

They are one of the most ancient and singular housings of Catalonia and Spain. It is one of the most important elements in the rich cultural heritage of the lower Ebro, a unique cultural inheritance, that is necessary to protect and conserve. We have notices since the Middle Ages, and it experimented an important increase during the XIXth century and the beginnings of the XXth, which is close related with the agricultural colonization of the Delta by rice fields. They were humble and simple constructions: a wooden structure with walls made of mud mixed with straw and, once it was dry, whitewashed; a vegetal covert of reed tied with twine, with only one gate, because ventilation was performed through the cover. Nowadays it has loosen his original function of agricultural warehouse, stable, tavern or home of lighthouse keeper, shepherd, peasant, fisherman... to became second home, rural gite, information center and restaurant, and it even has his own Interpretation Center.

Les barraques són un dels habitatges més antics i singulars de Catalunya i d'Espanya. Es tracta d'un dels elements més importants del ric patrimoni cultural del baix Ebre, una herència única, que cal protegir i conservar. En tenim notícies des de l'edat mitjana, i va experimentar un increment important durant el segle XIX i principis del XX, en paral·lel a la colonització agrícola del Delta lligada a l'extensió del cultiu de l'arròs. Eren construccions humils i senzilles: una estructura de fusta amb parets fetes de fang barrejat amb palla i, un cop seca, emblanquinada; una coberta vegetal de canyes lligades amb cordes, amb només una porta, ja que la ventilació es duia a terme a través de la coberta. Actualment ha perdut la seva funció original de magatzem agrícola, estable, taverna o llar de faroners, pastors, pagesos pescadors... per esdevenir segones residències, cases rurals, centres d'informació o restaurants, i té fins i tot el seu propi Centre d'Interpretació.

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Paraules clau: barraca, arquitectura tradicional, arquitectura de coberta vegetal, patrimoni etnològic, Delta de l'Ebre



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The Ebro Delta Cottages: One of the Oldest and Most Unique Forms of Traditional Housing in Catalonia

The Ebro Delta cottages are one of the oldest, most unique types of traditional housing in Catalonia. They are without a doubt one of the most distinguished architectural features of traditional heritage along the Ebro River. As a highly important cultural legacy that is unique in Catalonia, it is essential that they be protected and preserved. These homes have been documented since the Middle Ages, though it would seem that they especially proliferated from the end of the 19th century into the early 20th century, coinciding with the emergence of rice production on the Ebro Delta. Nowadays they are used as the homes of farmers, though they are also employed as information centres, restaurants and holiday homes.

The expression “Ebro Delta cottages” refers to a wide range of popular and traditional constructions with their own particular typology. They have been used as the temporary and permanent homes of both fresh and salt-water fishermen, as well as for hunters, wardens, farmers and day labourers in the rice fields, shepherds, common labourers, salt workers, ship pilots, soldiers and lighthouse keepers. In the past they were used for a wide range of functions, such as for housing and taverns, and as shelters, warehouses, stables, corrals and so on. The cottages used as housing were built in function of specific lines of work, as they were constructed by landowners to house their workers, or by individual families. They were usually found in the midst of large parcels of land, either spread out and dispersed, or gathered together,

eventually coming to make up the town centres of new municipalities.

Their highly simple architectural structure does not vary to a great degree, featuring a rectangular floor plan, a wooden frame and a peaked roof made of thatch, itself set upon the vertical walls or resting directly on the ground. Even so, cottages of this nature found in every place of the world will always have something that sets them apart, and in the case of the Ebro Delta cottage it is the presence of vertical supports with a forked top, which are used to hold up the weight of the roofing, along with the use of what is called a *solibert*, a type of roofing that allows the front part of certain family cottages to be left open.¹

History of the Ebro Delta Cottages

Like all constructions considered *primitive* from an architectural point of view, the traditional cottages were rather rudimentary and functional, and were in harmony with the natural environment and landscape they were found in, as they were made with material found in the Delta itself: wood, reeds, clay and brushwood.

For this reason that they can be linked to a millenary tradition found around the world, featuring structurally simple constructions made with organic material and clay from the place of origin. This tradition goes back to the Neolithic period and has been preserved around the world until our day. In the Park of Reconstructions at the Burgundy Archeodrome, we find a reconstructed Neolithic house from the Danube some 4000 years old that has highly similar architectural characteristics to those of the cottages found on the Ebro Delta.

Further to this, the Delta cottages bear a close resemblance to other traditional organic constructions in Spain: in

Catalonia, with the historical cottages of the Llobregat River Delta, which have disappeared; and in the rest of the country with the cottages found in L'Horta and L'Albufera regions of Valencia, in Oriola, Murcia and on the Segura River, as well as those at the mouth of the Guadalquivir.² They also are related to other cottages that can be found all over Europe, including those on the German and Hungarian sections of the Danube, on the Po in Italy, in the Camargue region in France, on the Portuguese island of Madeira, or others in Siberia.

