

Among palm trees. Brief history of the gardens of Santander

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The bay of Santander, the largest of the Cantabrian coast, stands out for its breadth, depth and protection. Historically it has known a continuous and intense human activity and almost half of its original surface has been filled in the last two centuries. On the northern shore has grown the city of Santander, which, curled up in its bay, turns towards the warmth and protection of the south. Perched on a long peninsula, the city has spread over slopes and valleys, always overlooking the sea and following the coastline. In parallel to its urban development, it has been softening the seafront with tree-lined promenades, parks and gardens, from the medieval cloister of the Abbey of the Holy Bodies (now the cathedral), through Becedo, the Alameda "Primera", the Oviedo, the Pereda gardens, the Magdalena park, the Valdenoja park or the Piquío gardens, to the recent Las Llamas park.

There is still much to be studied about the history of these parks and gardens in Santander, an area always difficult to approach due to the scarce and scattered documentation and the many transformations of these "living" spaces. However, the first news about a garden in Santander is ancient. In 1575, the famous *Civitates orbis terrarum*, edited by the German Georg Braun, included a print corresponding to Santander (liber secundus, plate 9), which included the small fishing village among the select group of the most important cities in the world. Each print was accompanied by a brief explanatory text and there was, for the first time, a description of the rich vegetation of the town. When referring to the Collegiate Church of the Holy Bodies (which in 1754 would become the cathedral of the city by then) it was indicated that in the cloister "there is a very pleasant garden, always fragrant, with the pleasant perfume of its flowering trees", possibly a secluded garden of orange trees. The outskirts of the town were also described:

It abounds in wine; the land is surrounded by vineyards, interspersed with orchards, planted for both need and delight, offering beautiful views and abundant fruit. In the vicinity of the city there are several villages, rich in grain and fruit, so that, except for a special punishment from God, this town will never lack provisions. In short, this city is rich in all things because of the convenience of its port. All this is narrated by the natives.

In the following centuries, little changed this urban landscape of Santander, which then barely exceeded the outline of the old walls. Only at the end of the eighteenth century on the Becedo side, at the exit of the city along the royal road, the marshes began to fill in and what would soon become the "Alameda Primera", with large shade trees and an ornamental fountain, began to take shape. In 1834 another long alameda (725 meters) was opened to the public, which would become known as "Segunda" or "de Oviedo" and which extended as far as the Cuatro Caminos exit of the city. Finally, by the middle of the 19th century, Madoz's Dictionary described the town as having "3 promenades, and a path planted with poplars that surrounds the whole city":

In addition, there are a multitude of orchards in the interior of the city; being all the land that surrounds it, occupied with fruit trees, vegetables, vineyards and meadows, which form delightful views, among them those that extend from the neighborhood of Becedo, to the place called Caseta de los Guardas, following the entire right. of the royal road.

However, the real "central park" of the city arrived in 1901, when the Board of Works of the Port ceded the land resulting from the filling of the old Ribera dock to the city council. The Boulevard and the resulting gardens were dedicated to the writer José María de Pereda and in 1905 they were inaugurated on the occasion of the Provincial Exhibition of Arts and Industries, adorned with ephemeral and exotic pavilions designed by the municipal architect Valentín R. Lavín Casals. In reality, the project was an indirect product of two episodes that had had a profound effect on the morphology of the city and the economic orientation of the port. On the one hand, the "catastrophe" of the explosion of the steamship

"Cabo Machichaco" in the Maliaño docks in 1893 had caused deep damages in a wide urban sector that went from Cañadío to Alta street and from Cuesta de la Atalaya to the new streets of Calderón de la Barca, Méndez Núñez and Antonio López, one of the most prosperous areas of the city. On the other hand, shortly after the "colonial disaster" of 1998 heralded an even more complicated future for the port. Santander, between the "catastrophe" and the "disaster", became aware of a port decline that, in reality, had begun a few years earlier. The Machichaco became the excuse to start the debate on the relocation of certain port activities and, in the long term, of the port. In addition, the essential reconstruction and urban modernization after the catastrophe became the occasion to change the economic and spatial orientation of the city -with the progressive abandonment of the old docks that would allow its progressive transformation into a bourgeois promenade- and the massive return of Indian capital, which provided the necessary funding for the succulent real estate business of reconstruction.

