

POWER, MONARCHY AND NOBILITY ON THE FRONTIERS OF THE CROWN OF ARAGON. THE DISPUTE BETWEEN JAMES I AND BLASCO DE ALAGÓN FOR THE TOWN OF MORELLA (1231-1239)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the conflict that arose between King James I and the noble Blasco de Alagón for the possession of the town of Morella, on the frontier of the Crown of Aragon. Our intention is to analyse this episode to know the discourses, practices and exercise of the power of the monarchy and the nobility in the middle decades of the thirteenth century. To do so, attention is focussed on the chronicle of James I and the documents that were produced during the dispute. However, we also have to consider the silences in the respective sources, as these are highly significant for understanding the actions of the two protagonists and their concept of power.

KEYWORDS

Power, Monarchy, Nobility, Frontier, War.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Potestas, Monarchia, Nobilitas, Limes, Bellum.

1. Introduction¹

The figure of King James I has drawn the interest of historians for many decades. The monarch played a vital role in the history of the Crown of Aragon and, due to that, he has been studied from different perspectives that delve into a wide range of aspects of his personal life and reign.² Of all his deeds, one that has received greater attention has been the conquest and creation of the Kingdom of Valencia in the mid thirteenth century. The occupation of the Sharq Al-Andalus gave him a halo of a warrior king, a conqueror, that has lasted through the centuries and is a vital element in the definition of his figure.³ In fact, this deed was one of the main achievements of his reign, because it meant a considerable increase in the area of the Crown of Aragon and because the monarch introduced a series of precepts into the construction of the new kingdom that were in the vanguard of the political theories of his time. As is logical, many steps still remained to be taken, but his action set the bases of the state that was built during the Late Middle Ages.

As a result, medievalists have analysed the monarch's acts to articulate the new political entity widely. Thus, the process of defining the country's frontiers, the division of land, the building of the new society and establishment of its own normative, adapted to the directives of the renewed Roman law, have played leading roles in studies that have also concerned themselves with the military deeds. Historians have also studied the campaigns to occupy the Valencian lands, very specially the conquest of the city itself in 1238 and the successive Andalusian revolts that lasted until the last days of James I's life.⁴ To an extent, it is logical that most attention has been paid to these events because the city would become the capital of the new kingdom and the later wars with the Muslims served to give the

1. Used abbreviations: ACA, Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó; ACT, Arxiu de la Catedral de Tortosa; AHN, Archivo Histórico Nacional.

2. The bibliography about this monarch is a very extensive and it is impossible to mention a significant part of this in a study of these characteristics. However, worth mentioning are the works in *I Congrés d'Història de la Corona d'Aragó dedicat al rey en Jaume I i la seva època*. Barcelona: Stampa d'en F. Altés, 1909, the first large contribution about the figure of the king himself and the Crown of Aragon in his times. A century later, commemorating the eighth centenary of his birth, there was a proliferation of congresses and publications that adapted many aspects studied in the past to the new historiographical tendencies and added new ones. Notable among these contributions is Colón, Germà; Martínez Romero, Tomàs, eds. *El rei Jaume I: fets, actes i paraules*. Castelló de la Plana-Barcelona: Fundació Germà Colón Doménech-Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2008; Ferrer, Maria Teresa, ed. *Jaume I: commemoració del VIII centenari del naixement de Jaume I*. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2011; and Narbona, Rafael, ed. *Jaume I i el seu temps 800 anys després*. Valencia: Fundació Jaume II el Just, 2012.

3. This mythification even comes from the Late Medieval Age itself. Granell, Francesc. "De gloriosa recordació. La imatge mitificada de Jaume I a la València Baixmedieval". *Ars longa: cuadernos de arte*, 26 (2017): 51-66. This tendency is also seen in three recent works that analyse the monarch's life. Belenguier, Ernest. *Jaume I i el seu regnat*. Lleida: Pagès Editors, 2007; Cingolani, Stefano. *Jaume I: història i mite d'un rei*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2007; and Furió, Antoni. *El rei conqueridor. Jaume I: entre la història i la llegenda*. Alzira: Bromera, 2007.

4. An in-depth analysis in Torró, Josep. *El naixement d'una colònia. Dominació i resistència a la frontera valenciana (1238-1276)*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2006 (2nd edition).



country its definitive form. However, the early stages of the campaign of occupation are also of great relevance, precisely because they were not free of controversy.

The conquest of the territory that would later make up the Kingdom of Valencia began at the end of 1231 with the taking of the castle of Morella by Blasco de Alagón. This noble belonged to one of the most important aristocratic families in the Kingdom of Aragon from the twelfth century and one, in fact, whose members were always close to royalty. Without going any further, from a very early age, Blasco de Alagón accompanied Peter the Catholic and James I on their military expeditions and also participated in the workings of the Crown administration. However, his relations with James I passed through different phases of proximity and distance over the years. One of the main points of rupture came with the conquest of Morella.⁵

The fortress of Morella was a key point for control of the frontier, on the way between Aragon with La Plana de Castelló and, then, Valencia. From the mid-twelfth century, with Christians taking over Tortosa, Lleida and Alcañiz, Morella had become the main bulwark around which the defence of the northern flank of the Sharq Al-Andalus pivoted. Thus, the castle was the most important place in the frontier region, but Blasco de Alagón surrendered it without the king's consent and so provoked the latter's rage and rapid reaction. A clash then arose between the two and lasted until the noble's death in 1239. This confrontation went through different stages, during which the monarch put into practice the mechanisms he had in his reach to impose his will and, ultimately, incorporate Morella into the royal patrimony.

Given its symbolic character and, especially, because the surviving documents contribute more shadow than clarity when it comes to interpreting the events, this episode has filled dozens of pages in books and journals since the end of the nineteenth century.⁶ However, the resulting views are almost always partial, very often because those behind them did not have all the surviving documentation about the episode available. This has frequently led to a biased explanation of the confrontation between the king and the noble being given, and this has hindered the overall understanding of an incident that goes beyond the anecdote of the specific case given the importance it hides and the ideological load behind the actions of the leading characters involved. Thus, my intention is to analyse in detail all the aspects concerning this conflict to be able to offer a broad panorama that explains

5. The ancestry and biography of Blasco de Alagón, in Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón (ca. 1190-1239)*. Castelló de la Plana: Universitat Jaume I-Fundació Blasco de Alagón, 2008. More details about Alagón lineage, in Laliena, Carlos. "Violencia feudal en el desarrollo del estado aragonés. La guerra de Artal de Alagón (1293)", *El poder real en la Corona de Aragón (siglos XIV-XVI)*. XV Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón. Zaragoza: Gobierno de Aragón, 1996: V, 151-184.

6. Notable among the early studies is Pallarés, Matías. "Don Blasco de Alagón, señor de Morella", *I Congrès d'Història...*: I, 219-231. Later, the interpretations proliferated, to the point where given the length of the list it is not possible to include them all here. So, one should refer to Rojo, Vicent. *La construcció i la definició de la societat rural en el regne de València. Conflictes, mediacions de pau i arbitratges en les comarques dels Ports i el Maestrat (1232-1412)*. Castelló de la Plana: Universitat Jaume I (PhD Dissertation), 2015: I, 346-369, for a more detailed overview of the historiographic treatment of these events.



the actions of both the king and the noble and one that enables it to be placed in the political and ideological context of the time.

After decades of analysis, political history has undergone a profound renewal in recent years. In contrast with previously, attention is now focussed on the study of power, in other words, the structures and relations established among the different groups that made up the political society in a given territory.⁷ This complex and polyhedral social construction has been approached from different perspectives that show the ideology, discourses and mechanisms that the different estates put into practice to legitimise their position in the social hierarchy or to claim the pertinent changes.⁸ Power was effectively built through the conflicts that arose between the different classes that aimed to exercise it and, in this context, the struggle between the monarchy and the nobility became one of the threads in the consolidation of the European states during the Late Middle Ages.⁹

This process of defining and sharing of power was even more dynamic in the frontier regions, where territorial expansion offered unique opportunities to transform the existing balance of power and reorder the distribution of power between the ruling classes thanks to the rights derived from war and the conquest of territories. Thus, my proposal is in this line of interpretation and aims to scrutinise the concept of power held by the noble Blasco de Alagón and, very especially, King James I, in the middle decades of the thirteenth century. This permits the discourse, practice and exercise of this power to be known for a such crucial moment in the history of the Crown of Aragon as the beginning of the conquest of the Kingdom of Valencia, with the dynamism that it derived from the advance over the frontier with the Sharq Al-Andalus.

To carry out this task, my study combines information from the royal chronicle, the *Llibre dels fets*, and the surviving scriptures from the epoch, a series of donations, pacts and concords that illustrate the actions of the two protagonists and other

7. This renovation can be summarised in Bisson, Thomas N., ed. *Cultures of power. Lordship, Status and Process in Twelfth Century in Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995; Berkhofer, Robert F.; Cooper, Alan; Kostó, Adam J., eds. *The Experience of Power in Medieval Europe, 950-1350: essays in honor of Thomas N. Bisson*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005; and Gaille-Nikodimov, Marie, ed. *Le Gouvernement mixte: de l'idéal politique au monstre constitutionnel en Europe, XIIIe-XVIIe siècles*. Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne Jean-Monnet, 2005.

8. A good example of the diversity of approaches to power done lately can be found in the works in the monographic editions of Luis Corral, Fernando (coord.). "Poder e ideología en la edad media peninsular". *Studia historica. Historia medieval*, 29 (2011): 19-143; Ayala Martínez, Carlos de (coord.). "Cultura y poder en la edad media peninsular". *Studia historica. Historia medieval*, 33 (2015): 19-117; and also Echevarría Arsuaga, Ana; Jaspert, Nikolas (coords.). "El ejercicio del poder de las reinas ibéricas en la Edad Media". *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 46/1 (2016): 3-443.