For a number of decades various writers and researchers, both local and foreign, have related the origin of the Ebro

Delta cottages to the arrival of families from Valencia whose task was to open up the uncultivated lands of the Ebro and convert them for agricultural use; this occurred from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. They have also been traced to the influence of large crews of day labourers from Valencia who would travel each year to carry out the then-harsh tasks of growing rice, especially in the times of planting, weed management and the harvest.

We do not know since when the Ebro Delta cottages have been built, or what they were like in the distant past, though there is no question that they go back at least to medieval times. By way of



■ Farmer cottages on the Delta in the 1920s. COLLECTION OF THE ARXIU COMARCAL DEL BAIX EBRE.

example, we can cite a number of older documents. One, from 1338, explains that in the Oliver salt flats (named after an important family of merchants from Tortosa, who produced and sold this highly important product in the Middle Ages), there was a large presence of workers during the time the salt was gathered, and the salt workers lived provisionally in permanent cottages on site which featured porches and large pantries.³ In 1469 documents also make mention of cottages used to house the salt workers from the City of Tortosa. These cottages tended to be concentrated in small villages, and the city itself was responsible for building them as well as ensuring living conditions (that is, by furnishing them and adding other features) and repairing them if they were to become rundown.⁴

With regards to the cottages of fishermen, from what we may draw from documentation, maps and nautical charts from the 13th and 14th centuries, and later from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, the fishermen from the *Gremi de Pescadors de Sant Pere* (Saint Peter's Fishermen's Guild) built the cottages, which would face the sea and have their backs to the coastal winds; they were placed near habitual fishing areas. Over the last three centuries these

placements did not vary in any significant way, being altered only in function of morphological changes to the Delta itself. In 1557 the *Establiments dels Peixadors* (the Establishments of Fishermen) refer to the cottages built by members of the Saint Peter's Fishermen's Guild who would fish the deep delta pools, making reference, for example, to where they could or could not be constructed.⁵

Fishermen's Cottages

The type of cottage built and used by Ebro Delta fishermen and their geographic location was determined by the abundant vegetation of the riverbank and the corresponding marshes (wood, reeds, wetland grass, brushwood), and where it was possible to fish on the sea and from land as well, both in the river itself and in pools and eddies. They were not particularly different from those built by farmers as shelters or as storehouses. The roof was set along the ground, though to make the frame they tended to reuse masts from old dismantled boats as well as wood brought into the coast by the tides; or else they would use pine and olive wood bought from shipwrights.

These constructions were strong, but they were usually designed as tempo-

rary housing: the same cottage could be used by fishermen during the week, fortnight or however long the fishing season would last, and would then be abandoned. They were usually five or six metres long and three to four wide, their rectangular floor plans setting out a single interior space. The frame could be put up in a single day, and there would only be one door. The brushwood used to cover them, such as sea rush (*Juncus maritimus*) and beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*), was gathered from nearby wetlands.

The fishermen tended to cook in front of the cottage, where they would also eat and spend the day when they were not fishing. Inside they slept and left their few personal belongings, as well as their shared fishing nets and other equipment.

Our cottage was at Raconet de Fora, on the eastern side of the Salines Velles. At that time in the Trabucador there were many dunes covered with vegetation that were so high you could not see over to the other side. The cottage was large: eight men slept inside and each of them had his box of clothing to change into when we went fishing We ate outside the cottage if the weather was good. We slept on bunks we made ourselves, four on each side, and when necessary two at the back. Above the door there was an air hole covered in metallic mesh where the light of day filtered in. The beds were set a couple hand-widths above the ground, with a heavy frame over top of which the stuffed matting was laid, made of corn cob leaves.⁶



■ Cottage used as a storehouse in the 1950s. COLLECTION OF THE MUSEU DE LES TERRES DE L'EBRO

This shared equipment included fishing tackle for various techniques, including all kinds of nets, traps made from reeds or rope, longlines, cast nets, handnets and landing nets, seine nets, a variety of fishing lines including jiggling lines,

and trammel nets. Some of this gear, as used from the late 19th century into the early 20th century, required the attention of the entire crew of workers, comprised of anywhere from 16 to 20 men who would go to the cottage once the day's work had ended, except on holidays then the fishermen went back to their families in L'Ampolla, Amposta, La Cava (now Deltebre), Tortosa, Sant Carles de la Ràpita or Sant Jaume d'Enveja. Other kinds of fishing gear were from a much older era.⁷

The Town of the River Mouth Cottages

Women did not usually live in the fishermen's cottages. They stayed at home with their children, or, if they worked in some fishing-related activity, they would go on assigned days to meeting points to pick up the catch, which was sold on the street by travelling vendors. It included eels, twait shad, gilthead seabream, common dentex, flathead mullet, bass, hake and sand steenbras.

Those fishermen who had not obtained a spot in any of the fishing crews in the Ebro eddies through the lottery run by the Saint Peter's Fishermen's Guild were allowed to fish at sea, using the small village of cottages that fishermen and ship pilots had on the left bank of the river, in the area where during the floods of 1937 a new mouth appeared along with the new island of Sant Antoni.