The transformation was quite rapid and Santander will be replacing the colonial trade by mining, fishing, industry and tourism. The changes were so sudden that a surprised visitor, the illustrious Basque-Argentine writer Francisco Grandmontagne, already highlighted the prosperity of the city in La Prensa de Buenos Aires ("Santander. La Castilla marítima", 16/11/1905):

Until ten years ago, Santander had its anxieties exclusively focused on the sea, on the trade that gave rise to the navigation to Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines; forced the city, like all of Spain, to concentrate on itself, to seek a base of its own resources, soon turned its eyes to its territory, finding in it the source of life to replace all that had been lost. Santander is the only city that has been saved from that terrible crisis that took hold of the entire maritime coastline after the last war ...

I have walked the first Alameda, and the second Alameda, the gardens, the Ribera, the street of San Francisco, the Avenida de las Naos [...] everywhere I see sumptuous buildings, modern mansions, wealth, prosperity, progress...

In fact, such was the momentum of Santander in these early decades of the century that it is one of the few cities that the painter and writer José Gutiérrez Solana saved in 1920 in his book *La España Negra* (Black Spain), stating that:

It has progressed a lot. Today he is building a magnificent Post Office building, a Bank of Spain, a brand new theater [...] He has also built a large modern hotel, with all the advances, and a great avenue with the name of an illustrious lady, and a palace, English style, on the peninsula of the Magdalena, which he has given to the kings. He has covered the pier with earth, forming a boulevard lined with plane trees. He has demolished the old Casino del Sardinero to build a bigger and whiter one.

In this context, the promenade of the pier and the gardens of Pereda became the image of the new city that emerged from the convulsions of the "fin de siglo" and the rapid transition from colonial port to bourgeois expansion. In addition, with the tourist plans for El Sardinero and the construction of the Magdalena Palace, the extension of the city to the north and east was consummated, a development that even the prestigious magazine *Blanco y Negro* (1/8/1915) praised: "The Magdalena Palace has been like the magic talisman that transforms those corners, urbanizing them and making them worthy of the royal neighborhood". A new Casino, Hippodrome and Royal Hotel were built and the accesses to the Sardinero and the Palace were improved with the opening of the Avenida de la Reina Victoria. In 1912 the gardens of the Paseo de Castelar were reformed and in 1925 the municipal architect wrote a report for the gardens of the Paseo de la Reina Victoria: "this is a splendid road, lined with luxurious hotels, which proclaims the widening and the European transformation of the mountain capital, for which it has more than enough: 'airs from outside', culture, money". Those "airs from outside" that define the cosmopolitan discourse of architecture in Santander and that will guarantee the sustained success of the spa city.

This is the time when Santander is filled with parks, gardens and avenues. A time when a bourgeoisie relatively informed of what was being done in the great European capitals not only imitated the cosmopolitan architecture of historicism or eclecticism, but also promoted, more or less spontaneously, a landscaping in line with the ideas of the great creators of European gardens, such as the German Peter Joseph Lenné or the French Jean-Charles Alphand (who reformed the Champs Elysées or the Trocadero

gardens). The city of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thus articulated its expansions with a network of green spaces that included tree-lined promenades, avenues, boulevards, parks and gardens, which are confirmed as basic facilities in any major municipality.

