



Xeremies de Sóller at Piping Live! 2013

# The xeremies in Mallorca: an introduction

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**T**HE latest bagpipe classification, established by Dr Jean Pierre Van Hees in 2010, describes the xeremies as a western European bagpipe: the melodic pipe has a conical bore and uses a double reed.

The xeremies were traditionally made out of a one year-old goat skin. The rear end was tied and the neck and the two front legs were used for the pipes. The mouthpiece (bufador) was attached to the left fore-leg, the melodic pipe (grall) to the right fore-leg and the drones (bor-dons) were attached to the neck. The xeremies boast three drones which are attached to a common stock (braguer), but until the 1970s only

the larger drone was bored. In the 1970s bag-pipe maker Joan Morey from San Joan opened the two smaller drones. Josep Rotger, one of the most established pipers of the island and leaders of the revival in the 1970s and 1980s, thought that these two smaller drones would have been in use in earlier times. Indeed, the two muted drones were of unequal lengths so why keep this

feature if they were purely decorative? Rotger thought that initially the drones may have been bored but that this practice could have been abandoned over the years due to a loss of craftsmanship. The design, however, seemed to have been passed down over the years. Today the xeremies are played with three drones and a melodic pipe.

The xeremies are played in C#. This pitch was decided on in the late 1970s by Joan Morey after having measured many melodic pipes from different pipers. Two of the drones are in C# (one and two octaves below the tonic of the melodic pipe). The third drone is at the fifth, G#.

The xeremies are traditionally played in a colla. The colla is the inseparable unit of a bagpipe player (a xeremier) with a flabiol and tambor player. The flabiol is similar to a short recorder played with the left hand, and the tambor is a short drum slung over the left hand and hit with a drumstick by the right hand. The colla is such a strong duo that the xeremies are

seldom heard alone. Even in the pipe bands that appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, the xeremies are always played alongside the flabiol and drums. The association of both instruments is so strong that when the word xeremies (pipers) is mentioned, it can mean either the xeremies player or the flabiol and drum player, or both at the same time.

## Early history

THE colla is thought to be one of the oldest musical formations in Mallorca. The bagpipes and the flabiol and tambor are often in close vicinity, reinforcing the theory that they were

traditionally played together. The earliest bag-pipe iconography on the island is located on the southern portal of Palma's cathedral (Portal del Mirador) as well as on the main altarpiece (retaule major). Both designs are attributed to the local stone mason Joan Morey (?-1394). Joan Morey was a local artisan so it is probable his inspiration came from instruments in use on the island at the time. Although the bagpipes are now viewed as a rural instrument, in the 14th century the bagpipes belonged to the musical environment of the royal court. King Pedro of Aragon, who ended the short life of the Kingdom of Mallorca in 1343, used the





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Angel xeremier, Portal del Mirador, Palma Cathedral

Xeremier, Betlem figurine from the taller del mestre de les Verges Rosses, 18th century. Museu del Santuari de Lluç, Mallorca



services of Joan de Mascum, bagpipe player of the fallen King James III of Mallorca. Despite the probable early existence of the colla, the medieval bagpipes seem to have no connection to the modern day xeremies. Iconography found locally in the 14th and 15th century shows an instrument with no drones and a smaller bag, a common medieval design.

### 18th and 19th century

VERY little information is to be found about the bagpipes in Mallorca between the 15th and the 18th century. The first sign of an instrument approaching modern day aesthetics appeared in the 18th century through earthen miniatures of shepherds used in nativities (Betlems). Many of these came from a local workshop called taller del mestre de les Verges Rosses in Manacor, a town in the north east of the island. As you can see in the illustration, the shepherd's xeremies have the same shape and design as modern day instruments although one drone seems to have been lost over time.

In the 19th century, the xeremies slowly emerged from their anonymity and became more visible in historical documents. They began to be mentioned in written testimonies, often by travellers passing through the island such as Grasset de Saint Sauveur and the Catalan writer Joan Cortada. The instrument was not always pictured in a good light. Cortada, who travelled to Majorca in the summer of 1845, described the sound of the bagpipes and drums during a village festivity in Alaró as "music that truly drills the ears. (...) Two chirimías and two tamboriles were playing, but in differ-

ent tones and with different beats, in a way that this noise was unbearable." Not long after, local chronicles also started describing celebrations where the bagpipes were played. More positive comments can be read in these archives, such as this excerpt from 1 August 1860:

Maybe it seems strange, but it is obvious that the sound of the chirimías, pífono and tamboril, that for many will be unpleasant y monotonous, is to us preferable to many concerts that are carried out elsewhere for they inspire a purer and more tranquil pleasure ... than other corridas, other dances and other amusements and divertissements which are usual in other places.

The first detailed description of the xeremies is in the Encyclopedia compiled by the Archduke Ludwig Salvatore between 1870 and 1891. The xeremies are described as a rural instrument well-loved by peasants and accompanied by drums and castanets.