With the exception of the bunks where they slept, which belonged to the Guild as well, everything else was shared between them, such as jugs, vats, pots, pans, lights, pails, fishing tackle, metal nets, as well as their double-ended skiffs, rowboats and pontoons. They were purchased by each crew of fishermen at the start of the season, with everyone pitching in, and the material was sold in auction at season's end. They purchased food, oil and

fuel together. Those things for personal use, such as raincoats, sacks, large knives, spoons, smoking pipes and shaving material, was brought in by each individually, and was what they would call *pellet*. In the same way each fisherman bought his own bread, wine and sweets, as well as coffee, chocolate, cane spirit, tobacco and rum, among other things. It was quite common to see them trade whatever they had extra for any of their other needs.⁸

With reference to the "Cottages in the Town of the Gola" (the Ebro *gola* or in plural *goles* refers to pools at the river mouth), there is documentary evidence of them from as early as the 13th century. It was an important location on both the sea and on the river that the Tortosa fishermen inhabited until well into the 20th century. In 1902 the town was still inhabited, though by then it had begun to lose its strategic function:

In the municipality of Jesús i Maria there is an island in the Ebro River called Den Graciá which is more than 5 kilometres long, with four farmhouses and a few cottages, while opposite the Buda lighthouse there is a group of 29 cottages and a larger house, which in times of greater navigational activity were lived in by ship-owners from Tortosa. This town had its own local mayor and licensed tobacconist and post. During the day they were occupied by a number of fishermen from the Saint Peter's Guild.⁹

In Poblat the Town of the Gola the cottages were permanent; that is, if they became worn down they were repaired. They were larger than the ones the fishermen built along the Delta eddies or on the coast itself. The fishermen's cottages were covered with thatch, while the walls were plastered in the cottages of the ship pilots who aided small

wooden sailboats, steamboats and all other pilot boats in their manoeuvres entering or leaving the mouth of the Ebro. The role of these cottages, which took in the victims of shipwrecks when sea rescue was required, was highly important in the time there was still a great amount of fishing activity as well as sea and river commerce at the port of Tortosa. The question was so important that the *Sociedad Española de Salvamento de Náufragos* (Spanish Sea Rescue Society), created by Spanish law in 1887, set up one of its first rescue stations in the area.

The Large Isolated Cottages Built at the Ebro Goles

At the Ebro *Goles* we also know of the existence of isolated cottages, which were built in function of various activities related to farming or fishing: assisted navigation; the military defence of the Port dels Alfacs from corsair attacks and from other "enemies"; as well as the construction and use of the main engineering project on the Delta, the Buda Lighthouse, made by the English manufacturer Porter.

In the 18th century the engineers of Charles III, who then designed the new city of Sant Carles de la Ràpita, also laid out a project, respecting the techniques and using the traditional materials of the region, to build large cottages as the permanent residences of the soldiers in the Gola de l'Ebre Detachment, whose mission was to defend the harbour. The project would never be executed, though it is interesting to see how numerous construction materials, named according to their popular use on the Ebro Delta until our day, appear in a document including a map and report from the 18th century done for the construction of these cottages for the military use mentioned, as annotated in the elevation and plan. The accompanying illustration shows one of these cottages. The words *anguila* (ridge beam), *barraca* (cottage), *carena* (main beam)

or *puntals* (stakes or vertical posts) are some of the terms used by the engineer Juan Saliquet Negrete in November 1779, in the document entitled *Plano, Perfil y Elevación de uno de los Barracones propuestos para colocar el Destacamento de la Gola capaz de contener 55 hombres* (Plan, Profile and Elevation of one of the Cottages proposed to house the Gola Detachment with a capacity for 55 men).¹⁰

Once into the 19th century, we find workers cottages built at the Ebro Goles, which were connected to the construction and later use of the Buda Lighthouse, erected with the idea of avoiding the repeated tragedies and shipwrecks suffered by boats navigating the area near the mouth of the Ebro each winter. They were also used for the lighthouse keepers. Historical documents tell of how a fire on June 15, 1863, burnt down the cottages made of brushwood used as housing and storerooms for the workers commissioned with the task of raising the impressive iron tower of the lighthouse. On November 1, 1864, the cottage of the three lighthouse keepers who kept the olive oil lantern burning was also said to be covered with reeds, and was found 20 yards to the south-east of the lighthouse tower. The lighthouse tower was at that time the tallest of its kind in the world (being seven metres higher than the second tallest, in Florida), a major piece of modern engineering placed right beside these other, rather *primitive* constructions. The Buda Lighthouse was a conical tower some 51.5 metres high, topped by a lantern using olive oil, which was reached by a spiral staircase with 365 steps that went up on the inside of a tube serving as the centre axis of the tower itself. The lighthouse collapsed over Christmas, 1961.¹¹

Farmer Cottages

On the Ebro Delta these cottages have been the most humble of all. Since ancient times, the natural wealth of

the Delta has given rise to other activities besides fishing, including hunting, grazing and the harvesting of shellfish, salt and thistle plants (to make soap, glass and dye for the quality printed cloth known as *indianes*), the gathering of liquorice (to make sweets and pharmaceutical products), as well as leeches for medical use, amongst other products.

