

The last tile makers

Although none of the last for tile makers of Laroya are still alive, we have compiled the necessary information so that their legacy is not lost, and so that we can get closer to knowing how Laroya tile factory worked. Although we can assume that its construction was almost certainly linked with the building of the church, its trace in sources is not easy to follow, and we therefore only have access to the most recent history of the kiln, attested by grandfather Manuel through his wife, children and grandchildren. He was one of the last four tile makers of Laroya, and therefore a primary source of information who conveyed essential information and characteristics for understanding how tile production worked in Laroya.

With Manuel Medina we go back to the 1950s, when four residents of the town joined forces to restart the old tile factory in order to obtain new tiles instead of buying them in neighbouring towns such as Olula del Río and Macael. In that period there was great need and few options for earning a living, as there were practically only two ways: working in the marble quarries (around 12 pesetas per day) or as a day labourer in the fields. Manuel Medina said that the idea of recovering this trade in our town arose to meet a need of the inhabitants of Laroya themselves. Municipalities tended to be self-sufficient with their own resources, causing this need for tiles and bricks, even more so after periods of war or demographic boom, sufficient reasons to justify the start-up of this traditional industry. The availability of tiles and bricks was a constant concern, either due to transport difficulties or lack of necessary investment. Arising from this need was the company that for two summers put the old, forgotten kiln on the other side of the river into operation.

This company was made up of the young Manuel Medina Sánchez and his friend Antonio, nicknamed “Galera”, teenagers of 16 or 17 years old who brought enthusiasm and strength to the greater experience of Clemente Martínez, a builder by profession, and Félix Franco Garrido, known by everyone as “El Mojaio”, both around thirty years old during this activity. The idea was a success, as they sold the whole production from the two summers that they were manufacturing tiles. The partners divided the work based on their skills and neighbours helped when there was a lot of work, as they had to make the most of the summer months. However, the whole path was not easy, as tiles had not been made in Laroya for so long that the tradition had been lost, and the necessary knowledge had to be reacquired to be successful.

To make up for the lack of experience, Manuel had to go down to the town of Tíjola, where there was a tile factory operating, with the aim of acquiring the necessary knowledge to replicate the production process on the banks of the Laroya river. He said that he replicated the moulds (argadilla and galápago) of the artisan from Tíjola to make identical tiles. However, there was an aspect that he could not copy, which was that the clays of Tíjola and Laroya are very different, red clays being predominant in the mountain town, and white clays in the valley town. To optimise the product, he was carrying out tests, and as his notes show, the chosen mixture was one part coloured earth to two parts white earth.

With all the preparations ready, production began, and although the first batch did not turn out well, as his wife Antonia Ujaldón and son Guillermo Medina state, they took advantage

of the remains of that resulting mass or block. This first “failure” was probably due to reaching a higher temperature than it should have in a short period of time, melting the first rows of tiles, paying heed to the popular saying “it’s better to pay for crooked ones than raw ones”, as the latter were unusable. Some examples can still be seen in the farmhouses of Reúl Alto. Even so, production continued and successful batches followed one after another during those two summers. From the town, you could see how the fire escaped from the top of the kiln. As the production was perfected, each partner specialised in a job, and while Manuel was in charge of filling the moulds and placing them to dry, Félix was the specialist in kneading the clay with his feet, to the point of having no hair on his legs below the knee. Likewise, it is detailed that the daily production was between 600 and 700 tiles and that the ideal period for their production was the summer between the festival of San Juan (24th of June) and the Virgin del Rosario (7th of October), avoiding the rain. The capacity of the full kiln was around 7,000 pieces, and production was divided equally, and each partner decided what to do with their share: to save them for private use or sell them. Manuel said that he sold practically all of his tiles to the farmhouses of the Arroyo del Baile, Emilio and Juan Parra bought around 200 units each, and uncle Rubira around 500 tiles. Transport was complicated, as it was carried out with donkeys and mules, which were properly harnessed with tools such as yokes and stones, harnesses which along with the ability to tie knots, managed to secure the load. This could reach up to 100-120kg per donkey, exceeding one hundred tiles on each trip.

Finally, after those two summers, each partner continued on their own path, and it may be that they had to stop making tiles, as the marked to which they had access was very restricted.

This is the story of the last tiles made by hand by people in Laroya, because after those batches, this tile factory fell into disuse and practically no one talked about it. For generations, children from Laroya have passed by these walls, have looked into the mouth of the kiln and have wondered what the operation of the Laroya tile factory must have been like, which we have tried to show at this interpretation centre.