### A shepherd's instrument

TESTIMONIES from rural musicians go back to the early 20th century. Most xeremies and flabiol players were shepherds who started learning as children. They would generally follow their father's and grandfather's footsteps and would go to work for a senyor (a landowner) in his possessió (his domain). Once accepted as an apprentice, the child would be given a flabiol, a whistle or a bagpipe. At night, he would then be sent into the fields to keep the herd. In the daytime the flock would be kept in a shed to protect the animals from the heat. The shepherds were expected stay awake all night, playing their instrument.



Xeremiers de Sa Calatrava leading the people in the annual Cossies celebrations in Montuàri, Mallorca, 24 August 2012

Photos: Casandre Balloso-Barufin

Joan Pubil, a xeremier from Ses Salines born in 1912, confirmed that this was the norm: "I was a shepherd and I went with the sheep and I would take the xeremies and play all night long". The shepherds did not have to be master players, but they had to play so the landowner would know if they were awake or sleeping. If the instrument could not be heard from the house the senyor would go on a round to check if everything was in order. Often the instruments did not belong to the shepherd and would be kept at the possessió, the landowner's house.

Alongside this functional use of the xeremies and the flabiol, the xeremies were called upon to animate dances and accompany festivities.

The colla was central to any village celebration, providing musical accompaniment to different activities: the religious processions, the ritual dancing in the village or the accompaniment of local officials. They also set the pace for the village races, led the collection of the prizes from the shops the previous day and, of course, accompanied the dancing that would go on for hours. Xeremies were often required to stay overnight as festivities would go on for several days. Transport, even owning a bicycle, was a luxury not many could afford.

When tourism became Mallorca's main industry in the 1950s and 1960s, several collas expanded their business and started playing in hotels and restaurants. Some xeremies such as the Llargos from Sencelles and the Camps from Son Roca started playing full time, leaving their land and flocks to be tended by the rest of the family. Tomeu Camps, son and nephew of the Camps colla, told me that they would play every day, three times a day at different hotels and restaurants all over the island, generating more income with their music than with their flock.

### Revival

IN the 1970s, about eight collas were active all around the island. Most were old men who had no successors. The shepherding business was disappearing fast, giving way to tourism and urban jobs. Young people turned to a new way of life and were not interested in old-fashioned rural customs. Nor were they particularly encouraged to take up the instrument as Tomeu Camps witnessed:

"There was no interest for me to play this

instrument as my father and my uncle were already a colla. I took up the llaüt and the bandurria. When I was in my teens, my father gave me a set of xeremies but in D [the common key is C#] so I could not play with them. Another xeremier was undesirable competition. I only took it up in 1978 when my father died and my uncle needed someone to play with and drive him around the island to play at the different venues and festivities."

In the early 1970s, Antoni Artigues, a university student in Palma, decided to act on his desire to learn the xeremies. The future professor in Catalan studies marked the beginning of a new era. A few years later two young friends from Palma and Calvià became interested in the instrument and started visiting elderly xeremies to buy instruments, listen to stories and learn tunes. They became a colla and called themselves the xeremies de Sa Calatrava, a poor district of Palma which became a hub of frenetic creativity in the aftermath of Franco's regime. Little by little, Pep Toni Rubio and Pep Rotger took over the gig market and started living from the art of the xeremies.

These young xeremies along with another new colla, the xeremies d'es Pla, became the official musicians of the Escola de Música i Danses de Palma, a prominent folkloric dancing school in Mallorca. They soon decided to emancipate themselves from the school and created a new band using original arrangements. They modernised the repertoire in a way that had never been heard before, using drum-kits and electric instruments. Two of the groups founded in the 1980s were Música Nostra and Ximbomba Atomica. They became extremely popular and greatly influenced the renewal of interest in Mallorcan traditional music. Their biggest achievement, however, was to encourage people to dance to their music in public, disregarding the carefully planned choreographed performances which had become the norm during the regime years.

### A bagpipe boom

THE 1990s were a real boom time for the xeremies. Villages opened xeremies classes and more and more people decided to learn the instrument. The sharp increase of interest all around Mallorca led to regular bagpipe events and to the creation of "bandas" such as the Xeremies de Sóller in 2000, a regular guest at Piping Live. This could not have existed 30 years ago due to the impossibility of finding

two instruments with the same tuning. Progress and research in instrument making enabled the manufacture of xeremies with a tempered scale and stable tuning.

Since the boom, a new generation of young xeremies players has emerged. These are musicians who learned not from the old xeremies but from the actors of the revival. Many have profited from accessible tuition at the Escola de Música i de Danses de Palma and at the Conservatori Superior de Palma. Some of these younger musicians started playing in collas. In recent years, however, there has been a sharp decline of the traditional duet. They are now hardly demanded in village festivities and are often replaced by the local bagpipe group. The new generation has therefore invested its energy in the creation of new bands, mixing the traditional instruments with modern sounds and influences from around the world.

There are now a few hundred xeremies in Mallorca. Thanks to the unrelenting work of a handful of individuals, the rural instrument has become popular. Some even say that it will be the victim of its own success. Only time can tell...

For musical examples of the xeremies, listen to episode 7 of Bagpipes Galore, a radio podcast dedicated to bagpipes around the world: [www.soasradio.org/bagpipes-galore](http://www.soasradio.org/bagpipes-galore) ●

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