In the case of Santander, the aforementioned Pereda gardens also became a testimony to the botanical preferences of the Santander bourgeoisie because, as Simón Cabarga reported in the press at the time for his work *Santander en la historia de sus calles*, "The idea of contributing to the creation of the gardens already laid out caught fire" and the municipality began to receive all kinds of offers "of exotic plants lovingly cultivated in private gardens and orchards, and above all trees":

Thus, linden trees were planted in the western part (Avenida de las Naos, they called it) and the first palm trees from the gardens still existing in many places of the town. The newspapers were giving, daily, relations of donors and the species of trees and shrubs typical of botanical gardens, like magnolias, holly, strange specimens sent by a floriculturist (Ramón Escalante), titled "Kaignon Bolova" and "Salisturi adianal folia" or "of the forty shields". Such was

the influx that a popular commission had to be formed to select the palms, sweet orange trees, Phoenixes, bamboos, araucarias, cedars, dracaenas, Indian canes, evonimos, privets, laurels, clitomedias [cryptomerias?], pines, pomegranates, boxwoods, daturas, horse chestnuts, wild pear trees, lemon trees, trees of paradise.... Of plants there was a countless influx of the rarest species. It was like an account of the splendid gardens that both in the city and in the province proclaimed the fervors of the mountain people.

As we can see from the news collected, the abundance of palm trees at that time is remarkable and they are very present in the gardens of Pereda. They will also be frequent in the city in all the gardens of the first decades of the twentieth century (the city has a heritage of more than 300 specimens, many of them centenarians), both private (Finca Jado, La Cubana, Villa Asunción, Sanatorio de Santa Clotilde, Sanatorio del Dr. Morales, gardens of the Sagrados Corazones in Menéndez Peléndez), Sanatorio del doctor Morales, Sagrados Corazones gardens in Menéndez Pelayo or in many period homes in El Sardinero, Cueto, Monte or San Román) as well as public (ten palm trees in the gardens of Piquío, next to the seminary of Corbán, or surrounding the Carlist fort of Corbanera, in La Maruca).

Generally, throughout northern Spain, the notable presence of these palms (specifically the 'phoenix canariensis', whose origin, as its name reminds us, is Canary Island) has been associated with the gardens of Indian houses. It is true that, since the 19th century, in the literary and artistic imaginary, palm trees have been associated first with the West Indian world and, by extension, later with the "Indianos", peninsular or "Americans". There are a multitude of examples, from the mentions to the "Palm of the Indians" in the *Cantos del Siboney* by José Fornaris (published in Havana in 1862) to the unfinished "Canto a Puerto Rico" by José Gualberto Padilla ("El Caribe"), published posthumously (after his death in 1896), which reviewing the trees that symbolize the exuberant Antillean nature arrives at the "Noble palm tree that to the happy Indian / Of gifts a thousand beneficent surrounds...!". Palm trees that will also end up intertwining with the biographies of the peninsular emigrants: "To you they will bring, wandering, pilgrims / Other worlds perhaps and other people; / Before you they will tell of their destinies, / The expired stories, and mourners...". So much so that the Asturian poet and journalist Alfonso Camín titles the second part of his two autobiographical volumes *Entre palmeras. Vidas emigrantes* (1958), illustrating his years in Cuba. Even another Indian autobiography, written by the mountain Indiano Francisco Fernández Zorrilla -*Un indiano: cómo se gana dinero en América* (c. 1923)- illustrates its cover with all the iconographic stereotypes of the Indian: the yarn suit, the watch, the big mustaches, the Jipi hat (made, precisely, with the fiber of the Jipi palm) and the landscape of palm trees.

This stereotyped image of the "Americans" is widespread, including the inevitable "chalet with a garden on which the palm tree stood out" cited, for example, by José Luis García Delgado, president of the Fundación Archivo de Indianos de Colombres. Nevertheless, and despite the power of this stereotype and the many nuances and exceptions, the same can be said, in general, of the gardens of the Indianos as of the "architecture of the Indianos": that it is no different from that of the rest of the bourgeoisie of the time and that both participated in the cosmopolitan eclecticism characteristic of the turn of the century.

