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Palms in Europe: The Palms of Elche

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A Bit of History

Over 3,000 years ago the Phoenicians were the dominant seafaring nation of the Mediterranean. From their base in the east in which is roughly modern Lebanon, they explored westwards, establishing colonies and trading posts, the most important being the ancient city of Carthage on the coast of North Africa. The Phoenicians extended their influence farther west as far as the Pillars of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar) and beyond, using their trading posts as stations where boats could take on food and water and be repaired. One such trading post in the western part of the Mediterranean was south of modern Valencia in southern Spain at the site of the modern city of Elche (Elx in the Catalan language and Jlice in Latin). Elche today is an important, sizeable city,

famous, among other things for its shoe-manufacturing industry.

Since time immemorial, dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) have been an important food crop, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. Not only are dates used locally, but they are also an ideal item of food for provisioning long journeys, and, indeed, wherever one travels in the drier tropics and subtropics, one can expect to find scattered groves of dates that, presumably, originate from discarded stones. However, in Elche the Phoenicians found a climate ideal for growing dates. Here they deliberately planted and cultivated the date for provisioning their trading ships.

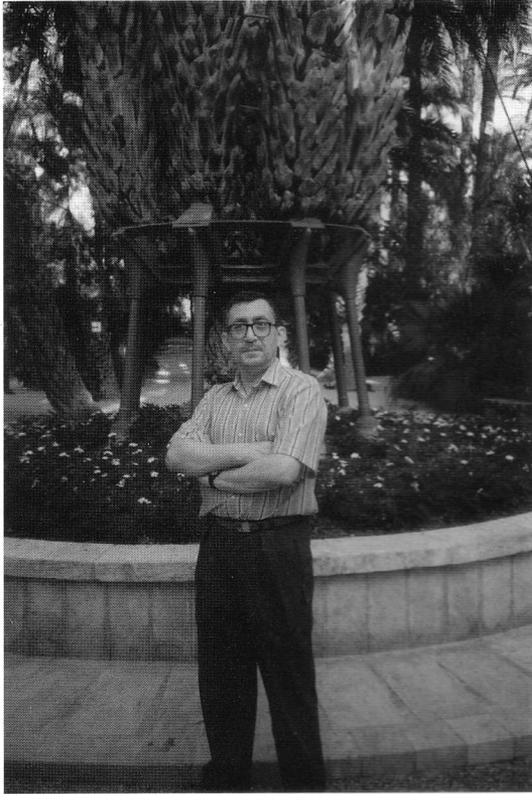
The power of the Phoenicians waxed and waned, and other powers became dominant in the Mediterranean region. By AD 670, Elche was already under the influence of Islam and the Arabs. During



1. El Huerto del Cura, Elche, Spain.



2. Typical Elche date palm. 3. Another view of El Huerto del Cura. 4. The Imperial Palm. 5. Base of the Imperial Palm.



6. Francisco Orts Serrano, grandson of Curate Castaño, standing in front of the Imperial Palm.

the period of Arabic control that ended towards the end of the Middle Ages, dates in Elche were cultivated in proper plantation plots, in a way similar to that common in the Middle East and North Africa. These plots were square and separated by irrigation ditches, dates being planted along the edges. The center of the plots were used for the cultivation of other crops such as pomegranates, also introduced by the Phoenicians. The plots were irrigated with ground water, which, in the Elche area, is quite saline. By the early 16th Century it is thought that there were some 1,300,000 date palms in the plantations of Elche. The life expectancy of a date palm in cultivation is about two to three hundred years. By the end of the 19th Century, the huge number of palms had been reduced by approximately one half, largely due to lack of replacement of dead palms.

In the 20th Century, industrialization slowly started in Elche, and as the city grew, dates were cleared to make room for factories, houses and

roads. More recently dates have been dug up and replanted as ornamentals.

The Palms of Elche Today

In Tenerife, Canary Islands, I came across a strange form of date palm in cultivation, that appeared sufficiently different from normal cultivated dates to stir my curiosity. I saw the same type of date in Mallorca in the Balearic Islands and elsewhere in southern Spain and, wherever I saw it, I would be told that the palm probably came originally from Elche. Recently while I was in the region of Alicante, I decided to visit Elche to see the distinctive form of the date in the place where it was supposed to originate.

