

THE LIGHTHOUSE OF LA CORUÑA “THE TOWER OF HERCULES” GALICIA, SPAIN



By Annamaria “Lilla” Mariotti

Lighthouses are numerous along the coasts of the entire world, even if it is said today that their utility is no longer needed because of the electronic devices installed on modern vessels. Anyway, these lighthouses have helped ships and sailors for centuries to reach home safely, avoiding the dangers of hardly visible rocks and shoals.

Each lighthouse has its own story, but there is one in particular, the Tower of Hercules at La Coruña in the region of Galicia on the northwestern coast of Spain, which owes its name to one of the most intriguing stories ever told.

In the mythological world, the ways of gods and humans often crossed. Gods lived on Mount Olympus in Greece, and their king and queen were Zeus and his wife Hera, but from time to time some gods used to come down among the common people to interfere with their lives.

Zeus was kind of a playboy and loved beautiful women, so, to avoid being discovered by his wife, he used various disguises. Once he was a Taurus to love Europa, another time a Cygnus, to make love to Leda, and so on. In this way he fathered a lot of children and, among them, Hercules was born to Alcmena. He was a god's son and the strongest man who ever lived. This was clear when, as a newborn baby, he strangled two big snakes that the jealous Hera had put in his cradle.

As a man Hercules was called upon many times to perform important missions, and one of them was to kill Gerion, king of Spain, because of his cruelty. Gerion was a monster, a man with three bodies and three heads and no soul, and he owned a herd of bulls that he fed with the bodies of young virgin girls

and boys offered by its citizens. The bulls were guarded by another monster: a two-headed dog named Orto.

Gerion, hearing that Hercules was coming for him, fled to hide in Galicia. But Hercules found him, and they fought for three days and three nights. At the end Hercules cut off the terrible heads and killed Gerion and, after him, the monster dog. In the place where the fight took place and where the monster was buried, Hercules erected a column that became a lighthouse. He called the nearby people to build a new town. Among the people, there was a nice girl, called Crunna. Hercules married her and in her honor gave the new town the name of La Coruña.

There is another legend connected with the lighthouse of La Coruña, less fantastic and based on the *Book of Invasions*, an Irish collection of histories of the 12th century.

It is said that the Celtic chief Lord Breogan was ruling the northwestern Spanish region of Galicia where he founded the town of Brigantium. He erected a tall tower, called The Breogan Tower, which was both an ob-



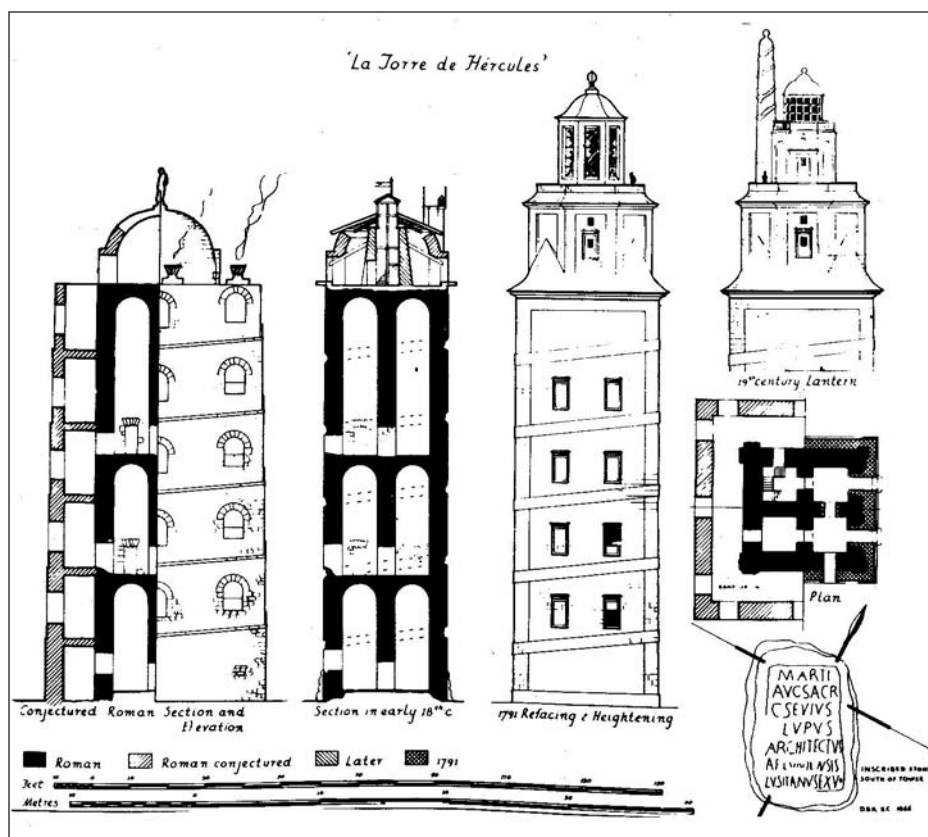
The La Coruña Lighthouse at sunset. Wikipedia photo.