In the 17th century wheat and barley were grown on the Delta. Before the irrigation channels were finished (the Canal de la Dreta, or Right Channel, opened in 1860, and the Canal de l'Esquerra, the Left Channel, was inaugurated in 1912), they were the only two crops grown. The channels made it possible to open up a vast area for agriculture dedicated to rice paddies, a long and arduous process that was also quite costly, with all kinds of legal, agricultural and sanitary impediments along the way:

We had a really hard time...Not because we lived in cottages, that wasn't it! We suffered because everyone suffered back then. We had two cottages: one was to sleep in and nothing more, while the other, with the door in the middle, had the kitchen and was where we spent the day. And then we kept our animals in another cottage set apart from these two; that is why there were cottages with no smokestack. Most people had one cottage and that was it. But those who did not have a smokestack had terrible problems with the smoke. Oh, I remember it well! Those cottages were unbearable.¹²

The settlement of cottages, inhabited along livestock paths by the families of shepherd or farmers, would come to make up the oldest centres of population on the Delta. On the right side of the Delta, the 1864 census of the historical parishes of Sant Jaume and

L'Enveja recorded 900 inhabitants. In 1902, a little after the creation of the new Sant Jaume d'Enveja parish, and only in that town itself, there were 763 inhabitants, with 96 masonry buildings and 136 cottages, while in Els Muntells they also built cottages, creating the town centre:¹³

Maria Esteve Montjà, from Els Muntells, was born on October 21, 1883, in the neighbouring town of Sant Carles de la Ràpita She was married in 1914 to Salvador Saborit Fernández, a bull herder who had come to the Delta from Xilxes in Castelló. It was not easy to convince her parents ... The profession of her husband obliged her to move to Els Muntells when the town was little more than a few houses, mostly cottages, aligned along the road running parallel to the Riet As Els Muntells did not have its own religious services, each year at Easter they would walk with their three children the fifteen kilometres to La Ràpita, to her parents' house, to fulfil their Easter obligations (confession and communion).

Settlements of cottages also emerged in the large rice farms, built by the farmers themselves or by professional cottage makers; entire families lived in them, and their job was to clear out reeds, wetland grasses and other plants to make it possible to plant rice. There were also a large number of cottages spread out over the Delta, built separately, whether on farmlands owned by the dwellers or rented out, and placed near the rice paddies, beside the roads or alongside the river, the main channels and the irrigation ditches.

Whether isolated or not, these cottages had their own features that set them apart from the fishermen's cottages or those used for storerooms. Their peaked roofs were set on vertical

walls and the roofline never reached the ground; the side walls could be covered with brushwood or not, but the front and back walls were always lined with clay mixed with straw to be later whitewashed.¹⁴ Besides this, many farmer cottages had one of the most characteristic features of the Ebro Delta cottages, the *solibert*, a type of roof jutting out above the front wall of many cottages, beneath which the residents would spend their time when the weather was good.

Characteristics of the Farmer Cottages

Amongst the farmers on the Ebro Delta the cottage was the most common form of housing, whether they were permanent or not. Many families spent the summer in rice production, from mid May to the end of October, while they spent the winter working in the dense bushlands planted with carob and olive trees found around inland towns near the Delta where many of them were originally from. On the Delta they lived above all off the land and from livestock, though sheer subsistence also meant that they would fish (for eels, gilthead seabream, twait shad, bass and carp), hunt (for waterfowl, frogs and moles) and gather (looking for snails, shellfish, other crustaceans and wild mushrooms).

The farmer cottages were usually eight metres long and three to four metres wide. The floor plan would be rectangular and the layout rather simple, with two adjoining spaces, the kitchen and the sleeping area. The beds were set in a single large space or else in a space divided into smaller rooms without doors; if the cottage did not have a mezzanine floor this area was also used as a pantry. Some of the cottages used for temporary housing had a stable inside the residence itself, so that they did not have to build another just for the animals. Between the ground and the roof another floor was built with

wooden crossbeams and reeds, with the stable underneath and the sleeping area above, in what was the mezzanine floor. In the poorest of cottages or in those that were not lived in year round, the inside layout could also include a stable and corral. The animals and the boys would sleep in one room, while in another there would be the fireplace and the bedroom of the parents and their daughters. The horse and mare would be given the best location in the cottage, since they were the hardest to replace in case something happened to them.

The ground tended to be made of rough earth that was hard and unvaried. Cooking was done on the ground over a small stove called a *foguerrill* (with three legs), and the smoke filtered out through the organic roof. The only opening was the door, whether it was on the front or on the side, made of wood or a simple curtain. If there was a window it would be very small and could not be opened, letting in a small quantity of light. The home's furniture and details would always be scanty, with a table, a few chairs, beds with mats or thin mattresses, boxes the clothes were kept in, along with shelves, wooden spoons, plates, pots, tins, a *porró* (the traditional Catalan wine-drinking vessel) and a few jugs (used to keep water or conserve meat in), along with wash basins to make soap in or to do the washing itself.