9. For the Crown of Aragon, is still useful the historiographic balance drawn up by Péguignot, Stéphane. "Pouvoir royal et société dans la Couronne d'Aragone. Un essai de lecture historiographique (1990-2006)". *En la España Medieval*, 30 (2007): 381-432, which contains a collection of works on these affairs. In the case of Castile, there is the notable summary by González Mínguez, César. "Las luchas por el poder en la corona de Castilla: nobleza vs. monarquía (1252-1369)". *Clío & Crimen*, 6 (2009): 36-51.



secondary actors over the years.¹⁰ However, apart from everything contained in these scriptures, it is also necessary to attend to the silences in the sources, which can be as eloquent as the words they contain. All this is without forgetting the ceremonies of conciliation that occurred during the confrontation between the king and the noble. These served to illustrate the structure of power and the position of supremacy that the monarch aimed to occupy at the peak of the social structure of the political society of the time. However, before entering into the detailed analysis of all these questions, the scenario and the leading characters must be placed in context.

2. The precedents

After the conquests of Tortosa (1148), Lleida (1149) and Alcañiz (c. 1149), the frontier with the Muslims ran approximately along the River Ebro. In the following decades, the feudal powers also progressively occupied the lands to the south, as far as River La Sénia and mountains of Els Ports.¹¹ With the disarticulation of the *thughur* —plural of *thagr*, in other words, the districts that protected the frontiers of Al-Andalus—, the territories south of La Sénia became frontier lands, a new situation that had a series of immediate consequences.¹² The coastal region between La Sénia and La Plana de Castelló had belonged historically to the demarcation of Tortosa, while the inland area had remained in the district of Zaragoza. However, the conquest of the city by the Christians broke this traditional division: these territories were included in the province of Valencia and became the *thugur* that protected the city from the Christian invasions.¹³ In this scenario, Mawrila appeared.

The town the Christians called Morella was situated on a high point that constitutes a natural defensive point and, at least from the mid-twelfth century, was the capital of a political, administrative and military district that covered a good part of the area of the later district of Els Ports. It also acted as an economic and social centre for the region and, given all that, it became the bastion around which

10. The edition of the chronicle used here is Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits*, ed. Ferran Soldevila. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1982.

11. The process of occupation of southern Catalonia and Aragon, in Virgili, Antoni. *Ad detrimentum Yspanie. La conquesta de Turtusa i la formació de la societat feudal (1148-1200)*. València: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona-Universitat de València, 2001; Laliena, Carlos. *Sistema social, estructura agrària y organización del poder en el Bajo Aragón en la Edad Media (siglos XII-XV)*. Teruel: Instituto de Estudios Turolenses, 1987: 27-45; and Laliena, Carlos, coord. *Matarranya, gentes y paisajes en la Edad Media*. Valderrobres: Universidad de Zaragoza-Comarca del Matarraña, 2016.

12. Epalza, Mikel de. "L'ordenació del territori del País Valencià abans de la conquesta, segons Ibn-Al-Abbar (segle XIII)". *Sharq Al-Andalus*, 5 (1988): 41-67.

13. The organisation of the territory in the Andalusian epoch and its transformations over the centuries, in Negre, Joan; Suñé, Josep. "Territorio, fiscalidad y actividad militar en la formación de un espacio fronterizo. La consolidación de Tortosa como límite extremo del al-Andalus omeya". *Anuario de estudios medievales*, 49/2 (2019): 705-740.



the defence of the northern frontier of the Sharq Al-Andalus was organised in the decades prior to the conquest. In this context, the Christians soon cast their eyes over the fortress and the territory it dominated. In fact, Morella was at the centre of the projects of expansion from southern Aragon towards the Sharq Al-Andalus during the second half of the twelfth century and the first decade of the thirteenth. The siege of the castle and its district gradually tightened, but there were many difficulties to consolidate the colonisation of this strip of the frontier. Moreover, the death of Peter the Catholic in 1213 and the minority of age of James I halted the process of feudal expansion for a couple of decades.¹⁴

At that time, the noble Blasco de Alagón had already entered onto the political scene in the Crown of Aragon. In fact, in 1210, he took part in the campaign to conquer Castellfabib and Ademuz, with his father, Artal de Alagón, and Peter the Catholic. To reward Artal for his involvement, he was granted the castle of Cabres, a modest fortification that controlled a mountainous area on the edge of the district of Morella.¹⁵ This donation did not become effective as the castle was still in the hands of the Muslims, but it should be taken into account because this concession would be of vital importance in the future dispute between Blasco de Alagón and James I.

Over the following years, Alagón became closely linked to the monarchy and enjoyed a close relation with the king. In 1216, during the minority of James I, Alagón swore allegiance to the monarch, together with other Aragonese and Catalan nobles and churchmen. Alagón later habitually spent time in the royal court and, in 1221, he was even appointed seneschal –*majordom*– of Aragon. However, he was then participating actively in the revolt of the Aragonese nobility against James I and, very possibly, this was behind his banishment to Valencian lands. In this sense, it is logical to think that, due to his participation in the rising, the monarch expelled the noble from Aragon and sent him to Valencia, where he spent a couple of years in the service of Said Abū Said, the last Almohad governor of the city.¹⁶

After this period, Blasco de Alagón returned to Aragon and restarted his service to the monarchy. In fact, he attended the principal acts in the preparation for the conquest of Valencia and, in 1225, participated in the abortive siege of Peníscola.¹⁷ Thanks to his involvement in the royal campaign, his loyalty to the monarch during his exile and the support he offered the latter in the civil wars with the Aragonese nobility, in 1226, the king granted him all the castles and towns he could seize *in terra*

14. Royo, Vicent. *Les arrels històriques de la comarca dels Ports. Societat, poder i identitat en una terra de frontera durant la Baixa Edat Mitjana*. Benicarló: Onada Edicions, 2018: 24-36.

15. AHN. Colecciones. Documentos textuales. Códices y cartularios, No. 1126-B, ff. 89v-90v.

16. The noble's exile is only known through the mention in the royal chronicle. The lack of news has led to this banishment being placed at different moments during the 1220s. However, the most recent research allows this exile to be situated between 1222 and 1225, when he disappeared from the royal retinue and did not hold the post of seneschal of Aragon. All the data about Alagón, in Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 39-42.

17. López Elum, Pedro. *La conquista y repoblación valenciana durante el reinado de Jaime I*. Valencia: Ajuntament de Xàtiva, 1995: 27-38.



sarracenorum.¹⁸ With that, James I involved the noble in the campaign against the Muslims, which became a source of wealth and fame for Alagón. His collaboration continued in the following years and, in 1229, he was in Calatayud for the signing of the treaty between the monarch and Abū Said, under the terms of which the latter agreed to lend the king military help.¹⁹

The monarch began to plan the conquest of Valencia with this agreement and counted on Blasco de Alagón for this project, being as he was one of his trusted men. However, this plan was put off for some years as James I turned his attention to conquering Majorca. While that was going on, the trail of the noble in the surviving documentary registers searched to date dries up, at least until 1232. Nothing is known about Alagón during this time, except for his presence in a hypothetical meeting with James I in Alcañiz at the end of 1231. With Majorca already conquered, the king called him back to his side to restart the campaign to occupy Valencia or, at least, that is what the king relates in his chronicle. Then began the series of events that put the conquest of the Valencian territory in motion and that definitively sowed discord between the king and the noble.

3. The conquest of Morella according to the *Llibre dels fets*

Since the end of the nineteenth century, many proposals have been made around the relation of the date and the leading character in the occupation of Morella due to the lack of concretion in the surviving documents. However, after over a century of debates, it is now possible to state that Morella was occupied by Blasco de Alagón between November 1231 and January 1232.²⁰ This was the beginning of the conquest of the future Kingdom of Valencia and, in the following months, the noble's army must have overrun the lands that depended on the Muslim fortress. Nevertheless, James I offers a different version in his chronicle or *Llibre dels fets*. The monarch relates that, before or almost at the same time as the taking of Morella, the castle of Ares was occupied in his name by an army from the Aragonese town of Teruel. Unfortunately, our knowledge of this situation is limited to what the royal chronicle contains, as there are no other documents that mention it. Consequently,

18. *Documentos de Jaime I de Aragón. I: 1216-1236*, ed. Ambrosio Huici Miranda; María Desemparados Cabanes Pecourt. Valencia: Anubar, 1976: 175 (doc. No. 85).

19. ACA. Reial Cancelleria. Pergamins. Pergamins de Jaume I, No. 373.

20. This date was proposed by Puig, Joan. "Els senyorius d'en Blai d'Alagó, conquistador de Morella". *Boletín de la Sociedad Castellonense de Cultura*, 13 (1932): 294-302. More recently, García Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 68, proposes maintaining it after an in-depth study of the documents from the epoch. On the other hand, Guinot, Enric. *Los valencianos de tiempos de Jaime I. La formación de una sociedad feudal en el Mediterráneo del siglo XIII*. Valencia: Tirant Humanidades, 2012: 30, sustains that it took place in December 1231.



it is necessary to follow the monarch's discourse and then, compare the information with what others provide to be able to interpret these events in detail.²¹

According to the chronicle, James I met his two most trusted men, Blasco de Alagón and Hug de Follalquer, in the Aragonese town of Alcañiz.²² By following the events narrated in the chronicle, the monarch's itinerary, the documents from the royal chancellery and other information related to these characters, a consensus has been reached in the historiography that this encounter took place in late 1231.²³ In this meeting, the two interlocutors convinced the king to initiate the conquest of Valencia and also suggested the best way to carry it out. Specifically, they recommended him not to attack any of the main castles in the frontier region, but rather to start the advance through Borriana. This humble centre on La Plana was close to Christian possessions and could be attacked by land and sea. Moreover, once it had fallen, it would be followed by the rest of the fortresses between there and the River La Sénia. Persuaded by Alagón and Follalquer, James I decided to wait some months before launching his attack, which began with the siege of Borriana.