In fact, the Canary Island palm is frequent throughout Spain and appears in all kinds of gardens (from the Royal Botanical Garden, the park of the Citadel in Barcelona or the Granada "Garden of the Palms", next to the Alhambra, to the "Garden of the Poets" of the Royal Alcazar of Seville, the Gardens of Aranjuez or El Retiro).

In fact, the matter is also closely related to the easy acclimatization of the Canary Island palm tree to the Cantabrian climate and to the active search for a "Spanish" or "Andalusian" garden model -as heir to the forgotten Arab garden- that would allow a national alternative to the traditional cosmopolitan gardens in the "French", "Italian" or "English" style. Along these lines, the exhibition Gardens of Spain by the painter Santiago Rusiñol in 1899 at the L'Art Nouveau Gallery in Paris was the first international recognition of this new vision of the Spanish garden and coincided in time with the apogee of garden painting. Later, the historicist aspiration to recover the Arab-Andalusian garden model was consolidated with the activity of two of its main theoreticians, who also participated in several projects in Santander: Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier (Aix-les-Bains, 1861 - Paris, 1930) and Javier de Winthuysen (Seville, 1874 - Barcelona, 1956). The former, trained in Paris with Alphand, arrived in Seville in 1911 at the invitation of the Executive Committee of the Ibero-American Exposition to direct the project for the gardens of María Luisa. He then intervened in numerous projects in Barcelona (especially for the Universal Exposition of 1929), Madrid and Andalusia and signed several remarkable plans for the Magdalena and for Valdeñoja (collected in his influential work *Jardins: carnet de plans et de dessins*, Paris: Emile-Paul Frères, 1920). Although well acquainted with the new European trends in garden design (as curator of the Landscape section at the Paris Decorative Arts Exhibition in 1925) he was always concerned with adapting the avant-garde to the local cultural, landscape and climatic influences. For his part, Winthuysen continued the work of defending the Arab-Spanish garden that Forestier had begun, and in 1930 he published his work *Classic Gardens of Spain: Castile*, the result of his travels and observations, which would give a great impetus to the art of landscaping in Spain.

Both Forestier and Winthuysen were involved in several large gardening projects linked to the transformation of the Sardinero into a royal summer resort. It all began with the construction of the Magdalena Palace between 1908 and 1912 (designed by architects Gonzalo Bringas and Javier González de Riancho), offered as a gift from the municipality to Their Majesties Alfonso XIII and Victoria Eugenia. Alfonso XIII and Victoria Eugenia. In parallel to the work on the palace, the gardener of H.M., Juan Gras y Prats, drafted, shortly before his death, a first planning project for the Magdalena peninsula, with two large curved perimeter avenues and double alignment of trees, following the landscaping criteria in vogue at the time, inspired by the great Parisian parks of the Second Empire and, especially, in the layout of Campo del Moro in Madrid (1890), the work of his master, the Catalan Ramón Oliva (1890).

Almost simultaneously, the palace architect Javier G. de Riancho designed the Polo field next to the access to the peninsula and the stables. Later, after the disappearance of Gras, it was Forestier who took charge of the design of the French-style gardens closest to the palace, which can be seen in his "Preliminary Project for Gardens and Plantations on the Magdalena Peninsula. Property of H.M. King Alfonso XIII", with the design of a terrace parallel to the coast in the area of the Stables and a large double staircase for the garden in the southern part of the palace, very similar to the one projected for Valdeñoja shortly after (1918) which he will also include in his work *Jardins: carnet de plans...* of 1920.