Everyday life in the summer was spent outside of the cottage, which was usually lined with flowers and plants to help keep the animals away from the base of the outside walls. There would usually be an oven, a masonry or iron stove called a *rameret*, a light canopy overhead and a large wooden basin. At times other cottages would be built nearby to be used as storerooms and could be made into pantries, or else used as stables or corrals. Furthermore, there could be a shared cottage or one

used to store onions, as Sebastià Juan Arbó described them in his 1932 novel *Terres de l'Ebre* (Lands of the Ebro):¹⁵

On the right at the front there was a space used as the kitchen and dining area... A dividing wall, built from reeds covered in clay and later whitewashed, split the cottage in two across its width; two small doors opened up, one on each side on this wall, leading to the two rooms taking up the entire end area of the cottage. On the left was where they slept on a wooden bed, while on the other side there was the small corral for the donkey, while in a corner the newer tools were left. Apart from this area all others were plastered with better quality clay and then whitewashed, so that the entire cottage had a clean and orderly appearance.

During the second half of the 20th century, living conditions improved all over Spain. New transportation methods (motorcycles, cars, lorries and vans) cut down on distances, and new construction materials (including bricks, cement, roof tiles and uralite-fibre cement) gave everyone the possibility of building more resistant and long-lasting housing. This led to the gradual abandonment of the cottages, or else their substitution by better-built houses, shacks and storerooms. Some owners sought to repair their cottages using new materials, substituting the brushwood used on the rooftops with fibre cement, to give an example, though in general the cottages were forgotten and began to disappear from the Delta landscape.

Construction Process

The tools and material used by the cottage maker and his assistants were very simple. In most construction processes they used their hands and, in preparing the clay used to line the walls, their feet. There was only one tool that

was unique to the trade, the cottage maker needle, used to sew together the bunches of brushwood covering the rooftop. The tools used could be limited to just this cottage maker needle, a small axe, whitener, lime, rope cord, a brush for whitewashing and a zinc pail. The most commonly used tools were the builder's hands and feet. There was no set criteria on how to choose the location of the cottage and lay it out, or to determine its size and inside plan, the nature of the door, the presence of the roof jutting off the front or not, of the inclusion of a window or the number of rooms, to offer a few examples. Each builder (whether a shepherd, a fisherman, a hunter or a farmer) would adapt it to any required uses.

In erecting the cottage, first of all the wood was brought together, along with the thatch and reeds; the braided rope was made and then the cottage was framed. Afterwards the floor was levelled and hardened. The side walls were set out by driving posts into the ground (called *istantirons*), logs generally made of olive wood, to which three higher vertical posts, each with a forked top, were added: one in the centre (the centre post) and the other two on the respective ends (what were called *pendelocs* or *pendalocs*), setting

out the front and the rear, which could be rounded. The horizontal structure was nailed in over top of the set of vertical stays (called *l'estacada*, the stakes), with the ridge beam defining the peak above, called the *anguilera* (or *anguileta*) and the main structural beam below it, at the highest part of the cottage. Finally the angled part of the structure was nailed in, including the ribs of the roof, which extended past the frame towards the ground, to make the overhang. Sometimes the cottage was strengthened even more by tying the central stakes and the ribs together with what were called *crevetes*, referring to a type of brace.

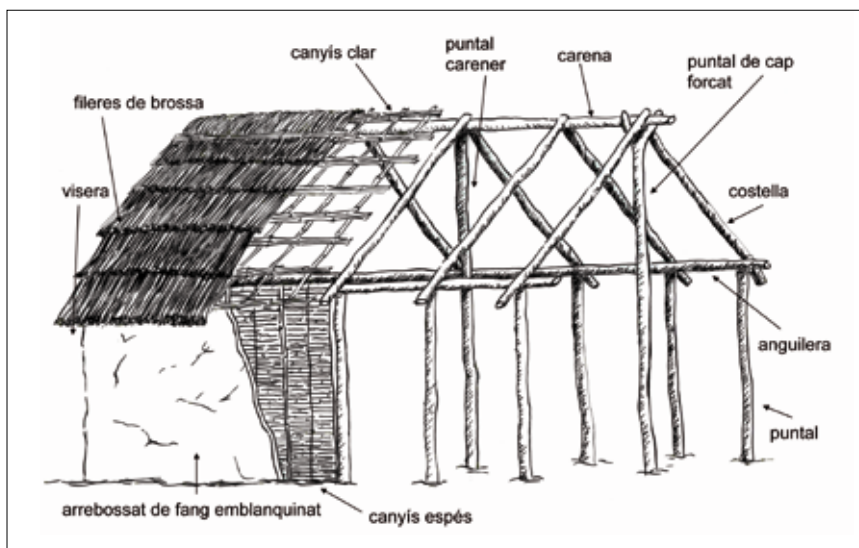
The entire structure was then covered with gathered reeds, bunched and sewn together and then sewn onto the various vertical stays using the needle. The first reeds were set along the ground and the final ones finished off at the top near the ridge beam defining the peak. The reed bunches were sewn onto the ribs in evenly spaced pairs, leaving spaces between them. The organic roofing material was also sewn onto the reeds and the ribs with the cottage-making needle (a metre-long iron needle that was slightly curved), row by row, beginning with the overhang and finishing at the peak.