Shortly after the meeting, the king met Gea de Albarracín while hunting, and received the news that a host from Teruel had occupied the castle of Ares, so he set off there to take possession. However, on the way, he was informed that Blasco de Alagón had taken Morella. Given this turn, the monarch changed route and set off for Morella to reclaim possession from the noble. When he arrived, James I set up an improvised camp outside the walls. The next day, he called Alagón, who was intercepted by Fernando Pérez de Pina when he was heading to the medina. The noble intended to meet the king after leaving Morella, but the royal messenger persuaded him otherwise and Alagón went to the King's tent, where they met in private to discuss the question. The king exhorted the noble to hand Morella over immediately, while Alagón reminded him about the concession he had granted him in 1226, according to which everything he seized in Muslim territory would be his.²⁴ The monarch insisted and finally an agreement was reached: Alagón ceded Morella to James, but the latter granted him the regency for the services lent. Then they left the tent and announced the agreement before the nobles gathered there. Thus, Blasco declared that it was fair to hand the town over to the king, as he had received numerous favours from him, while requesting him to cede it to him to rule over it. The monarch accepted the noble's proposal and promised to reward him. To conclude the act, Alagón paid him homage kissing his hands and mouth.

21. The conquest of Morella can be followed in Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 157-165 (chapters 127-137).

22. The latter was castellan of Amposta and master of the Order of the Hospital in the Crown of Aragon.

23. Many specialists doubt the veracity of some episodes in the chronicle and, in fact, it is believed that this meeting in Alcañiz never took place, but rather that it is included to enable the king to follow the line of glorifying his figure and, in this specific case, justify his later acts. In contrast, others recognise that the text is the only source regarding the event and despite maintaining a certain caution, accept it as true. García Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 59-77, even proposes a possible date for the encounter in Alcañiz, after the 9th of October 1231. For his part, Cingolani, Stefano. *Jaume I...*: 209, sustains that it took place during the autumn of that same year.

24. *Documentos de Jaime I de Aragón...*: I, 175 (doc. No. 85).



These are the events as narrated in the chronicle of James I. The agreement was reached orally and was reinforced with the homage to grant it greater public validity, although there is nothing in writing that backs this up. So, everything that is known about this episode is through the version the monarch offers, one aimed at exalting his own figure. In fact, all the words that the king uses to build his discourse, both those he pronounced and those he put in the mouths of the others involved in this series of events, follow this direction. Even the gestures and rituality of the scenes are aimed at maintaining the honour and supremacy of the monarch. Indeed, it is possible to make a deeper reading of this episode, one that enables a more detailed approach to the reality and, especially, to the concept of the power of the two characters.

4. The interpretation of the chronicle

The version that James I offers of this episode in his chronicle has a clear intentionality: to present himself as a diligent, just and powerful king, but one also able to subject the nobility. To reinforce this image and justify his own actions, he needs to create an antagonist, one who does not respect his word and goes against the royal will, and that role corresponds to the noble Blasco de Alagón. Finally, around these two, others appear that reinforce the figure of a monarch who knows how to overcome with rectitude the hurdles placed in his path by those who do not wish for the good of the monarchy. Thus, a very marked discourse is constituted, one that directs the monarch's discourse through the series of events related to the conquest of Morella.²⁵

To begin with, in the hypothetical meeting in Alcañiz, James I puts the directives for the project the conquest of the Muslim kingdom of Valencia into the mouths of Blasco de Alagón and Hug de Follalquer. The king, respecting his advisors, listens to their contributions and, trusting their honesty, decides to follow their advice. However, it can be interpreted that Alagón tricks him because he persuades him to begin the conquest with Borriana but, just after the meeting, he sets off for Morella, without respecting the advice he had given. When James finds out, bewildered, he asks the people he trusts for their opinion. Then a secondary character emerges who perfectly illustrates the depiction of the two leading characters. This was Fernando Díaz, a knight who was a vassal of Blasco de Alagón. Despite that, on the way to Ares, Díaz advises James that *lleixats l'anada d'Ares, que Morella és gran cosa e valria*

25. More details about the aims of the king when drawing up his chronicle and the strategies used to reach his objectives, in Cingolani, Stefano. "Memòria i estratègies al *Llibre del rei Jaume I*". *Revista de Catalunya*, 154 (2000): 111-141.



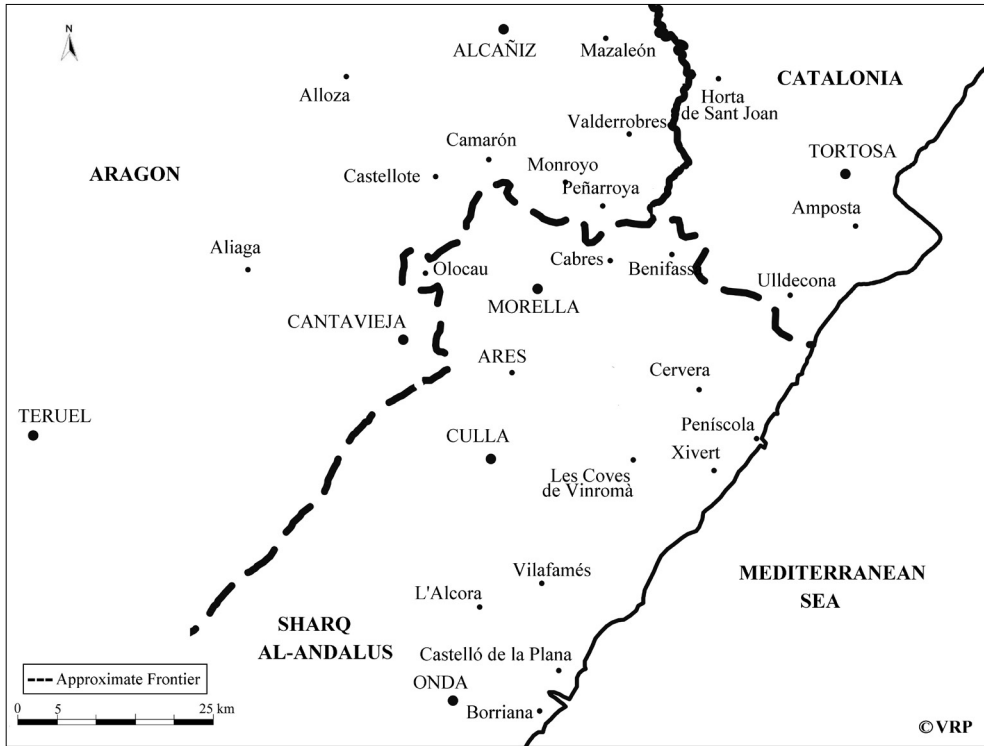


ILLUSTRATION 1. APPROXIMATE FRONTIER BETWEEN CATALONIA, ARAGON AND AL-ANDALUS IN 1231. MAP PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR.

*més que la tinguessen los moros que don Blasco.*²⁶ Furthermore, the knight gives him this advice because, *jassia que don Blasco sia mon senyor, vós sots mon senyor natural.*²⁷

His discourse is an excellent example of the social order the monarch aimed to transmit. Fernando Díaz, despite being linked to Alagón, was concerned with favouring James I as the natural lord he was. Beyond the vassalistic links, which could change with a certain frequency according to the knight's words, the king was above everyone on the social structure and thus, this link would never be broken. On the other hand, Díaz offers a perfect description of Alagón, who he presents as a more dangerous rival than the Muslims.²⁸ In fact, the two sentences are an excellent

26. "Leave the path to Ares, because Morella is a great thing and it would be worth more the Muslims having it than Blasco de Alagón". Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 161 (chapter 133).

27. "Although Blasco de Alagón is my lord, you are my natural lord". Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 163 (chapter 133).

28. This support from Fernando Díaz for the monarch earned its compensation because, at least by summer of 1233, he had reached the post of *maiordomus curie*. Guinot, Enric. "La nobleza aragonesa en los orígenes del reino de Valencia durante el siglo XIII", *Bajar al reino. Redes sociales, económicas y comerciales*



summary of the political reality of the time, when royalty sought to place itself at the apex of the social structure, above the nobility, in a monarchic state still under construction. What James I did when he arrived in Morella and interviewed Alagón further reinforce this concept of power.

In the meeting held at the foot of the castle, the king was at all times benevolent with the noble and reminded him of the good way he had always treated him. So, he stated that, *vós sots mon majordom e hom que nós havem molt amat e ben feït, e que tenïts terra per nós.*²⁹ Indeed, *per la naturalesa que vós havets ab nós, e pel bé que us havem feït e per ço com sots nostre majordom,*³⁰ he requested him to cede Morella because, despite deserving all the good in the world, it only corresponded to the king to possess a strongpoint like that. The king appealed to the love he professed for the noble and, especially, to the loyalty that he owed him as seneschal of Aragon to make that request. Moreover, the monarch promised to reward the noble.

