Castles on the Valencian Border March

by Karl W. Butzer

The Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula that concluded in 1492 was an attenuated process, in no small part due to the system of Islamic border defense. Islamic rural militias had long ago proved unable to withstand the armored warriors of the Christian north, and counter offensives were only feasible with Berber shock-troops. As a result, Islamic strategies were primarily defensive and often static, based on a network of small urban fortresses and strong castles. This arrangement of border "marches" becomes apparent during the 10th century (Fig. 1), and after the original Upper and Middle Marches crumbled, a second tier of defenses was activated about 100 km further south ca. 1125. This included the Eastern March (al-thaghur al-sharqi) in the foreland of Valencia (Fig. 2).

Until the recent advent of "castle archaeology," such defensive strategies were only imperfectly understood, on the basis of sparse historical writings. Even architectural sketches or topographic surveys of castles also are no substitute for excavations, which can elucidate function and provide a relative chronology for phases of construction. Furthermore, small rural castles form an integral part of a local settlement matrix, because castles were commonly built and defended by nearby villagers, providing refuge for people, seed grain, and livestock during times of danger. While spectacular fortresses may provide landmarks and receive historical attention for a famous siege or two, it was the aggregate of smaller "refuge" castles that potentially provided continuity for livelihood and settlement. Given the nature of medieval warfare and military technology,

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border marches were not impenetrable. But some or many of the countless local refuge points would survive any one incursion, to allow rapid revitalization of landscapes savaged by mobile sack-and-burn raiders.

How such defensive networks developed and functioned can be illustrated from my study of the Sierra de Espadán, 50 km north of Valencia, within the inner circuit of the Eastern March. During six seasons in the archives and in the field (1980-87), Elisabeth Butzer and I began to understand a rural landscape in the longue durée. The last two seasons were devoted to the castles: seven were surveyed and two, Afn and Xinerue, were partially excavated (Fig. 3). The findings of this part of our project are briefly sketched below. They demonstrate two phases of castle construction in response to the growing threat from the north. First, local villagers built unstandardized defenses, commonly towers, with or without walled enclosures. Subsequently, systematic defensive works, including large fortresses, were constructed with institutional organization and support. Even after the Christian Conquest of Valencia, the castles were repeatedly reutilized during revolts or regional wars.

A diagrammatic overview is provided by Fig. 4, showing the plans of probable or certain Islamic structures. Afn offers a "model" constructional history: (1) The original nucleus was a round tower of 12m height, with an attached enclosure and cistern—robust walls of mortared rock. (2) A geometric platform, with a thick casing of mortared rock around rubble fill was later added, buttressing the inner wall. Islamic pottery, in part derived from the original enclosure, is abundant. (3) Low walls of concrete were poured along the edge of the platform, but raised to form 6m parapets facing the village; at least two small "rooms" were built against the inner wall on top of a cemented floor. (4) Approximately contemporary are exterior defensive ramps and an isolated, square tower of mortared rock on the same ridge. (5) After protracted light occupation (soil with charcoalcd twigs and animal bone) the castle was abandoned and sterile sediment was laid down by rain wash. (6) The site was reoccupied, with much Islamic pottery, coeval with collapse of the eastern wall; The phase ends with a massive

![Map of the Eastern March](image-url)

Figure 2. The Islamic topography of the Eastern March is based on Arabic sources of 1050-70. An open square indicates a hisn (fortress with settlement); a full square, a qal'at (village, walled or with castle); a large black circle, a madina (urban fortress). Arrows represent invasion routes. Inset shows location of Figure 3.
A 14th century Christian castle, with a round wall turret; its hall had cut-oak ceiling beams, and the destruction debris has much glass from wine goblets and a potted with a Gothic rose—a Christian symbol. Two phases of destruction—in rapid succession—have a radiocarbon date around 1440, despite a pottery age of c. 1350, and I favor a date of 1363-65; the walls were partly rebuilt but the castle was not reutilized. Surprisingly, there is no documentation for this Christian castle. Its walls are anchored on Islamic, concrete roots, with a rectangular wall turret. An even earlier, round tower of mortared-rock was razed in the 14th century; its fill has Islamic pottery with calligraphy, and a radiocarbon date of ca. 1165. At that time the settlement itself was perched on this rock, which also has foundations of a late Bronze Age site. The inhabitants moved down to below the castle by 1300, where surface pottery is compatible with abandonment shortly after the last documentary reference to this Muslim community in 1449.

The castle of Esilda is disappointing, given the archival importance of its castellan until 1475, and the numerous complaints in regard to work services by the Muslim citizenry ca. 1365. The struc-

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...and the ground evidence shows that by 1200 every qarya was a minor fortress. At first a hisn may have been a tower or small castle, but later it typically was expanded and also served as protection or refuge for an adjacent settlement; originally perhaps built to further petty dynastic ends, it became a link in a system of regional defense against invasion. The concepts of castle and settlement function not only varied from one region to another, but also over time; by 1200 there probably was little difference between the typical hisn and the typical qarya.

The Espadán castles document this change. New mountain settlements were founded during the 11th century. At some point and in response to increasing danger, simple defensive towers began to be constructed at the local level, to shelter people and animals. Subsequently a systematic effort at fortification was begun. In particular, the tabiqa technique requires masses of cement, calcined in high-temperature kilns, implying transport over considerable distances; even the sand and gravel mix meant that local villagers had to carry hundreds or thousands of loaded baskets up steep mountain sides from the valley bottoms. That infers major mobilization of labor and even of capital, and is unthinkable without a larger, regional administrative input. I would argue that the tabiqa constructions of the Espadán represent an organized institutional effort, in

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response to a major perceived crisis.

Here archaeology and history become complementary. Even before the collapse of the Ebro valley towns, El Cid and several allied barons wreaked havoc on the coastal plain around Valencia ca. 1093-1103, first exposing the vulnerability of sharg al-Andalus. Then, as Zaragoza was about to fall, a Christian army struck at Alcañiz and then deep into the mountain valleys of the border march, to take Morella (1117), before permanently conquering the upper Daroca plains (1120-28). In 1125-26, the king of Aragon followed the traditional invasion route via Teruel to Sagunt, penetrating southward to Granada, in order to evacuate Andalusian Christians. Perhaps the proliferation of simple defenses, organized at the local level, was a response to the events of 1117-29.

The Aragonese systematically hammered away at the border fortresses from 1146-80, pushing back the frontier by an average of 70 km, while a Catalan force surged down the coastal plain deep into Murcia, during 1172-79. The situation then stabilized for some 30 years, and one can envision a systematic amplification of defenses in what remained of the Eastern March. The many tabiqa castles were probably built during the late 1100s, and subsequent resistance was stiff. The final offensive of Jaime I, begun in 1232, concentrated on besieging and starving out the coastal cities, later securing capitulation of the inland castles by generous treaties. Thus the archaeological of the castles elucidates not only rural landscape history but also the progression of the Conquest.


EXHIBITS

Textiles from Egypt, Syria and Spain: Seventh through 15th Centuries. 50 pieces from the museum’s collections. Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, through November 1, 1992.