The thatch, which was generally composed of rice stalks, fine rushes (*Juncus sp.*), bulrush (*Typha sp.*) and wetland grasses (*Phragmites sp.*), was sewn on in bunches as well. This was the most delicate operation, since the slope of the ribs and the proper overlapping of the rows was what made the cottage waterproof and durable.

Finally, the walls were lined with clay, filling holes and cracks, using mud that was made into a paste by stomping on it; it was then mixed with hay to make it denser. Once dry, it was whitewashed with lime and whitener, a process that was repeated every two to three months. The rooms inside the cottage were also set apart by reed walls that were plastered in the same way.

The name of each feature of the cottage structure has been passed on orally for generations, making it possible to encounter a great number of local variations (such as the term for a wooden board, *istantiró* or *santiró*):¹⁶

My grandmother, who lived as a renter in the village, thought we could have our own place there on our own land ... and the cottages were built. I was nine years old, it was 1923. My father bought everything the cottage maker told him to acquire up at the Ros herding area where they sold firewood, since when they did the pruning or cut down olive trees they made olive wood boards (*santirons*) that would last a lifetime. Some ten boards are used for a cottage that was six or seven metres long. They are used as lateral braces that hold up the ribs used to make the cottage roof. So Mr Ros came down with a cartload of these boards, and he also brought firewood with him to sell to whoever wanted some, since down here you could not find that kind of material.



Farmer cottages affected by the 1937 flood. Courtesy Maria Aguiló.



■ Construction of a cottage as a holiday home, 2005. Courtesy David Monllau.

COLLECTION OF THE MUSEU DE LES TERRES DE L'EBRE.

Other Cottages

Besides the cottages used traditionally as housing for farmers, shepherds or fishermen, on the Ebro Delta there were other types of cottages directly related to everyday life and agricultural activities. These constructions were built following one of the two basic cottage typologies we have seen: either the wooden frame of the thatch roof had an overhang that went down to the ground; or the roof was supported by the side walls of the home. There are very few examples of these kinds of typically small cottages left. Once their utilitarian function was abandoned they were no longer built, or else, being even more rudimentary constructions than most others, the organic material used to make them would not survive the test of time.

We can classify these cottages into three main groups, according to their use and size: tavern cottages and large cottages used to put up men working as day labourers for the night; warehouse and storeroom cottages, cottages for shelter, and those used to leave horse carts and tools; and cottages meant for animals and other products, used as

corrals, stables, for cold storage, as rabbit pens, for onion storage, for shared use, and so on.

The tavern cottages and other large ones used for day labourers were bigger than those used for housing, though their structure and layout was quite similar. It was typical in the taverns to serve wine, while on Sundays and holidays they would serve other kinds of hard liquor and meals. This is how Arbó described it in his previously cited 1932 novel, *Terres de l'Ebre* (Lands of the Ebro):

When supper ended the men gathered in the tavern, set up in a building that was half stand-half cottage, where a man from Valencia lived with his entire family. Guests came in dirty, with the same clothing they had worn while working. They sat around one of the four rough tables near the door, on their little stools, downing one glass of wine after another, discussing the weather and the land, and getting old. At the end of the tavern, separated by a curtain of burlap sacks ... the children lay sleeping on a bed of

hay ... They had come to this place a few years earlier, where they found a home in that abandoned shack, fixing it up here and there and setting up the tavern: four glasses and two bottles of firewater.

The day labourers' cottages, from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, gave nighttime shelter to the men who went in crews to work in the rice paddies, especially doing the planting, weeding and harvesting. The storage cottages were used as domestic pantries or were where agricultural tools and equipment or else fishing gear and nets were kept. Those used as shelters and to leave carts and other material did not have front wall and were rather small, since their only use was to leave some equipment and provide shelter in times of bad weather. All these cottages had thatch roofs. In the cottages used as corrals and stables, or for raising rabbits, the farmers also raised hens, quails, ducks and geese. They tended to have a closed off exterior space with water coming directly from the rice paddy. The cottages used as stables were where livestock was kept (including horses, cows, sheep, goats or pigs) and they usually had their walls lined with wooden planks to protect them from the animals, who would kick against them or even eat them.