These arguments convinced Alagón, who decided to hand over the place. However, he is presented as astute, always seeking his own interests, and then appeals to the love professed for the monarch to make a request that is in his own benefit. Thus, he asks, *que em fassats tanta d'amor que jo la tingua [Morella] per vós, que ben és raó que, pus jo la us ret, que la tinga per vós mills que null hom del regne.*³¹ The monarch accepted the proposal and invited Alagón to leave the tent to make the agreement public before Pedro Fernández de Azagra, don Atorella, Abū Said and other knights who were there. At that moment, there was another act that illustrates perfectly the message the monarch aimed to transmit with the story of these events.

When they appear in the presence of the other nobles, it is Alagón who seizes the initiative and says to the monarch that he should explain the agreement. In contrast, James I responds forcefully that it is not up to him to make the pact known, but rather it is the noble who has to do so.³² Then, Alagón takes the floor, announces the agreement and finally, pays homage by kissing the hands and mouth of the king for Morella, which he will hold in the latter's name. This way, the monarch shows he has been able to subject Alagón to his will and that, instead of acting cruelly, he has been benevolent with the noble, ceding the place to him despite his irreverence. Moreover, Alagón's words reinforce this image of a powerful, magnificent and fair king, because he recognises that James I has always rewarded him for his services

entre Aragón y Valencia: siglos XIII-XV, Estaban Sarasa, coord. Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2017: 167-222.

29. "You are my seneschal and a man we have loved and favoured greatly, and who has land for us".

30. "For the nature that you have with me, and for the good we have done you and because you are our seneschal".

31. "That for you love me so that I have [Morella] for you, because it is a good reason that, as I hand it to you, that I have it in your name better than any other man of the kingdom".

32. The monarch exhorted the noble with these words: *Don Blasco, deïts vós, que a vós fa a dir* ("Blasco, speak, for it is you who must speak").



and, on this occasion, this compensation is precisely to hold Morella in the king's name, as well as other concessions that will follow.³³

Besides his deeds and words, James I used other strategies to strengthen his pre-eminence and, in this specific case, minimise the discredit of not being the leading character of the beginning of the conquest of the Muslim kingdom of Valencia.³⁴ In fact, it is very feasible to think that the monarch consciously altered the succession of events when compiling his chronicle. So, he presents the conquest of the castle of Ares as being before or at the same time as the occupation of Morella, as he cannot allow Alagón to go down in History as the person who really initiated the conquest. However, Ares was a minor place, so he needed to introduce another argument to conserve his fame as a powerful king. Then, through the pact reached with Alagón for Morella, the king also became the first lord of the most important place on the frontier that had fallen into Christian hands. This way, he maintained the halo of a crusading king he wanted to earn, because he had led the occupation of the Sharq Al-Andalus from the start and had taken the opportune decisions that enabled him to maintain the process of expansion under his control.

However, logic invites one to think that this was not the real sequence of events. Although there are no documents that show it, the most likely is to think that the seizure of Ares was carried out by a host from the town of Teruel on James I's orders in the autumn of 1232, in other words, a year after Alagón conquered Morella.³⁵ This makes full sense if one attends to the geostrategic aspect, because the situation on the political map that was being forged at that specific moment of the campaign of conquest did not favour royal interests at all. With Morella—and possibly the neighbouring castle of Culla—in Alagón's hands, the king could not allow the noble to extend his domains further into Valencian lands. If he had taken Ares, Alagón would have occupied all the eastern side of the frontier and controlled a key point on the path to La Plana de Castelló. Thus, he would have gained excessive power for the king's intentions and so James had to intervene to avoid losing control of the frontier. Consequently, the king must have requested the town of Teruel to assemble a host to take the castle, always acting in his name. And this, surely, happened a year after Alagón had taken Morella.

Then, beyond the symbolic questions, another reading of the monarch's acts is revealed, one where he was concerned to stop the process of occupation slipping from his hands. If, at this initial moment, he had let the nobles and towns in the south of Aragon start to occupy places in the Muslim kingdom of Valencia, he would have lost control of the military campaign and, even more, the power to impose his will when it came to building the new political entity. Consequently, he would have been unable to construct the new Kingdom of Valencia in the way he did, but instead would have had to make more concessions to the nobility and knights from

33. All these passages in Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 163-165 (chapters 136-137).

34. This idea of the discredit comes from Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 69-73.

35. Royo, Vicent. *Els orígens del Maestrat històric. Identitat, convivència i conflictes en una societat rural de frontera (s. XIII-XV)*. Benicarló: Onada Edicions, 2017: 34-36.



the towns on the frontier who were opposed to the constitution of a new reign and aimed to annex all the territory of Valencia to the Kingdom of Aragon. That explains his rapid reaction to the seizure of Morella by Alagón, his insistence that the latter had to cede possession of the town and the conquest of Ares by the town of Teruel in the king's name. Only that way could he keep command of the campaign of conquest and the later share-out.

Once James I's intervention has been understood, it is also necessary to seek the motives that led Blasco de Alagón to take Morella, because it was this that precipitated the events. To begin with, the noble had the privilege earned in 1226, according to which everything conquered from the Sharq Al-Andalus would be his.³⁶ This concession could have encouraged Alagón to organise an army and begin the occupation of the frontier region. In fact, the noble based his defence before James I in the supposed meeting related in the chronicle precisely on that privilege. Independently of that, we need to know why he decided to occupy Morella and not some other place on the frontier and, in that, Saïd Abū Saïd could have been a key element for understanding Alagón's behaviour.

Alagón and the last Almohad governor of Valencia had forged a good relation with each other during the time the former had spent in Saïd's service in Muslim lands, when he had been banished by the king from his domains.³⁷ Likewise, Abū Saïd had agreed to lend the king military aid and obtained a licence very similar to the one James I had granted Alagón some years earlier. In 1229, the monarch and Saïd reached a pact under which the former granted the latter the right of ownership of the places he took in Valencian territory, in exchange for handing over a quarter of the incomes. As a guarantee, Saïd promised to take the castles of Morella, Peníscola, Culla, Jérica, Segorbe and Alpuente and place them in the hands of Aragonese nobles, while the monarch would grant him the castles of Castellfabib and Ademuz.³⁸ All that allows a hypothesis to be built to explain why Alagón seized Morella.

Everything suggests that before the occupation of the town, Abū Saïd had a strong influence over Morella and it is possible that he had already occupied it, although only shortly before the noble's arrival. Thus, there is the possibility that the town surrendered to Saïd late in 1231 and that Blasco de Alagón arrived immediately after to take custody of the castle under the conditions established in the agreement of 1229.³⁹ This hypothesis can be confirmed by a detail that can be deduced from the royal chronicle. In fact, Saïd only appears in the story when Alagón was on his

36. *Documentos de Jaime I de Aragón...*: I, 175 (doc. No. 85).

37. If we recall, his exile lasted two years, in all probability, between 1222 and 1225. García Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 39-42.

38. ACA. Reial Cancelleria. Pergamins. Pergamins de Jaume I, No. 373. More details about the contents of this scripture and its implications in the planning of the conquest of Valencia, in López Elum, Pedro. *La conquista y repoblación valenciana...*: 27-38.

39. Cingolani, Stefano. *Jaume I...*: 213, proposes that there was a serious split in Morella between the supporters of Abū Saïd and those of Zayyan ibn Mardāniš, the last emir of Valencia, and this state was exploited by Alagón to occupy the fortress.



way to meet the monarch and not before. When the king relates his journey to Morella, he mentions some of the people who accompanied him and Said was not among the royal retinue. However, when Alagón presented himself before James I to resolve the question of Morella, the old Almohad governor is mentioned by the king as one of those attending the meeting and who waited outside the tent for the result of the discussions.⁴⁰ Thus, one can think that Said was with Alagón in Morella and accompanied him in the interview with the monarch. Moreover, at that moment, they both had solid arguments for demanding that Alagón should conserve the ownership of Morella. On one hand, the fortress had capitulated to Said and immediately had to be placed under the control of an Aragonese noble. On the other, Alagón enjoyed the above-mentioned privilege of 1226, according to which everything conquered from the Muslims would be his. Indeed, rather than impose his will, the monarch must have felt forced to accept the proposal by Said and Alagón, given the solidity of their arguments. Then, the act of vassalage that the chronicle relates was staged.

Nevertheless, it must be recalled that James I did not narrate any of that in his story, but rather centred his discourse on Alagón's betrayal and his own rectitude to recover the domain over Morella. In the same way, nor was the pact that clarified the possession of the place put into writing. In fact, it is surprising that no copy of this scripture has survived given the importance of the events. It is possible that the contents of the agreement were formalised in a written document, with the pertinent public validity, but that this has not survived down to our days or is still unseen in some section of the royal or private archives. However, without excluding this option completely, everything seems to indicate that the explanation is different.

The territories of the Crown of Aragon had a long tradition of scriptures and many pacts were registered on paper to maintain a record of them even centuries before this episode. Even more so, James I himself took special care to leave written proof of his actions and, in fact, the registers of the royal chancellery began to be organised systematically in the latter stages of his reign.⁴¹ Likewise, in line with the legal precepts that the monarch was concerned with introducing into the administration of the states that made up the Crown of Aragon, giving public form to a document was the most tangible option for granting it legal validity. So, it is certainly strange that the king did not put an agreement of such relevance onto paper, given that it established the ownership of the most important place in the frontier region. In fact, this could be precisely why the pact with Alagón alluded to in the chronicle was never put into writing.

At this juncture, it is necessary to return to the idea of the discredit suffered by James I to attempt to understand this lack, because it is possible that the harm

40. Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 163 (chapter 136).

