

## A brief History of Alcalá de Henares

<http://www.alcalanow.com/brief-history-alcala/#more-1479>

In this post we talk about the history of Alcalá de Henares, we tell you briefly the most important facts that you should know about our city. Aren't you curious of its origins and how it developed?

[The historical importance of the city of Alcalá de Henares](#) was born possibly as a result of its geographical location. Alcalá is set in the Valley of the River Henares, a fertile land where people had to pass through in order to travel from the South Plateau to the Valley of the River Ebro.

## First settlements in Alcalá de Henares

Even though we don't know precisely the origin of the first human settlements in Alcalá, archaeological remains tell us the exact locations of the Neolithic population and that of the Bronze Age. They were located in the south hills of the present-day town.

In one of these hills (San Juan del Viso) we can find signs of what could have been a Celtiberian city called **Iplacea**. This Celtiberian settlement was probably the embryo of a future Roman city.

Remains belonging to Roman times suggest that a Roman urban center had been placed here. Its location had defensive functions: it was easily accessible from one side and quite rugged to the North. Besides, it had control of the country plain around it. Different situations of Alcalá in the past

## History of Alcalá during Roman Times

Alcalá was already an important city which even appeared on Roman road maps and Administrative Areas of the Iberian Peninsula.

**Complutum**, as Alcalá was called in this time, is a name that it's believed that it came from 'compluvium', a latin word which means 'place where water converge' since there are many streams meeting in here: Camarmilla and Torote merge with River Henares.

During the First Century BC, the population from the hills moved to the valley where it was possible to develop a growing city and was closer to the Roman road that connected Caesaraugusta (Zaragoza) with Emerita Augusta (Mérida).

Plenty of archaeological remains prove this fact: including the city itself and plenty of houses and discoveries that have been found over the years. '**Casa Hippolytus**' is nowadays a museum where you can see some Roman remains and close to it there is the archeological site where the **forum of Complutum** used to be. You can [visit both of them](#).

Los Santos Niños' Cathedral – Engraving painting of Francisco Javier Parcerisa (1803-1875)

In spite of this, the most influential heritage from Roman times is **the martyrdom of Justo and Pastor, also known as 'Los Santos Niños'** (the Holy Children). They were two schoolboys who were killed for their faith during the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Diocletian.

These children mean a lot to the city of Alcalá. During the Visigothic times, when the relics of Justo and Pastor were discovered, the Archbishop of Toledo, Asturio Azulino Serrano, commanded that a chapel be built here.

This chapel would be the center of the new settlement (neo-Complutum) where the archbishop decided to have a residence (what nowadays is the Palacio Arzobispal).

## History of Alcalá during Muslim era

Alcalá didn't change its location during Muslim times, even though a small military fort, known as **Qal'at Abd al-Sālam**, was built during the ninth century in the outskirts, near the hill Ecce Homo. To this location came some inhabitants seeking mainly protection.

In front of the chapel Nuestra Señora del Val some vestiges of the tower and traces of human settlement can be seen nowadays.

## History of Alcalá in the Middle Age

The archbishop of Toledo conquered **Alkal'a Nahar** in 1118. The archbishopric of Toledo would control Alcalá and its land beginning in 1126, when the King Alfonso VII allowed it. The **intervention of archbishops of Toledo** in Alcalá was clearly visible for the population:

- Gonzalo Petrez created a General Studies School in 1223
- Gil de Albornoz developed a urban planning of Alcalá
- Pedro Tenorio enlarged and reconstructed the archbishop residence, remade the bridge over the river Henares and built the Chapel of el Val
- Alonso Carrillo expanded the area of the villa

A long list of actions took place that made Alcalá well-known and one of the most important towns of the Kingdom of Castile.

Alcalá de Henares in 1565 – Painting of Anton van der Wyngaerde (1525 – 1572)

## History of Alcala from the sixteenth to eighteenth century

In 1497, Cardinal Cisneros was promoted to Archbishop of Toledo. He fostered the construction of the Cathedral of Santos Niños, as well as several monasteries in the city and the **Complutense University**, his main project.

College of San Ildefonso. Source: *Fotografía científica UAH*.

[The University Complutense meant a lot to Alcalá](#). Cisneros designed not only an University but an organized Renaissance city. The College of San Ildefonso was the nucleus of a urban development along the streets Colegios and Libreros, where another 12 schools and a hospital for students were built, too.

It led to religious orders setting in this town that opened schools and convents for members of their institutions, and it also led to lots of personalities being in Alcalá, as students or teachers, for instance [Miguel de Cervantes](#).

During the age of Enlightenment, [Alcalá de Henares was granted the title of ciudad in 1687](#), and Puerta de Madrid was built demolishing the existing one.

The University was gradually losing its functional character, and in 1767 the Jesuits were expelled, so that the university was forced to make a reform.

Alcalá in 1667 – Watercolor of Pier María Baldi (Laurentian Library in Florence)

## History of Alcala from the nineteenth century to the present

The Nineteenth century is a time of disasters. There was the Peninsular War (1808-1814), Ecclesiastical Confiscations and the **Complutense University moved to Madrid** because a lack of students. Every building ever belonging to the university changed its activity, serving as barracks or other military uses.

Puerta de Madrid. Source: *Fotografía científica UAH*.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was a disaster for cultural artistic goods and treasures of Alcalá. These disastrous consequences lasted until the 70s, when the industrialization of Spain and Alcalá started. It brought money to the inhabitants of Alcalá, and it brought back social life and urban development.

Luckily a new law was made just in time to protect the most important urban heritages of Alcalá (but not all), and so the city center wasn't demolish to build new ugly housing.

The XXth century brings a new growing touristic interest in Alcalá. It has brought back the University (even though it is not the University Complutense anymore but the **University of Alcalá**) and the old confiscated buildings have been reoccupied and restored.

The college environment that was lost for a long time but that has always been the spirit of Alcalá has been reemerging.

**Do you want to learn more things about Alcala de Henares? In [this link](#) we have more post about the History of Alcala.**