Recent Cottages on the Delta

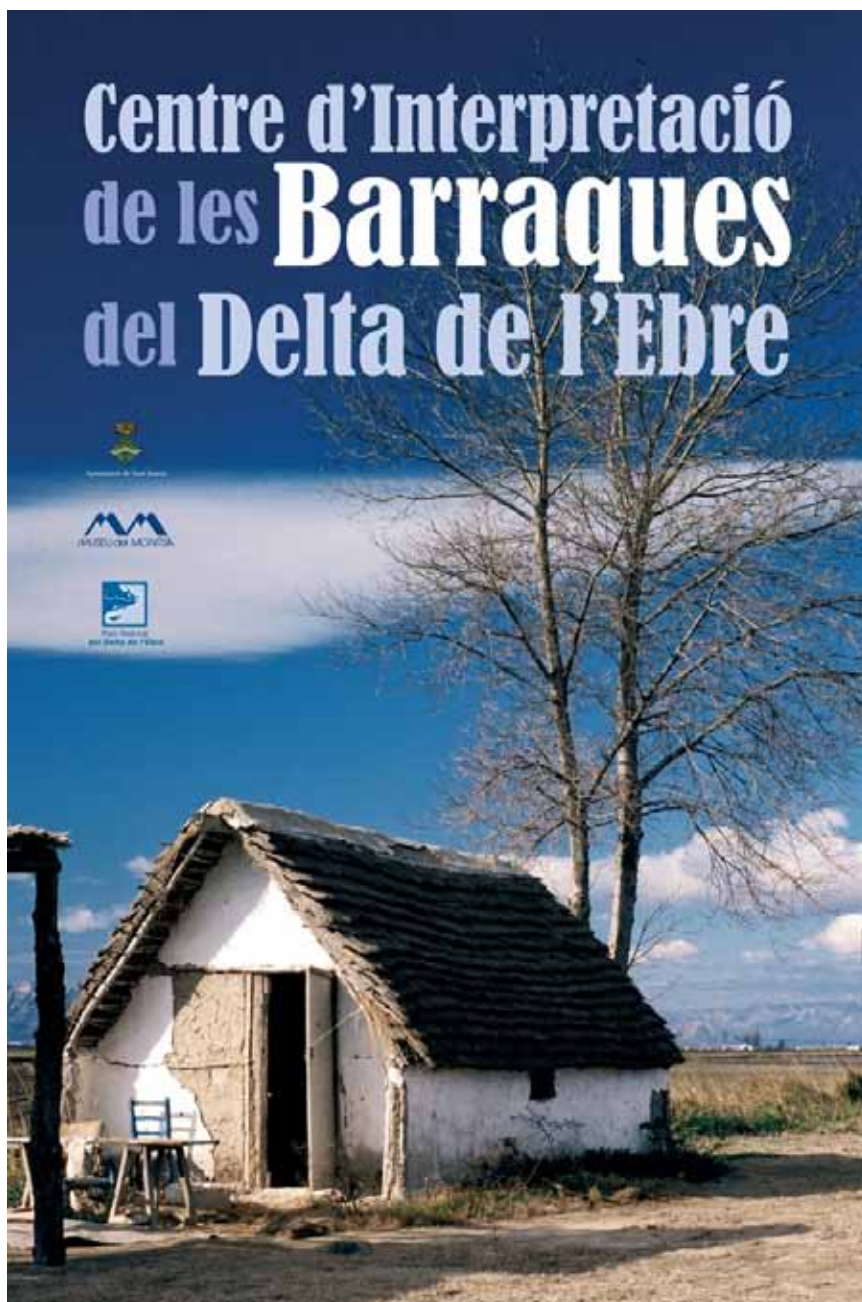
There are hardly any truly authentic cottages left from amongst those of a certain age and built in line with traditional parameters and for traditional uses. Those that do remain have been preserved by their owners more or less how their ancestors or they themselves had made them. Some of them, once in the hands of public institutions, were rebuilt and are today preserved to give testimony to the past. Nowadays, however, the majority of traditionally-built cottages in the Delta have been conceived and set out for newer, more

contemporary uses; that is, they have been directly built for educational, recreational, museum, heritage and tourist purposes.

In the 1980s, individuals and institutions in the area (including the Ebro Apprenticeship Camp (Sant Carles de la Ràpita), the Museu Comarcal del Montsià, now part of the Museu de les Terres de l'Ebre (Amposta) and the Ebro Delta Nature Park (Deltebre) sought to research, preserve

and promote the values of historical and ethnological heritage, technical knowhow, architectural merit and cultural interest. The traditional cottages of the rice farmers have become one of the symbols of the Delta, an identifying feature acknowledged by the general population. In this way the cottages have become one of the most popular symbols of the Delta and are reproduced on many items and for a multitude of events, being used as the theme for floats in

town festival parades, for the names of businesses, on pins, plates and other tourist souvenirs, as well as on t-shirts. From the 1990s on, thanks to mostly private but also public initiative, new cottages began to be built, using traditional materials and methods, though updating the conditions of their interiors. A number of individual hobbyists from Amposta, Sant Jaume d'Enveja and Deltebre have resuscitated the former trade of cottage maker.¹⁷



■ Cottages used to protect fishermen from inclement weather, 1933. Courtesy Maria Cornelles. COLLECTION OF THE MUSEU DE LES TERRES DE L'EBRE.

Amongst cottages built for educational and heritage purposes there is the cottage at the Museu del Montsià (Amposta, 1984), the former cottage of the Ebro Apprenticeship Camp (Sant Carles de la Ràpita, 1986-2002) and the one used as an observatory by the ecomuseum of the Ebro Delta Nature Park (Deltebre, 1988). Amongst those now used as restaurants, country stores, information centres or galleries, there are the L'Estany restaurant (Amposta, 1993), the cottage of the Moviment Escolta Guies Sant Jordi de Catalunya (the Saint George of Catalonia boy scouts and girl guides, at El Poblenou del Delta, 2001) or the information centre and country store in the recreational area of the Casa de Fusta (Amposta, 2004).