41. Trenchs, José. "La Cancellería de Jaime I: cancelleres y escribanos", *Paleographica, Diplomatica et Archivística. Studi in onore di Giulio Battelli*. Rome: Edizioni de Storia e Letteratura, 1979: 97-128; Urgell, Ricard. "Els homes de la cancelleria", *Jaume I i el seu temps 800 anys després*, Rafael Narbona, ed. Valencia: Fundació Jaume II el Just, 2012: 461-476.



to the king's reputation provoked by Blasco de Alagón was behind the silence in the written record that marks the beginning of the campaign to occupy the Sharq Al-Andalus. The noble's acts shattered the image of a powerful king the monarch wanted to create around himself and perhaps that is why James I did not order any scripture written to leave evidence of the taking of Morella. All that has survived about this episode are the words he himself pronounced when drawing up his chronicle, in which this question is dealt with rather superficially. In contrast, much more importance is given to the taking of Borriana, a campaign that the king did lead and that has traditionally been taken as the starting point for the conquest of the kingdom of Valencia.⁴²

In the chronicle, the monarch offers his version of the events and insists on making patent Alagón's submission. This is the message transmitted by his story and also in the document of the donation of Sástago and María de Huerva to the noble, the only surviving scripture from this episode. On the 22nd of February 1232, the king granted Alagón these two Aragonese towns, *in remunerationem servitii* [...] *fecistis nobis de captione castri de Morela et quia nostram voluntatem fecistis inde liberaliter, tanquam fidelis vassallus purus et legalis*. In other words, this was as a reward for taking Morella and, very significantly, for having accepted the royal will.⁴³ Only when there was the possibility of presenting Alagón as a loyal vassal, subject to the royal designs, did the monarch agree to put into writing an action that was the direct consequence of the previous one.

However, this document certifies that Blasco de Alagón had occupied Morella between the final months of 1231 and January 1232. Indeed, although the initial pact was not put into writing, the conditions agreed were respected by both parties. In fact, that same month of February 1232, Alagón charged four Muslims with identifying the limits of the castle of Morella and, the resulting document states that, at the start of that year, the first settlers had reached the town *in voce domini regis*, but also *sub domino Blascho de Alagon*.⁴⁴ So, the agreement between the king and the noble existed and, furthermore, it seems that the agreed directives were the same as those contained in the chronicle. So, the initial dissensions having been resolved, Alagón took effective possession of Morella and began to build the new Christian lordship. This became the furthest forward feudal territory in the Sharq Al-Andalus. However, this does not mean that James willingly accepted Alagón as the lord of Morella, because the town became a key point for the control of the frontier.

42. The hypothesis of this pact of 1231-1232 not having been scripted is reinforced by the fact that, on the 29th of September 1231, James I put into writing the agreement with Peter of Portugal, with which the prince ceded the County of Urgell to the monarch in exchange for receiving the isles of Majorca and Minorca as a life fief. James I even also included this transaction in his chronicle. Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 141 (chapter 109). The similarities between one situation and the other are evident, but in the case of the County of Urgell, the king was much more explicit than with Morella, perhaps because he could narrate this event with more dignity than his disagreement with Alagón.

43. ACA. Comtat de Sástago, lligall 8, No. 33.

44. AHN. Clero. Benifassà. Pergaminos, carp. 417, No. 1.



5. From peace to war

After this first clash, solved with the interview explained in the chronicle, relations between them became calm again. Blasco de Alagón acted as lord of Morella and, on the 17th of April 1233, issued the charter of settlement for the town.⁴⁵ Immediately after, he started colonising the lands that depended on the fortress, beginning precisely with the castle of Cabres, the territory he had inherited from his father, Artal.⁴⁶ Thus, on the 6th of May 1233, he granted *castellum de Cabres cum suos terminos* and *Herber Iusano cum suos terminos* to Arnau de Ribes, a member of his armed retinue who received the modest fortress and the lands that depended on it in the times of the Saracens as a fief.⁴⁷ From then on, he continued the work of settling the lordship and returned to the king's side.

Relations between the two returned to normal. In fact, Alagón again held the post of seneschal of Aragon and participated in the campaign to conquer Borriana in July 1233.⁴⁸ However, James mistrusted Alagón's domain over Morella and gradually separated him from royal retinue. As the king wrote in his chronicle, Alagón played a notable role in the siege of Borriana, but always trying to convince the monarch to abandon the campaign of occupation. Whether or not that is true, James always mentions the noble with a certain distance, and this was confirmed after the conquest of Borriana.⁴⁹ After that campaign had ended, Alagón returned to Morella and left his son, Artal, in his place next to the king.⁵⁰ Artal began to appear frequently as a witness in the documents issued by James I. In this context, in the midst of the process of conquering La Plana de Castelló, the king devised a strategy that was a strong blow to Alagón's aspirations. To understand his actions, we must look back to the years before the conquest, because the king resorted to the typical ambiguities of those times to turn the situation in his favour.

In 1195, Alfonso the Chaste granted the castle of Benifassà, near the castle of Cabres, to the prior of Tortosa Cathedral. Benifassà was a small fortress that controlled a modest mountainous territory, on the edge of the Morella district. However, this donation did not take effect and, in 1208, Peter the Catholic granted possession to the knight Guillem de Cervera, seemingly after he had occupied it. In 1229, Cervera became a monk in Poblet and transferred all his possessions to the monastery, among which were the rights to the Andalusian castle, the domain

45. Guinot, Enric, ed. *Cartes de poblament medievals valencianes*. Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 1991: 89-91.

46. If we recall, Peter the Catholic had granted the place to him in 1210 for his participation in the campaign in Castellfabib and Ademús. AHN. Colecciones. Documentos textuales. Códices y Cartularios, No. 1.126-B, ff. 89v-90v.

47. Guinot, Enric, ed. *Cartes de poblament...*: 91-92.

48. Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 42-43.

49. The story of the occupation of Borriana, in Jaume I. *Crònica o Llibre dels feits...*: 181-209 (chapters 153-178).

50. In fact, Alagón returned to his colonising work during the autumn of 1233. Guinot, Enric, ed. *Cartes de poblament...*: 99-100.



of which he had lost years earlier. It is very likely that Benifassà came back into feudal hands between 1232 and the early months of 1233. Once it was occupied, on the 13th of August 1233, the monastery of Poblet and Guillem de Cervera reached an agreement with the bishopric of Tortosa, who claimed possession due to the concession of 1195. Finally, the bishopric renounced ownership of the castle in exchange for primacy and half the incomes from the tithe and the mills, while the monastery of Poblet conserved the possession.⁵¹ At that point, James I appeared on the scene.

Four days after the signing of this agreement, the monarch confirmed the possession of the castle of Benifassà by the Catalan monastery. Some months later, on the 22nd of November 1233, James again ratified the concession and compelled the monks of the Cistercian order to found a monastery in Benifassà. He also had the consent of Blasco's son, because Artal de Alagón had signed the scripture as a witness.⁵² That confirms the distance between monarch and Blasco de Alagón, as well as the split between the noble and his son, who had replaced him in the royal retinue. Finally, in December 1233, the monastery of Santa Maria de Benifassà was born, an action that supposed a clear interference by the monarch in Alagón's faculties and even usurpation of his assets.

First of all, when he founded the monastery, James I granted it some lands to sustain it, and these were evidently in the limits of Morella, under the custody of the noble. However, the monarch was acting on his own, without Alagón's consent. Even more so, the monastery in Benifassà received a set of lands that was made up of the territories dependent on the old castles of Benifassà and Cabres.⁵³ The monarch took advantage of the lack of precision in the documents from the early years of the thirteenth century to unify the two Muslim districts into a single territorial demarcation, although there had been a clear separation in the times of the Saracens.⁵⁴ Thus, the Tinença de Benifassà was born and this was, to a point, illegal, because the castle of Cabres was a patrimonial asset of Blasco de Alagón. The noble had received the fortress and the territory it dominated as a paternal inheritance and, acting in consequence, had started the colonisation of these lands

51. All the documents mentioned, in AHN. Colecciones. Documentos textuales. Códices y Cartularios, No. 1.126-B, ff. 1r-2v; and AHN. Clero. Poblet, carp. 2.096, No. 6.

52. The two documents, in AHN. Clero. Benifassà, Pergaminos, carp. 418, No. 13; and AHN. Clero. Benifassà, Pergaminos, carp. 418, No. 15. More details about the problems generated by the ownership of Benifassà and the founding of the monastery, in Royo, Vicent. *Les arrels històriques...*: 45-57.

53. Specifically, the king granted the monastery *castrum et villam de Malgraner, et castrum de Fredes, et locum et totam terram de Boxar cum suis vallibus et planis et terminis, et totam terram de Rossell, et castrum de Capris, et castrum de Bel cum suis terminis*. AHN. Clero. Benifassà. Pergaminos, carp. 418, No. 15.

54. Traditionally, the definition of the limits of the lordship of the monastery of Benifassà by James I in 1233 had been taken as a reference for setting the limits of the Muslim castles of Cabres and Benifassà, so that it had always been thought that the two fortresses formed a single unit in the times of the Saracens. However, an in-depth review of the documents from before and after the conquest in the thirteenth century allows a clear separation to be established between the two and the districts they dominated. Royo, Vicent. *Les arrels històriques...*: 24-30.