servation spot and his manor. Lord Ith, the only son of Breogan, looking from the top of the tower saw on the horizon an unknown land, which really was Ireland, and asked his father for permission to make an expedition to explore it. His father gave his consent, but this was fatal, as Ith never returned. Lord Breogan ordered that a fire be lighted on the top of the tower so that his son could find his way home. One day a ship arrived. The Irish

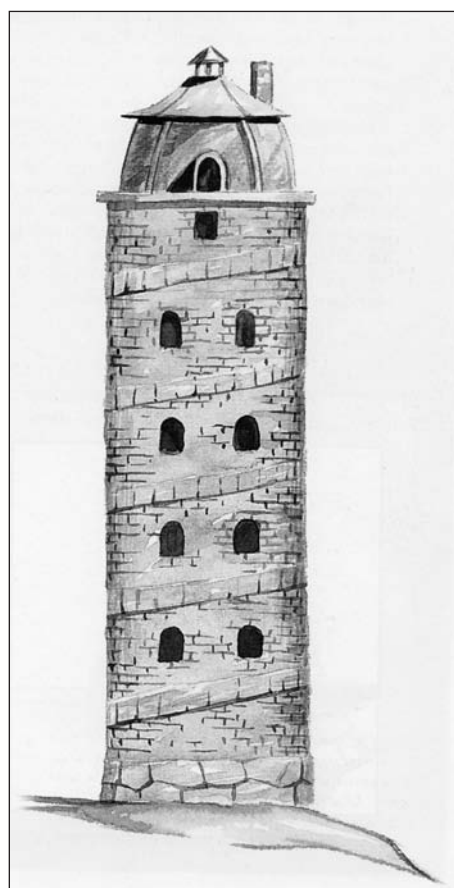
had killed Ith, but, knowing who he was and as a sign of respect, they returned his body to the father. Lord Breogan was furious, both with sorrow and desire for revenge, so he took an army to Ireland, defeated the Irish, and became king of Ireland.

These are nothing more than legends, very different, but both connected with the lighthouse. They are still told today in that region as folk tales for the visitors, but the true story of this lighthouse is very different.

The lighthouse of La Coruña is the oldest in the world still working. The original tower was built in the second century A.D. during the reign of the roman Emperor Trajan by the architect Caius Sevius Lupus, a man from Aeminium in Lusitania, a town located near Coimbra in what we today know as Portugal. The tower was dedicated to the god of war, Mars, and was used both as a lighthouse and a watch tower to protect the nearby port of Brigantium. It is still impressive to think that a modern electric lighting system works on top of stones placed by the Romans. The lighthouse is the symbol of the town itself, and it is a charming site to see.



Ancient schematic of the lighthouse. Note the Latin inscription at bottom right.



The Roman tower. From *Fari del Mondo*.