The majority of cottages still left on the Delta are used as holiday homes or farmhouses, and were built in the late 1990s. Still today the idea is to revive, with a family-oriented focus in mind, one of the most characteristic features of the former way of life on the Delta. It goes without saying that the construction of these new cottages is now adapted to the demands of comfort, hygiene and full functionality this type of home requires, to the degree that available construction material and the techniques used to build them might allow. This means, for example, that they have kitchens and bathrooms with wall tiles, a proper smokestack

and various fully functional windows, amongst other features.

The Ebro Delta Cottages Information Centre

In June 2005 the Ebro Delta Cottages Information Centre was opened at Sant Jaume d'Enveja, in the heart of the Delta. An initiative of the City of Sant Jaume d'Enveja, it was carried out with the collaboration of the Museu de les Terres de l'Ebre and the Ebro Delta Nature Park. The permanent exhibition allows visitors to enjoy a historical and cultural visit explaining this

unique and ancient form of traditional architecture, perfectly adapted as it is to the Delta environment. The main goal of the centre is to evaluate, conserve and promote one of the many features of the historical, ethnological and cultural heritage of the municipality, giving a new meaning to those aspects of the town that make it unique, with a special focus on those most directly related to the presence of humans on the Ebro Delta.

From a more general point of view, the Information Centre also draws

attention to and promotes popular and traditional culture amongst town residents, along with other inhabitants of the Ebro Region and the visiting public, whether coming as tourists, students or for some other purpose. Those coming from outside the Delta find the Ebro Delta Cottages Information Centre to be a place where it is possible to visit and learn more about the history of some of the oldest forms of traditional life on the Ebro Delta. ■

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NOTES

- 1 Sanchis Guarnier, and later Max Thede and W. Giese, studied this feature and published on it in 1933 and 1951 respectively.
- 2 Queralt Tomás, Maria Carme. "Las barracas del Delta del Ebro. Un modelo de hábitat tradicional" in *Narria*, 57, pp. 57-58. Madrid: Museo de Artes y Tradiciones Populares, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1992.
- 3 Pitarch López, Josep. *Les salines del delta de l'Ebre a l'Edat Mitjana*. Barcelona: Columna Tresmall, 1998.
- 4 Arxiu Comarcal del Baix Ebre. Arxiu Municipal de Tortosa, Salines-81; f. 4v ss.
- 5 Foguet Marsal, José. *Cofradías-Gremios especialmente fluviales de la ribera del Ebro*. Madrid: Impremta de Juan Pueyo, 1923.
- 6 Oral account by Francesc Navarro, as recorded by Lluís Millan Roca in "Francesc Navarro Santos ens parla de la pesca amb nanses i de la barraca de pescadors", *Ràpita*. Sant Carles de la Ràpita: Ajuntament de Sant Carles de la Ràpita, March 1993.
- 7 Some of them are mentioned in medieval and modern books and documents, for example in Despuig, Cristòfol. *Col·loquis de la insigne ciutat de Tortosa*. Edited by Eulàlia Durán. Barcelona: Curial, 1981. 1557 (1st Edition).
- 8 Personal recollections gathered in 1934 by Joan Moreira in *Del folklore tortosí: costums, ballets, pregàries, parèmies, jocs i cançons del camp i de la ciutat de Tortosa*. Tortosa: Cooperativa Gràfica Dertosense, 1979 (2nd edition).
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- 10 Archivo General Militar de Madrid. Servicio Histórico Militar. Ejército de Tierra. Instituto de Historia y Cultura Militar. SH. T-18/8.
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- 12 Josep Oliver, farmer. Oral memory recorded by the author in Sant Jaume d'Enveja. Audio library of the Museu de les Terres de l'Ebre, 2005.
- 13 Miralles, Monsignor Fernando, *op. cit.* and Ayet, Monsignor Vicent. "María Esteve Montia, abuela centenaria" in *Delta. La Veu del Poble*. Sant Jaume d'Enveja: Ajuntament de Sant Jaume d'Enveja, 1983.
- 14 Salvadó Arrufat, Joan. *De la falç a la recol·lectora. Vida i cultiu tradicional al delta de l'Ebre*. Amposta: Ajuntament d'Amposta, 1991.
- 15 Juan Arbó, Sebastià. *Terres de l'Ebre*. Barcelona: Catalònia, 1932.
- 16 Oral memory of Joan Franch, farmer and shepherd from Deltebre, recorded by Ramon Martí Comes in *El Delta de l'Ebre*. Barcelona: Edicions de Nou Art Thor, 1989.
- 17 Montesó Gallego, Ramon. *Recuperació d'una barraca, habitatge dels avantpassats del delta de l'Ebre*. Tortosa: College of Architects and Technical Architects of the Terres de l'Ebre, 2004.