Shortly after, Forestier and Winthuysen intervened successively in the Valdeñoja park (several of the original plans are preserved in the archives of the Royal Botanical Garden of Madrid). The project included the large estate of the shipowner Ángel Pérez Eizaguirre in Cabo Menor, to the north of the municipality. The proximity of the shipowner to the royal family links both projects (the Magdalena and Valdeñoja, in which Forestier intervened consecutively in 1917 and 1918 and the same architect: Javier G. de Riancho) with very similar solutions. Forestier made a previous project for the parterre and the pergola (initially intended for a rose garden) in Valdeñoja, a design with geometric sectors that follows his ideas about the Andalusian garden (in fact, it is included in his work *Jardins: carnet de plans...* in the chapter for Mediterranean gardens). From 1930 onwards Winthuysen also intervened, studying the Valdeñoja estate as a whole: its accesses (with a winding promenade surrounded by palm trees), masses of trees and views over Mataleñas and the Cabo Mayor lighthouse. The project combines the geometric design of the garden closest to the house, with the more irregular arrangement of the tree masses

adapted to the topography of the estate and a lake with an island. Finally, the estate became municipal property and was opened for public use in 1983, divided between the current Mataleñas park and the first municipal golf course in Spain, inaugurated in 1986 with an extension of 15 hectares.

After the projects for Valdenoja, in 1925, the third coastal projection of the Sardinero was landscaped: the gardens of Piquío. Until the twenties, the Piquío point was only a cliff with a viewpoint, which owes its name to its peak shape that went into the sea and separated the two beaches of the Sardinero. There, in 1911, Javier González de Riancho had projected the new Casino, which walled the rocky profile of Piquío following the ideas of maritime casinos common in France, buildings hanging over the sea (although finally the project of Eloy Martínez del Valle for the Plaza de Italia was preferred). It was not until 1925 that a single landscaping project was undertaken, conceived by the municipal architect Ramiro Sainz Martínez on a surface area of some 12,000 square meters. The project included flower beds, a pergola for tarays (perhaps inspired by that of Forestier for Valdenoja), a lookout over the sea, various furnishings (the "Ball of the World", in fact a rare and valuable example of an astronomical instrument called "Parallel Earth") and elegant rows of Canary Island palm trees visible from all over El Sardinero.

Then came several projects that complete this brief history of the parks and gardens of Santander. In 1945, following the construction of the church of San Roque in El Sardinero (architect Ramiro Sáinz Martínez), the alameda de Cacho, which runs parallel to the Avenida de los Hoteles, was reformed with staggered terraces in an "art deco" style. In 1983, the Doctor Morales Park was opened to the public on the former estate of Doctor Morales' sanatorium, in a place called Fuente de la Salud, in the Barrio de Cajo, to the west of the city. Finally, in the 21st century, the new "great green lung" of the growing area north of the city was inaugurated: the Atlantic Park of the Vaguada de Las Llamas, near the campus of the University of Cantabria and not far from the Sardinero, in a new residential area with recent facilities (Sports Palace, Exhibition Hall, Santander Stage or the frustrated project of the Museum of Cantabria designed by Mansilla and Tuñón). Designed by the studio of the Catalan landscape architects Enric Batlle and Joan Roig and opened to the public in 2007, it was conceived by its authors as "a Center for the Art of Gardens and the Culture of the Atlantic Landscape".

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For more information on the history of parks and gardens in Santander can be consulted, along with the classic works of Enrique Loriente Escalada (Parks and gardens of Santander, Santander: Estvdio, 1988) and Julio J. Polo Sanchez (editor of the Catalog of cultural heritage of Cantabria, III. Santander y su entorno. Santander: Gobierno de Cantabria, 2003), some more specific recent works, such as those of Patricia Hernández Lamas (El Jardín Moderno en España, 1926-1980, doctoral thesis, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, 2017) or Andrea C. Peresan Martínez (El Parque de Mataleñas, Santander: un elemento patrimonial del conjunto de El Sardinero, Final Master's thesis, Santander: UC, 2021). As well as the documentation preserved in the Archivo General de Palacio, the municipal archives of Santander, the González de Riancho family archives and the Royal Botanical Garden of Madrid (Javier de Winthuysen collection; available in Biblioteca virtual CSIC).