At the base of the lighthouse has been found a carved stone with the following Latin inscription:

MARTI
AUG. SACR.
C. SEVIVS
LUPUS
ARCHITECTUS
AEMINIENSIS
LUSITANUS EX.VO

The translation means: "Dedicated to Mars. Caius Sevius Lupus, Architect from Aeminium, in Lusitania, as accomplishment of a vow."

The first tower was built with a square base, 18 meters on each side, and was 36 meters high. There were three levels, with four rooms on each floor. On the top a round pinnacle 4 meters high was surrounded by containers where the fires were lighted. A spiral ramp was erected outside the building, with a door at each floor. This ramp was used to carry wood to the top to keep the fire burning.

This lighthouse was involved in many troubles and events through the centuries. In a book written by the historian Paulus Oro-

sius between 415 and 417, this tower is for the first time called *faro* (Spanish for lighthouse). Later, in 572, the surrounding land, a donation of the Iria Bishopric, was called *Faro* and in 830 the entire region took the name of Lighthouse-Shire.

When the entire coastal population was forced to escape the Norman invasion starting from 846, the new village they built on the hills was called *Burgo de Faro* (Lighthouse Village). In 870 Saint Sebastian, in his chronicles, tells that the Normans reached a town known as *Faro de Brigantium* (Brigantium Lighthouse). From 915 Brigantium was owned by the Santiago of Compostela Archbishopric, while the surrounding lands, still known as *Faro*, were owned by different monasteries and churches, until, in 991, King Bermudo II allotted the Lighthouse-Shire to the church of Santiago.

During the Middle Ages, King Alfonso V confirmed the donation of the county to the church, with the exception of the tower. This roused the noblemen of the county, who started to fight among themselves for the property of the tower, which was in a strategic position near the sea to be used as a stronghold. The light again became a crown



The interior of the tower. Photo from *The World's Greatest Lighthouses* by Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti.

property, and after that it was once more owned by the Archbishopric of Santiago de Compostela. All these changes led to the decline of the tower from too many owners and lack of maintenance.

At the end of the 12th century, the name of Brigantium was changed to La Coruña (from the Latin *ad columnam*, meaning "near the column"), which, in the following century, became the main town of the entire region. But the tower was still deteriorating; the outside ramp was destroyed and many stones of the lighthouse were used to build a new fortress inside the town. During the 16th century the tower again became property of the town, which wanted to restore it as a lighthouse. But the lack of outside stairs to reach the upper floors made the building unusable, and its ruin increased. In 1589, during the English siege, the tower was considered nothing more than "a bird's nest."

In 1682 work was started to rebuild the

tower. For the reconstruction work, it was necessary to reach the top. Passages were created in each room's ceilings and an inside staircase was eventually built. New lanterns were located inside two small towers on the north side of the lighthouse top.

The heavy expenses for the restoration, putting the lighthouse back into service, and maintaining it were paid for 10 years by the Consuls of England, Holland, and Flanders, who were interested in the security of commercial navigation among their countries. After that period, this responsibility was taken over by the towns' authorities. But once again the lighthouse was neglected, and it suffered new decay: both the inside staircase and one of the small towers collapsed.

In 1785 the lighthouse was handed over to the Royal Maritime Consulate of Galicia. It was decided to reconstruct the tower, and the commission was entrusted to an eclectic personage, Eustaquio Giannini, a naval officer and engineer.

The ancient tower was covered with 60 centimeters of thick granite stones. On the top was placed an octagonal vault. A staircase was built inside. While general renovation work kept the original shape of the Roman construction, a complex stone turret was added. By 1791 the lighthouse was working again, and the lantern was fueled with olive oil. The light was enhanced by seven reflectors and the eclipse was reached using iron plates moved by a clockwork system. At this time the lighthouse had reached the same appearance that we can see today.

Since then new and more modern light-

ing systems have been installed. In 1847 the optic apparatus consisted of a rotating light with 11 big reflectors, 11 small ones, and 12 convex lenses, still fueled with olive oil. In 1883 the fuel was paraffin wax; in 1904 it was petroleum vapor. In 1921 electricity reached the lighthouse, where a Fresnel lens was installed and lighted by an electric bulb. The ancient clockwork equipment was replaced by a new electric rotating system, even though the old one is still kept in the lighthouse as a memory of the past.