The "Elche date" does not compare favorably with the best comestible dates. It is about 30 mm long and is not particularly sweet and flavorful. However, there is still a lot of excitement in seeing what is probably a very ancient cultivated form of the date, a living historical relic that reaches back into ancient time and culture.

At the present day there are estimated to be between three and four hundred thousand date palms in Elche, surely the largest palm grove in Europe. The Elche date groves are now protected by laws that prohibit the uprooting of palms. These laws make it at times impossible for landowners to develop their land in the way they would wish, and the palms also need to be maintained, the costs of which landowners may be reluctant to bear.

El Huerto del Cura (The Curate's Orchard) (Fig. 1)

Around the turn of the present century Jose Maria Castaño, a curate, lived within the city of Elche; he had a passion for plants and it was probably he who alerted the residents of Elche to the unique nature and historical significance of the Elche date palms (Fig. 2). His house, constructed in 1894 in the style typical of the region, employs palm trunks in the rafters of the roof and for supporting pillars in the arcade. The curate eventually turned his orchard into a small botanical garden (Fig. 3). From the Empress Elizabeth of Austria to the King and Queen of Spain, many famous people have visited his garden over the past 100 years. The garden contains many plants typical of Mediterranean gardens, such as pomegranates, citrus fruits, carobs and jujubes. It also has a fine collection of succulents, cycads and

other subtropical plants. Palms are, of course, well represented, including *Trachycarpus fortunei*, *Chamaerops humilis*, *Jubaea chilensis*, *Butia capitata*, *Brahea armata*, *Washingtonia filifera*, *Howea forsterana*, and many species of *Phoenix* and *Chamaedorea*, all palms that are widespread in Mediterranean gardens. More unusually there are also *Ptychosperma elegans*, *Syagrus romanzoffiana*, *Livistona chinensis*, *Hyophorbe verschaffeltii*, *Neodypsis decaryi*, *Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*, *Sabal palmetto*, *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*, *Bismarckia nobilis* and *Caryota mitis*.

However, the most astonishing and unusual palm is a splendid specimen of the Elche form of the date. This, the Imperial Palm (Fig. 4), forms the center piece of the whole garden and gained its name after the visit of Empress "Sissy" of Austria to the Curate's Orchard in 1894. The Imperial Palm has eight suckers that all emerged at the same time and at the same height, about one meter

above ground level. The suckers cluster evenly around the main trunk, the base of which thus supports nine stems (Fig. 5). The total height of the palm is about 12 m, which probably represents 150 years of growth. The total estimated weight of the palm is about 10 to 15 tons, and for this reason, a metal corset was designed and erected some time ago to support the palm. The Imperial Palm makes an altogether impressive sight.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all those people in Spain who helped to arouse my curiosity in the Elche date. In particular I am grateful to Francisco Orts Serrano (Fig. 6), grandson of Curate Castaño, who spent his childhood in the orchard with his grandfather; it was he, who with great enthusiasm, told me the history of the Curate's Orchard and the origins of the Elche date palms.

Funding Available

At the October 1995 meeting in Sarasota, Florida, the IPS Endowment Fund Committee will meet to review requests for funds.

The purpose of the Endowment Fund meeting will be to consider any requests for "funds which would be used solely and exclusively for scientific and/or educational purposes related to the study of palms, their propagation, culture, conservation, care, or development." The members of this committee consist of all the directors of the IPS. The interest earned from Life Membership payments may be used for donations, funding, or grants for palm-related activities or research consistent with the purposes of the society.

Do you know of any institutions or groups in your area which have needs for funds consistent with the above goals? If so, please submit (or ask them to submit) a formal request for IPS Endowment Funding. Make sure the request provides information on the amount needed and what the funds will be used for, if awarded. All funding requests consistent with the above guidelines will be considered.

Funding decisions will be made by the Endowment Fund Committee and announced prior to the end of October 1995. The next opportunity after that date for such funding will be August of 1996.

JIM CAIN
PRESIDENT IPS