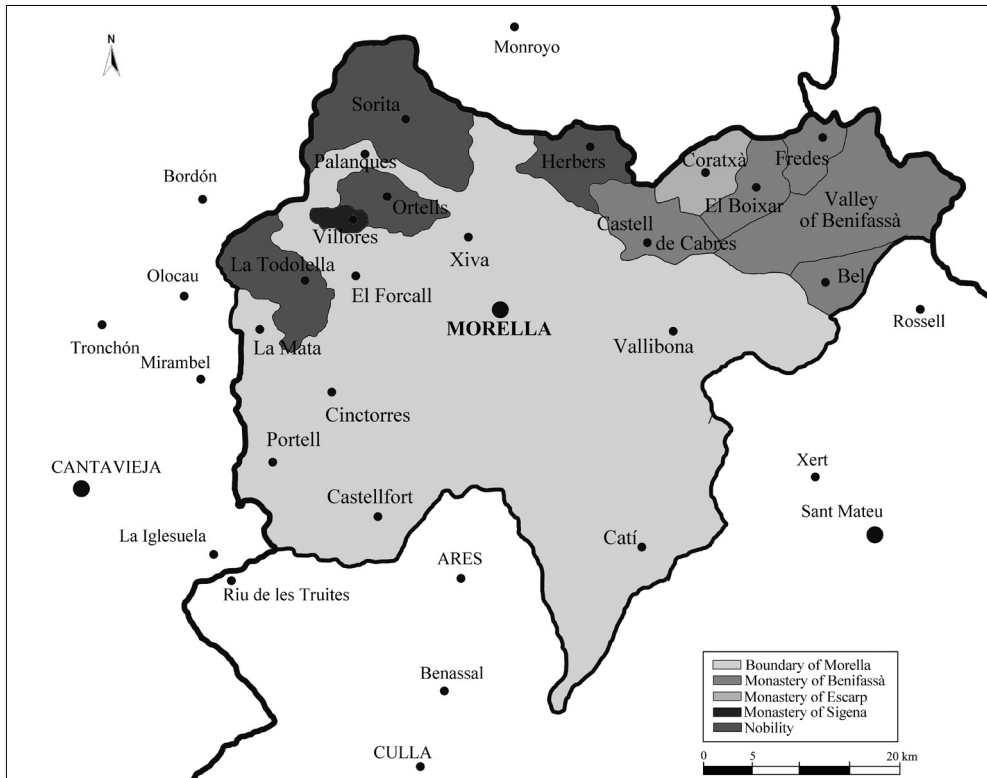


ILLUSTRATION 2. THE LIMITS OF MORELLA (1239). MAP PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR.

some months earlier.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, his action did not dissuade the monarch, who was determined to undermine the power of Alagón beyond the legitimacy of his actions. So, with the founding of the monastery of Benifassà, the king sought to introduce an element of distortion into Morella district so as to reduce noble's power significantly.

Faced with this interference, Alagón was determined to retain the town and, during the early months of 1234, he started a plan of action destined to consolidating *de facto* his condition as lord of Morella. To begin with, he negotiated with Pons de Torrella, bishop of Tortosa, about sharing the tithes of the castles of Morella and Culla. They reached an agreement on the 2nd of March 1234 and the noble signed the scripture that attested to the pact as lord of Morella and Culla.⁵⁶ A month later, on the 9th of April 1234, Alagón donated Coratxà to the monastery of Santa Maria

55. See note 47.

56. Significantly, the bishop granted Alagón half of the tithes of the two castles as a reward for the noble's efforts to take the two places from the Muslims. ACT. Cartoral, No. 5, f. 53r-v.



d'Escarp.⁵⁷ The noble took advantage of the fact that the rural community had been left out of the lands conceded to Benifassà —surely due to an error by the scribe who drafted the document of donation to the monastery— and, thus, introduced a new actor into the dispute, who served as a contraposition to the Valencian monastery. Lastly, he continued with the colonisation of the lands belonging to Benifassà and, a month after the donation of Coratxà, on the 4th of May 1234, he issued a charter of settlement for Bel, *que est in termino de castiel de Crabas*.⁵⁸

So began a fierce rivalry between the monarch and Alagón for control of Morella and the lands in its limits. This became even more serious when the latter was stripped of the office of seneschal of Aragon in mid-1234.⁵⁹ All this finally led to an armed clash between the noble and James I. However, this episode is very poorly known, because there are no contemporary sources that mention it. In fact, we know that the clash existed through two clauses contained in two much later documents. In 1250, James I confirmed the charter of settlement of Morella. In that scripture, he granted the inhabitants of the town the assets of people who had given support to Blasco de Alagón in the war between the King and the noble.⁶⁰ In 1259, the monarch issued a document through which he ratified Bernat Monsó as the owner of the Torre de la Soma, situated in La Mata. The inheritance had been granted to Monsó's father, also named Bernat, by Alagón between 1233 and the early months of 1234. However, both father and son supported the royal cause and, so they had to abandon it *quando guerra incepit inter nos [James I] et dictum Blaschum*.⁶¹

So, there seems to have been a certain dissension among Blasco de Alagón's vassals, as some of these, as in the case of Bernat Monsó, stood by the king, while others must have remained loyal to the noble. However, the lack of documents means we do not know the composition of the two sides that faced each other nor is there news about the course of the fighting. Beyond these questions, today it is accepted that the confrontation existed, as the scriptures cited above are evidence of these events. Moreover, thanks to the reconstruction of itinerary followed by monarch, everything seems to indicate that it took place between the second half of 1234 and the early months of 1235.⁶² In May of the latter year, two events illustrate the end of hostilities and, especially, the defeat of Blasco de Alagón, who submitted to the monarch's wishes without putting up resistance.

57. AHN. Clero. Benifassà. Pergaminos, carp. 419, No. 4.

58. Guinot, Enric, ed. *Cartes de poblament...*: 105-106.

59. In April 1234, Blasco de Alagón still appears as seneschal of Aragon, but had been replaced by the noble Pedro Cornel at least on the 13th of October of that year. García Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 43.

60. The king decreed that *confirmamus vobis, omnibus et singulis, omnes hereditates sive possessiones que condam fuerunt illorum hominum qui fuerunt contra nos in guerra cum Blaschone de Alagone, qui eiecimus de Morella*. Guinot, Enric, ed. *Cartes de poblament...*: 215-218.

61. Specifically, James I confirmed Monsó's possession of the tower *quam dictus Blaschus de Alagone assignaverit patri tuo in termino de Morella, sicut etiam dictus pater tuus et tu similiter tenebatis et possidebatis tempore quo exivisti de Morella per mandato et fide nostra*, when the war between the king and the noble began. ACA. Cancellaria, Registles, 11, f. 150v.

62. García Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 83.



On the 2nd of May 1235, from Zaragoza, James I donated the rural community of Coratxà to the monastery of Escarp.⁶³ A year after Alagón had granted it to the same monastery, the king did the same, but without mentioning the previous grant. This way, the monarch presented himself as the authentic lord of Morella, able to decide the future of the pieces that made up the manor. So, it could be thought that the war with Alagón had then finished or, at least, was about to do so and the result was favourable to the king. Then or shortly after, the negotiations must have begun between the monarch and Alagón to find the definitive solution to the dispute over Morella. However, due to the noble's defeat, the discussion must not have lasted long. In fact, nine days after this first act, the resolution of the confrontation was made public in a ceremony of conciliation attended by both parties and Blasco's son, Artal de Alagón.⁶⁴

6. The Concord of Montalbán

Meeting in the Aragonese town of Montalbán on the 11th of May 1235, the king and the noble decided the fate of the town of Morella and this time, put the agreement that ended the dispute into writing. The resulting document is an excellent example of the strategy the king put into practice to dignify his figure after the earlier episodes of discredit and, especially, to show Alagón's submission, while also leaving everything regarding the possession of Morella well wrapped up. In fact, nothing in this discussion about the exercise of power was done by chance and the way the dispute was resolved has a strong symbology, which James I executed with great care to transmit the message of his superiority over the noble. In this tessitura, the mechanism that best adapted to the royal intentions was a concord or amicable settlement of a dispute.

This act of conciliation had a long tradition in Europe and was very often used to deal with conflicts that had become engrained in the conscience of the litigants, and the resolution of which could suppose an excessively harsh defeat for one of the parties. Then, the best option was to seek a negotiated settlement, one that was able to dissipate the malevolence and present the final result in the least burdensome way possible, because each side made a series of concessions to their rival. As well as the content, the solution reached through these practices of pacification was usually made public in ceremonies that promoted the concord and the definitive

63. AHN. Clero. Benifassà. Pergaminos, carp. 419, No. 11.

64. Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 87, sustains that James I's donation of Coratxà to Escarp could be an indication of his possible occupation of Morella. However, on the 20th of April 1235, less than a fortnight earlier, Blasco de Alagón signed an agreement with Hug de Follalquer to establish the limits between the castles of Morella and Cervera, so he was still acting as lord of the town at that moment. Accordingly, if the king did occupy Morella, it must have been after the latter date and prior to the 2nd of May. The pact with the master of the Hospital, in Sánchez Almela, Elena, ed. *El "Llibre de Privilegis de la Villa de Sant Mateu" (1157-1512)*. Castelló de la Plana: Caja de Ahorros y Monte de Piedad de Castellón, 1986: 370-371.



eradication of the hatred, all sealed with oaths on the holy scriptures and the mandatory homages kissing hands and mouth. So, bearing in mind that the conflict with Alagón required all this treatment given the circumstances in which it had come about, the monarch opted to end the dispute through a concord that was staged according to the ritual for this type of mechanism. However, the king added a series of details that significantly modified the model for writing this type of pact and served to show the real winner in the clash.⁶⁵

To begin with, in these concords both parties were usually presented at the beginning of the document in a position of equality. However, this was not the case here. In fact, James I took the initiative in writing the scripture and clearly recognised the existence of a *contentionem que erat inter nos et vos super castrum et villam de Morella* and, to put an end to it, *venimus vobiscum ad bonam pacem et concordiam et amicabilem compositionem*. Having said that, the document took the form of a donation. Despite resorting to a practice of pacification to end the dispute and presenting the document formally under this legal and also moral cover, the king modified the structure and language to display his supremacy over Alagón and act consequently. Thus, through the adoption of a document of donation, the king presented himself as the true lord of the town of Morella and, from a position of superiority, ceded it to the noble for the services lent in the campaign of conquest. With that, he also displayed his magnificence as a king because, despite the Alagón's insurrection and defeat in the subsequent war, the monarch showed that he knew how to pardon and, especially, to manage the political relations with the nobility effectively.