To illustrate the various transformations the structure has undergone over the centuries, bronze bas-reliefs were placed over the two entrance doors.

Between 1849 and 1854, the lighthouse hosted a school for prospective lighthouse keepers; many young men attended it to learn the trade. In 1956 on the southwest side of the tower a dwelling was built for the keepers and their families. In 1974 a foghorn was installed and in 1977 a radio beacon.

Today the Tower of Hercules is the symbol of the town of La Coruña, and the tower and town are usually identified with each other. The beacon has been shown for centuries on coins and various coat of arms of the town. Through these images, it is possible to see the changes that the tower has undergone during the years.

Today the lighthouse is fully working: its characteristic is four flashes of white light every 20 seconds that can be seen for 23 miles.

The Tower of Hercules is located at latitude 43° 23' 2" north, longitude 8° 24' 3" west. It is 49 meters (159 feet) high and the focal plane is 106 meters (348 feet) above sea level. Until 2001 there was also a keeper.

The tower is open to the public and can be climbed to the top, with the exception of the lantern room which is closed to visitors. While climbing the 234 steps, it is possible to see the remains of the ancient Roman construction, as well as the signs of all the various renovations made during the following centuries. At the base of the tower, there is a small structure erected to protect the original Latin inscription left by the Roman architect. The inscription can still be read.

Between history and legend develops the ups and downs and the adventures of this lighthouse whose history is crossed with that of the mythic hero Hercules and the Celtic Lord Breogan. It was built by the Romans to protect a main harbor necessary for their



An aerial view of the La Coruña Lighthouse. Photo from *Lighthouses of Europe* by Daniel Charles.



trades, a lighthouse that met moments of prosperity and moments of severe decay. In spite of all this, strong as a rock, the lighthouse of La Coruña went through the centuries, suffered heavy storms, saw the passing of empires and emperors, and met with many changes, but it is still there, surrounded by the Atlantic ocean, to testify to the long-lasting history of these shining monuments that run the risk of being lost once more to man's carelessness.

Everything should be done to preserve these monuments. While most of them are very ancient and can tell us many stories if only we would listen, they must be preserved, most importantly, so future generations can enjoy them.

Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti is the author of The World's Greatest Lighthouses, published by White Star, 2005. She can be reached at lilla.mariotti@alice.it



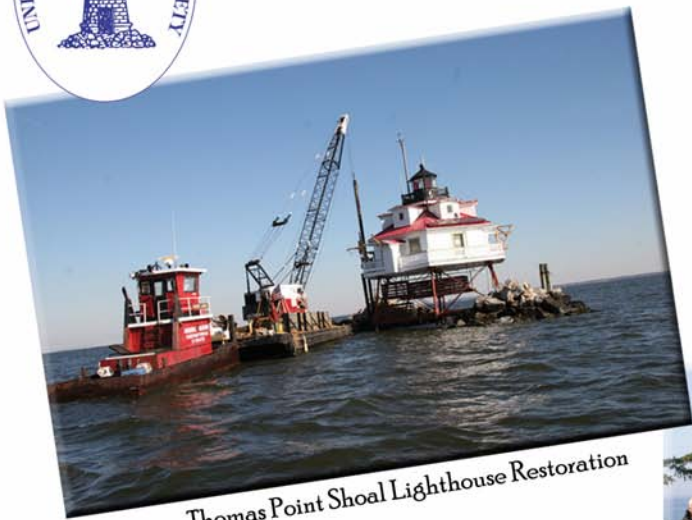
Above: Close-up of the turret of the lighthouse. From *Lighthouses of Europe* by Daniel Charles.

Right: The La Coruña Lighthouse today. From *The World's Greatest Lighthouses* by Annamaria "Lilla" Mariotti.



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