. Some of the walls were demolished and the first stretch of Rambla Nova and Carrer de la Unió were built linking La Marina neighbourhood with the new expansion and upper part of the city. Towards the end of the century the city was further enlarged and started expanding towards the Francolí River. This was complemented by the Pujol Plan (1922), which called for the extension of Rambla Nova to create a large new square to reorganise traffic (the Imperial Tarraco square). Building also continued along the former road to Santes Creus, today Carrer de Rovira i Virgili, and the first northern ring road was designed, which would pave the way for Avinguda Catalunya.

The new urban development plans of 1960 and 1973 were expansive and failed to regulate the urban grid and building volumes, leaving a shortage of open green spaces. Sound urban planning did not materialise until the Cantallops Plan of 1984, which set the tone for the city's future urban development.

Demographically, until the eighteenth century the city had around 10,000 inhabitants, a number that declined in the wake of the Napoleonic War, though by the end of the first third of the twentieth century it had exceeded 30,000 residents. Population growth was slow until the early 1960s but surged by 72.8% between 1960 and 1970 due to the establishment of the first petrochemical industries and the enlargement of the port, rising from 45,273 to 78,238 inhabitants. This explains the appearance of new neighbourhoods mostly occupied by immigrant workers.

By 1981 Tarragona had 111,689 inhabitants, which had risen to 140,323 by 2009, although this figure later dropped slightly due to the separation of the town of La Canonja, which had previously been forcibly annexed to the city. The Ponent neighbourhoods (Torreforta, Camp Clar, Bonavista) are currently home to more than 26% of the population, while the historic neighbourhood in the upper part only houses 3%.

As of December 2023, only half the population had been born in Tarragona and many of them were the children of immigrants from other parts of Catalonia, Spain and abroad: 7% were born in Morocco, almost the same percentage as those born in Latin America and Andalusia, with these groups together accounting for more than 20% of the population. With the new millennium, immigration from outside the Iberian Peninsula increased, associated with the rise in construction and tourism. This trend halted during the financial crisis that started in 2008 but has resumed in recent years. These phenomena have led to the existence of different cultural communities and a decline in the progress of Catalonia's own language and culture. This is shown by the 2011 survey, in which only 54% of respondents stated that they knew how to write in Catalan. Likewise, disparities in backgrounds and income levels are correlated with election results, with clear differences between the Ponent and Llevant neighbourhoods.

The working population is primarily employed in retail and services (80.4%), followed by industry (11.6%) and construction (7.4%). Jobs in agriculture and fishing are minimal, with the latter standing at just 1% and declining. The important role of services and retail can be explained by the fact that Tarragona is an education, healthcare and government hub and has retail facilities serving areas that extend broadly beyond the municipal boundaries. Thanks to these activities, GDP per capita (43,700 euros) is 25% higher than the average in Catalonia.

Tarragona was a city with very little industry until the advent of the chemical industry in 1960 and the establishment of the oil refinery in 1975. Before that, it was still a city that revolved around the Church, the military and the government, with retail only focused on essential goods. The only notable industry before the arrival of the chemical industry was tobacco manufacturing (1930-2000).

The chemical industries are concentrated in two large industrial parks, mostly located outside the city limits, though they need proximity to the port for loading and unloading their goods. There are currently 29 chemical companies located in the region which provide 5,000 direct and around 3,500 indirect jobs. The port plays a crucial role in the local economy. It spans around 1,200 hectares, handles around 35 million tonnes of freight and employs around 800 workers, while some 80 companies are associated with the port activity. It imports hydrocarbons and bulk goods (grain, coal, iron, etc.) and exports petroleum by-products, cars, food and other goods.

To understand Tarragona's economy, the healthcare and university sectors have to be borne in mind. The former includes two large hospitals and employs around 2,800 workers directly and 1,500 indirectly. There are also other hospitals and clinics, and Tarragona is the main referral

city of a healthcare region with around 3,000 public-sector employees. Regarding higher education, the Universitat Rovira i Virgili stands out as another mainstay of the city's economy. The university has twelve institutions, not all located in the city, and its budget exceeds 135 million euros (2023). It has 1,276 academic staff, around 700 administration and services staff, and almost 16,000 students. The Universitat Rovira i Virgili excels internationally in various fields, and in 2023 it raised 46.2 million euros in competitive public research funding.

In short, Tarragona is a large city that is part of a metropolitan agglomeration that exceeds 500,000 inhabitants and is home to major industrial, tourism and services infrastructures. The city is laid out parallel to the coastline, with a central area comprised of the ancient city and its expansions, and other zones that partially surround it. Each of these nuclei and zones is clearly distinguished from the others in terms of income, culture, employment and ideological and electoral affinities.