Consequently, after accepting the existence of a conflict over Morella, the monarch declared that he granted Morella to Alagón, *attendentes et considerantes multa et grata servicia* that Blasco had lent, was lending and would lend to the king. However, given the strategic importance of the place and the power his military victory over the noble gave him, James introduced a series of conditions that limited the donation and ensured a certain control over the fortress for the monarchy. Thus, the king imposed a time limit on the concession: Blasco could only hold Morella *omnibus diebus vite vestre*, so that, *post dies vestros, revertatur ad nos vel ad successores nostros villa et castrum de Morella*.⁶⁶ Moreover, the king reserved part of the castle, *quod vocatus Celoquia*, that had to remain in the power of Fernando Díaz or, if the knight did not want to or could not take charge, of Jimeno Pérez de Tarazona, accompanied by a garrison. Thanks to that, the monarch ensured the presence of troops who could act rapidly before any insurrection and, especially, maintain his presence as a display of his control.

After James I had presented the conditions in the pact, it was the turn of Blasco de Alagón, who had little room for manoeuvre after his defeat. In fact, the noble's

65. More details about the practices of pacification, their use and staging, in Royo, Vicent. *Vilafranca (1239-1412). Conflictos, mediaciones de pau i arbitratges en una comunitat rural valenciana*. Castelló de la Plana: Universitat Jaume I, 2016.

66. However, the noble's heirs could retain an inheritance of seven *jovades* of land within the limits of the town. Thus, the concessions that Alagón must have made to the men in his army and other settlers remained fully valid and could not be revoked by the Crown. A *jovada* was equivalent to three hectares.



speech was very brief and, in it, he accepted the donation, promised to respect the terms of the agreement the monarch had proposed and, finally, signed the document with his son, Artal. At this point, there was a return to the typical discourse of the practices of pacification and the ceremony that put a close to the dispute was staged, although again with certain differences from the habitual model. Thus, James I promised to observe the terms of the pact *super librum et crucem Domini, tactis sacrosantis evangeliis*, while Blasco and Artal de Alagón paid homage kissing the king's hands and mouth. Normally, the parties paid this homage to each other to seal an agreement. This time, however, only the nobles did so, a final display of submission, through which they recognised the king as the true lord before the political society of the time.⁶⁷

Reaching this pact and the ceremony of pacification staged in Montalbán put a definitive end to the conflict between James I and Blasco de Alagón for Morella. Objectively, the conditions had been agreed between the two parties, so that, to a good degree, they responded to each one's pretensions. On one hand, the king had managed to ensure the possession of Morella for the Crown after the noble's death. On the other, Alagón was in no condition to demand any other prerogative or right: he had been defeated in the armed conflict and, despite this, he maintained possession of Morella, although he had to renounce the right to pass it on to his heirs. Moreover, the same day the agreement was signed, James I granted him the castles of Culla and Les Coves de Vinromà *propter meritum et remuneratione et magnum servitium et utile quo nobis fecistis in captione castri et ville de Morella*. This donation, that again recognised the noble as having conquered Morella, was done with the full *iure hereditario*, so that Alagón obtained full possession and could leave these territories to his descendants.⁶⁸ This thus completed his domains in the Kingdom of Valencia and made up the largest territorial estate in these early years of the conquest.

This 1235 pact followed the same directives established some years before between the two parties, as the new concord ratified the principal decision taken in the oral agreement reached between 1231 and 1232: the town of Morella belonged to the king, who ceded it to Alagón to administer. However, in the new pact of 1235, two clauses were added that guaranteed the monarch's supremacy and attested to his superiority over the noble. This must be taken with caution because, as stated above, the first agreement from 1231-1232 is only known through the chronicle. Then, it is not possible to compare the information with any other official document and so we cannot find the possible novelties incorporated into the second pact compared with the first with any certainty. Nevertheless, logic invites one to think that, if James I had managed to impose the two additions introduced in the

67. Eleven people witnessed the act, among whom there were nobles and representatives of the military orders. ACA. Cancellaria. Pergamins. Pergamins de Jaume I, No. 643.

68. AHN. Órdenes Militares. Montesa. Pergaminos reales, 481, No. 47R. Blasco had occupied the castle of Culla some years before—surely between 1232 and the autumn of 1233—and, with this document, the king confirmed his ownership. The castle of Les Coves had been occupied by royal troops in the autumn of 1233 and now came into the noble's hands. Royo, Vicent. *Els orígens del Maestrat...*: 32-42.



1235 concord, he would have put them into the chronicle, because they were very evident proof of his victory over Alagón.

The first of these aspects affects the duration of the concession and at no moment is a time limit on the cession mentioned in the account in the chronicle. It is highly likely that James I had not envisaged this at that moment or could not impose this condition because, in he had done so, he would have left a written record of it to show the submission he obtained from the noble. Beyond this initial silence, the importance of the place, the colonising work that Alagón carried out in Morella from when he assumed the lordship and, especially, possible future claims by his descendants to keep the town among the family's assets would have encouraged the king to introduce the clause that restricted the possession of the fief to the life of the noble. In fact, the inclusion of the concession for life in the 1235 concord was the only way to ensure that Morella would be incorporated into the royal patrimony, even more so when it was Artal de Alagón himself who certified the transfer.

The second novelty was the occupation of part of the fortress by a delegate from the monarch, as the chronicle contains no mention of the Celòquia tower being under the custody of a royal garrison. As in the previous case, it is very possible that the stationing of royal troops in the fortress was not in the original pact of 1231-1232 because, if it had been, the monarch would have detailed this question in the chronicle. In fact, the king would have mentioned this aspect because the person chosen to take charge of the tower in the concord of 1235 was none other than the knight Fernando Díaz, who, if we recall, in the autumn of 1231, advised the king to go first to Morella to negotiate the possession with Alagón. As he did when relating this episode of the journey to Morella, if he had envisaged occupying of part of the fortress and leaving it under Díaz, James I would have mentioned it in the chronicle, especially to show the loyalty he enjoyed from one of Alagón's vassals.

On reaching the concord of 1235 and surely with the intention of making the royal domain over Morella evident, the monarch managed to include this condition in the pact he agreed with Alagón. In a clear position of inferiority when negotiating with the king, the noble had to accept the presence of the royal troops. Moreover, those in charge of guarding the place were Fernando Díaz or Jimeno Pérez de Tarazona, men of confidence of both the noble and the monarch—who accompanied the latter on a good part of his expeditions during the conquest of the Kingdom of Valencia—, so that the custody of the tower was entrusted to men close to the two contenders. Indeed, given how the conditions for choosing the future holders of the tower if neither of these nobles was able to accept the guard are expressed, everything suggests this was done by mutual accord between James I and Alagón.⁶⁹ Despite this diligence, the condition imposed by the king was cruel and even humiliating for the noble because he remained under the vigilance of a

69. It was envisaged that, if neither of them could take charge of the tower, *teneat illam ille miles quem nos et vos eligemos, ad voluntatem utriusque sub eadem fidelitate*. ACA. Cancelleria. Pergamins. Pergamins de Jaume I, No. 643.



knight who had been his vassal and now acted in the name of the monarch.⁷⁰ In short, the two novelties introduced into the concord of 1235 ratified the position of superiority that James I achieved over the noble, a supremacy that defined the relation between the two over the following years.

7. A slow transition

The signing of the concord of Montalbán put an end for all time to the dissensions between James I and Blasco de Alagón over the possession of Morella. The monarch had managed to impose his will over the noble and had obtained the guarantees necessary to ensure the transfer of the town to the Crown sometime in the coming years. As well as the symbolic questions, the king was aware of the importance of the place on the political and strategic chessboard of the frontier region between Catalonia, Aragon and Valencia, so he fought hard until he was sure he would dominate the town after the death of a noble who he had also managed to subject in the personal and political fields. In fact, James I felt sure about victory achieved over Alagón and a good indication of this is that, after the signing of the concord, there was no further royal interference in the running of Morella. To the contrary, the noble administered the lordship as he wished and the monarch, busy with the conquest of Valencia, forgot about these lands and, in passing, also about the monastery of Benifassà, which was left unprotected by its leading backer.⁷¹ James I only paid interest to Morella again when the lordship reverted to the Crown in 1239, after Alagón's death.⁷²

In the case of Blasco, he attempted to regain the monarch's favour and, in fact, during 1235, he participated in the royal expeditions to Cullera, Montcada and Museros.⁷³ However, these actions did not hide the distance between the two, that progressively separated Alagón from the royal retinue. His place in the royal court was taken by his son, Artal, who participated in the campaigns to conquer Valencia

70. Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 81, points out that the king's domain of the Celòquia tower was purely symbolic in nature. In fact, the royal standard flew from the highest part of the fortress, the most visible point for all travellers, above Alagón banners, that would be on the gates and walls. This would be the best way to express that the supreme right over the castle and town of Morella was in the hands of the king, its natural lord.

