

## *The Mercury: Almadén and Almagro*

The exploitation of the cinnabar (Mercury sulphide) mining site of Almadén (in Arabic, The Mine), the richest and most abundant in the world, explains the *raison d'être* of the town (currently about 5,000 inhabitants): housing, facilities, infrastructures... And also, to a large extent, that of Almagro (city of around 10,000 inhabitants), where during the Middle Ages its tenants settled: the Military Order of Calatrava (13th to 15th centuries) and, later (16th and 17th centuries), the German bankers Függer (nicknamed *Fúcares*).

In this short article, we will show, through a simple geographical synthesis operation, the extraordinary historical and patrimonial value of the mercury mines (paralyzed since 2002, such as the Asturian coal mines) and of the two aforementioned urban centres of Castilla-La Mancha, strongly influenced by them. The recognition of its heritage value on a national and international scale has come to promote a cultural and tourist function that, however, has not been able to replace historical activities. Almadén takes the worst part due to its high mining specialization, compared to the diversification of Almagro's activities, with a predominance of those in the tertiary sector, characteristic of a dynamic regional capital, the capital of Campo de Calatrava. Since the middle of the last century, Almadén has lost more than 60% of its population, while Almagro's decline barely exceeds 10%, as can be seen in the table 1.

In the historic mining town, long before the inclusion of its Mining Park in the Unesco list of World Heritage, resilience had passed to reconversion. Mostly it is oriented towards cultural tourism taking as its engine the old

facilities (buildings, infrastructures, artefacts, machines, documents ...). Thus, the elements created by the mining activity for the reproduction of the workforce have been radically transformed towards other functions, although in some cases the buildings were demolished, as unfortunately happened with the Royal Prison. However, these functions and activities have not been able to replace the former mining activity: disappointment has prompted civil society to set up the *Forzados* Platform in 2019 (an obvious historical remembrance) to demand better actions from the administrations that can reverse the situation and stop the sharp demographic decline ([www.eldiario.es](http://www.eldiario.es), 09-03-2019).

The urban morphology is determined by a slightly orthogonal plan composition: the plan is divided into two symmetrical parts separated by Avenida de la Libertad, of eighteenth-century origin and designed for the enlightened development of the town. The one of the North corresponds to the old town and is structured, as in many Castilian towns and cities, by the Calle Mayor, in the direction W-E from the church of San Sebastián and the mine to the bullring, passing through the central square of the town hall; the secondary streets, more irregular, short and narrow are roughly parallel or vertical to the main axis. The southern part, modern and contemporary, also has a main longitudinal axis (in the W-E direction) on which the Real Jail and the Hospital de San Rafael were built; his plan led to a grid plan.

The transformation of Almagro, a city of 10,000 inhabitants that in the Middle and Modern Ages had been the *de facto* capital of La Mancha, was much more com-

plex than that carried out in Almadén. In 1972 its old town had already been declared as a historical-artistic complex (Almarcha, 2011, 26).

The rediscovery and reconstruction in the 1950s of the old theatre the *Corral de Comedias* built in the 17th century, the only theatre of the Golden Age that could be preserved (closed in the 18th century, it remained partially in use as an inn), facilitated the reconversion of Almagro towards a hegemonic function: the cultural. In the 70s of the last century, once the *Corral de Comedias* has recovered physically and functionally thanks to the influence of a seventeenth-century Presbyterian priest of the parish of San Bartolomé named Leonardo de Oviedo, the Almagro Classical Theatre Festival is launched. Its success is at the base of the transformation of a city that had depended on the mines of Almadén.

The prominence of the Festival and the *Corral de Comedias* attracted to Almagro nothing less than the National Theatre Museum, housed in a historic building in the centre of the city, originally built in the 13th century, such as the chambered house of the Grand Master of the Calatrava Order. Besides, it shares with Madrid the headquarters of the National Classical Theatre Company, founded by Adolfo Marsillach in 1986, with a residence since 1993 in the old convent-hospital of San Juan de

Dios is an excellent 17th-century monument very representative of the Baroque of La Mancha.

Finally, Almadén and Almagro may be a reference for Asturian mining basins due to their resilience and re-use of monumental heritage. Nevertheless, Almadén, as a strictly mining enclave, suffered continuous wear, like the Asturian basins, since the 60s of the last century. The recovery of the rich heritage legacy that has deserved its inclusion in the Unesco List of World Heritage, has not brought about the expected returns. The people from Almadén, defrauded, have been “forced” to associate to demand new compensation and incentives.

Almagro, with a smaller starting population, has been able to cope much better with the effects of the primary and mining decline: commercial and administrative support has survived, and the Classical Theatre Festival did the rest. Since the restoration of the *Corral de Comedias*, the city has opted for integrated regeneration for culture and tourism functions. And it seems that he has succeeded. Its historical evolution had three successive pillars: the Order of Calatrava in the late Middle Ages, the German bankers Függer in the Modern Age and the Classical Theatre Festival that, in the last four decades, has emerged as the main regenerative force of the city, with the support of the Ministry of Culture, the Ciudad Real Provincial Council and the City Council.