71. In fact, Alagón colonised the possessions of Benifassà, except the valley where the monastery lies, and the conditions he imposed remained valid in the following centuries because the monks could not modify them. At that moment, the monastery could not stand up to Alagón and, from then on, it also had many difficulties to consolidate itself in the seigneurial network of the region due to the monarch's inattention. More details about the situation of Benifassà and its complex relation with James I, in Burns, Robert I. *The Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: Reconstruction on a Thirteenth-Century Frontier*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1967.

72. The transfer to the Crown and administration of Morella by James I, in Royo, Vicent. *Les arrels històriques...*: 91-146.

73. Puig, Joan. "Els senyorijs...": 297.



beside James I until his death in Sax in the spring of 1239.⁷⁴ With this substitution, the monarch maintained the lineage in the royal retinue, but side-lined the head of the family, which became a hurdle for consolidating his projects. From then on, the honour of serving the king passed to his elder son, who had shown himself to be a loyal ally of the Crown in the most difficult moments and had preferred to support the king instead of defending the family interests and also his own. Before the political society of the epoch, the king was the true winner in the struggle with Alagón because, as well as gaining possession of Morella, this was also ratified by Artal himself.

The defeat inflicted by the monarch and the abandonment of his son Artal sank Blasco and he disappeared from the political scene in the Crown of Aragon after the pact of 1235.⁷⁵ He retired to Morella, where he spent the final years of his life. He focussed on managing his domains and actively worked on settling his Valencian possessions, granting a total of thirteen charters of settlement in the lordships of Morella, Culla and Les Coves.⁷⁶ However, relegated from the fame and importance he had enjoyed previously, Alagón's light gradually dimmed. Moreover, the cost of financing his campaigns of conquest and setting up the new Valencian lordships threatened the noble's finances seriously. His debts piled up and he even had to give up some possessions to face the demands of his creditors.⁷⁷ Finally, he died towards the end of 1239. At that moment, the town of Morella changed hands and went to the Crown, as had been agreed in 1235, while the rest of Alagón's assets remained in the power of his brother-in-law, Pedro Sesé, who had to resolve the debts the noble had contracted before transferring it to his heirs.⁷⁸ Thus, the dispute about Morella between James I and Blasco de Alagón came to an end, although the conflict had really finished years before.

8. Conclusions

This episode of the conquest of Morella and the subsequent dispute over its ownership illustrates the relations of power established between the monarchy and the nobility in the central decades of the thirteenth century. Beyond this particular case, the clash between James I and Blasco de Alagón shows the power play between the two groups and also the aspirations of their members. On one hand, the monarch aimed to consolidate its position at the head of the social structure

74. Ubieto, Antonio. *Orígenes del reino de Valencia*. Zaragoza: Anubar, 1979: I, 146.

75. After 1235, it has only been possible to document the presence of Alagón in the courts of Monzón in 1236. Garcia Edo, Vicent. *Blasco de Alagón...*: 43.

76. The administration of Morella by Alagón, in Royo, Vicent. *Les arrels històriques...*: 59-89.

77. For example, before dying in 1239, he had to sell the castle of Les Coves to the Order of Calatrava. See the following note.

78. Garcia Edo, Vicent. "Blasco de Alagón". *Boletín de la Sociedad Castellonense de Cultura*, 62 (1986): 383-420.



and, on the other, the nobility defended its leading role in society, especially in everything referring to war and conquest of territories. In this sense, the expansion into the *Sharq Al-Andalus* energised the relations and dispute for power between the monarchy and the nobility, at the same time that it also enabled the leading figures in this secular confrontation to introduce new elements that reinforced their postures. All these factors were present in the conflict over Morella and the actions of the two principal actors perfectly summarise one of the aspects of the political universe of the Crown of Aragon in the thirteenth century.

Blasco de Alagón's acts displayed a mind-set that characterised the nobility in the first third of the thirteenth century. In fact, Alagón was heir to a noble tradition that marked his behaviour at all times. He belonged to one of the families with most renown in Aragon, although the territorial bases of its lordship were certainly modest. So, like his father, Blasco sought to obtain prestige through service to the Crown in the complex context of the minority of James I. In those times, collaboration with the monarchy had become a path to social promotion for a nobility that also attempted to enlarge its fame on the frontier. The expansion into *Al-Andalus* could supply a good name, riches and especially territories, that augmented the patrimony of the lineage and provided new sources of income for the seigneurial economy. Then, the war with the Muslims was a path to enrichment as well as offering the possibility of consolidating the position of the nobility in the political framework of the Crown of Aragon.

The occupation of *Al-Andalus* became a source of legitimation of the power because it combined the justification for war supplied by the cover conferred by fighting the infidel. Then, from the start of the expansion process, the monarchy and nobility coveted the ideological monopoly intrinsic to the conquest and also the leadership of the military campaigns, as that would enable them to justify and consolidate their hegemony at the head of the social structure. So, a tense dispute began between kings and nobles that, in the ideological field, the former progressively achieved the upper hand. Indeed, the monarchy imposed itself on the aristocracy as the conquests advanced and assumed the moral coverage supplied by the crusade, an ideological support absolutely necessary to reinforce its position at the head of society. However, in an epoch when the crown lacked its own military forces, the contributions of the nobility—and other social groups—were essential for sustaining the royal projects. This, as is logical, stimulated discussions about ideological, military and political control with the Crown, because the members of the aristocracy aspired to lead the territorial expansion and also demanded the share of power that they had earned for their role in the advance against the Muslims. So, there was an intense dialectic between the monarchy and the nobility around the conquest of *Al-Andalus*, one that was fully valid in the early decades of the thirteenth century and that, likewise, determined how James I would act.

The king had had enormous difficulties to control an unruly nobility, which had attacked the basis of the power of a weakened crown during his minority and the early years of his reign. In this *tessitura*, James I knew that expansion into *Al-Andalus* was one of the best mechanisms to upturn the balance of power with the



nobility and build a strong monarchy. Thanks to the conquest, he could obtain the ideological and moral cover necessary to head the social structure and to be able to build new models of social, economic and political structures that were more favourable to the interests of the crown. Indeed, the war and occupation of the Andalusian territories offered the king the opportunity to project a new social edifice with a solid monarchic structure, that was situated indisputably at the head of the social organisation. However, to carry out this out, James I had to guide all the process of expansion and, that is why he needed to subject the nobility from the start. Only that way could he have more room for manoeuvre at the head of this great enterprise and mould the new society to his interests. That is why he reacted so rapidly to Blasco de Alagón's acts and did not stop his attacks until he achieved his objective. James I knew that the later evolution of the conquest and, especially, the adoption of the model of construction of the new country, depended to a good extent on resolving this incident.

To reach his target, which was none other than to subject the noble, he used all the mechanisms within his reach. Sometimes, the circumstances forced him to take the only possible decision available. So, he resorted to negotiating directly with Alagón after the conquest of Morella because he had no other means at his disposal at that moment. From then on, however, the king acted very skilfully and employed different mechanisms in the way he believed most suitable on each occasion. In fact, James I handled relations with the nobility with great skill to win their favour and, especially, to avoid their reaction to the illegalities he committed during his struggle with Alagón. He even managed to convince the latter's son, Artal, to support the monarchic project and also took up arms when he considered that war could give him the final argument to impose himself over the noble. In fact, armed conflict was the main mechanism for imposing the royal will throughout this struggle. Victory in the war legitimated James I's acts and the result was sealed by a document with the pertinent legal guarantees. Immediately after, the posterior ceremony of pacification, moulded to the parameters that interested the monarch, displayed the submission of the noble before the political society of the time. Through all these mechanisms, the conflict with Blasco de Alagón was fully resolved and there was no room for doubt: James I had won a victory certified by the acts undertaken during the final stages of the clash. Finally, all this interweaving of actions was impregnated with a very marked discourse, one that elevated the figure of the king as head of the social structure.

Indeed, the chronicle serves as the central thread for analysing the monarch's acts and supplies the ideal language to build the image of a powerful king that James wanted to achieve. The account was articulated at the end of the monarch's life, some four decades after the events. As is logical, his memory had erased many records and had transformed others, sometimes unconsciously and others according to the author's own interests. That is why some details are lost and it is complicated to date some of the principal episodes of the struggle precisely. However, beyond the lapses imposed by the passing of time, a deliberate distortion of some passages from this conflict can be perceived, especially from its early stages. Currently, the



succession of events can be reconstructed with a certain consistency and, in this sense, the general discourse elaborated by the king concords with the surviving documentary vestiges. Indeed, the scriptures confirm the monarch's words, but that does not mean that the king's version was completely true. In fact, James I deliberately hid or transformed some information to continue the line of enhancing his figure, until he had built a seamless vision of himself. This way, a fully coherent discourse was assembled, one that shows the progressive submission of the nobility and strengthening of a monarchy that consolidated itself at the peak of the social structure thanks to the king's deeds.

This is the path followed by the conflict over Morella between James I and Blasco de Alagón, a struggle that marked the beginning of the conquest of the future Kingdom of Valencia. The struggle was complex, but the king was finally victorious and, from then on, was able to impose his designs on the other social actors. Evidently, James I would have to make concessions to the nobles –and other social groups– to involve them in the conquest and construction of the Kingdom of Valencia. However, what the king achieved was that the nobles had much less power in the new country than in the other political entities of the Crown of Aragon. This was the first step of a strategy by James I that established the bases for consolidating the monarchy. As is logical, the discussions about the exercise of power continued over the following centuries and, in fact, the balance of power between the monarchy and the nobility went through different phases, depending on each one's situation. However, James I imposed a new dialectic on political relations during his reign, one that determined the share of power between the social classes and was the basis for building the late-medieval state of the Crown of Aragon.

