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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 de-

fenses was activated about 100 km further south ca. 1125. This included the Eastern March (*al-thaghr 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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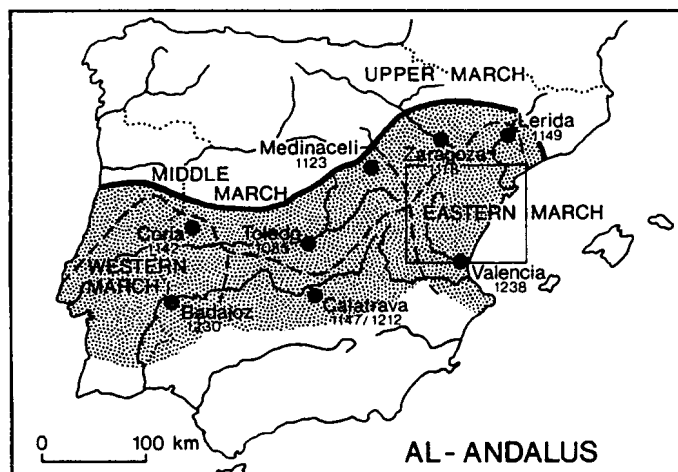
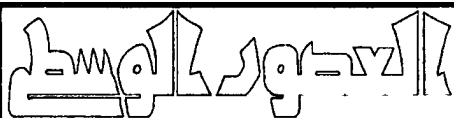


Figure 1. The frontier defense of al-Andalus was originally based on the "Middle" and "Upper" Marches. Dates give year of loss. Inset shows position of Figure 2.

HELLO, COLUMBUS

Because October, 1992 marks the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World, this issue of *Al-'Usur al-Wusta* has a special focus on Islamic Spain, which in many ways provided the historical background for the momentous events of 1492.

-Ed.



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The Board of Directors of MEM is elected annually at the general business meeting, normally held in the fall at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association. The next business meeting will take place on Wednesday, October 28, 1992, at 8:00 P.M. in the Forum Room of the Portland Hilton Hotel, Portland, Oregon, U.S.A. The Board of Directors for 1992 consists of the following members:

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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, Aín and Xinquer, 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 Chris-

tian 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. Aín 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, abutting 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 charcoaled 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 massiv

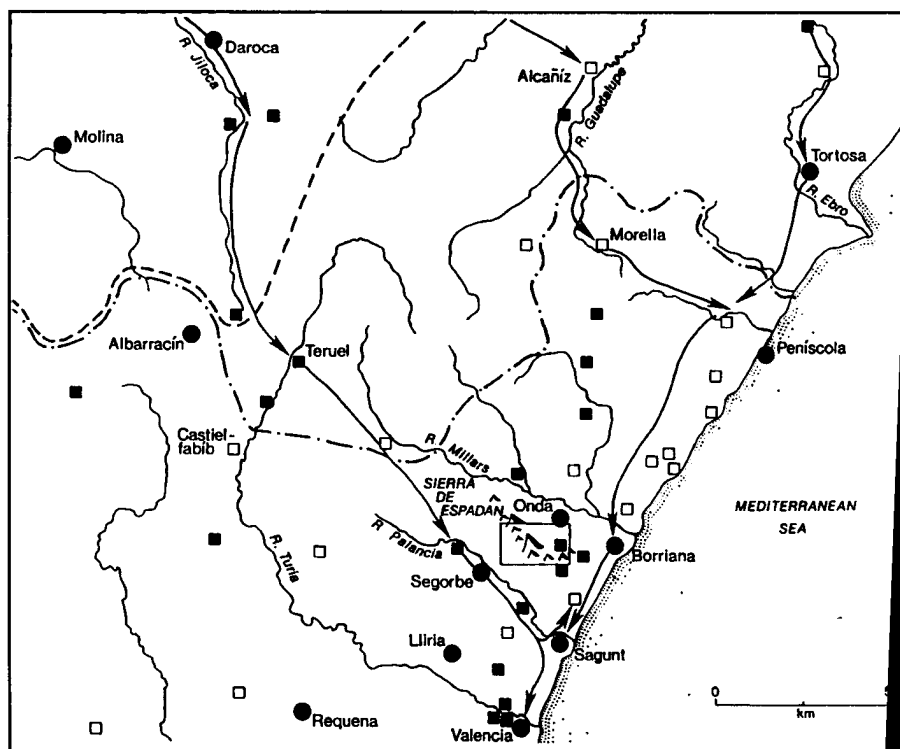


Figure 2. The Islamic topography of the Eastern March is based on Arabic sources of 1050-70. An open square indicates a *hisn* (fortress with settlement); a full square, a *qa* (village, walled or with castle); a large black circle, a *madina* (urban fortress). Arrows represent invasion routes. Inset shows location of Figure 3.

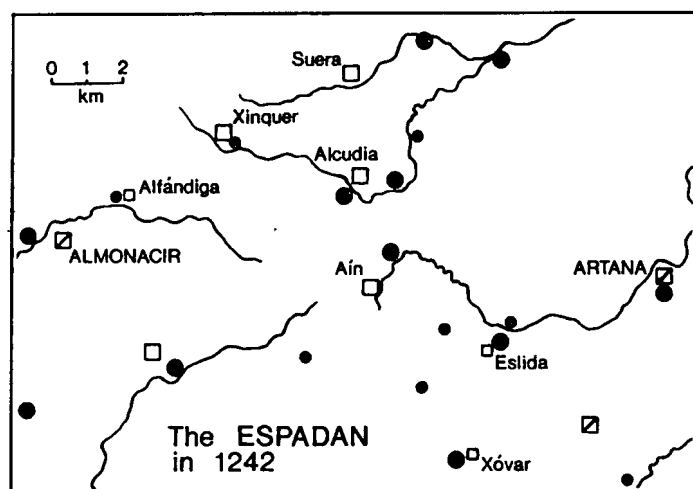


Figure 3. The Sierra de Espadán in 1242 included villages (large circles), hamlets (small circles), fortresses (crossed squares), and castles or towers (large or small squares). Names refer to fortifications of Figure 4.

destruction layer that embeds a cross-bow bolt. (7) The decaying castle was crudely repaired, with goat pens in the inner enclosure; ceramics include some Mudéjar pottery of ca. 1400-1450, mixed with older Islamic sherds. Radiocarbon dates suggest rough ages of ca. 1150 for (5) and ca. 1265 for (6).

With exterior wall heights only 3m above the rocky hilltop, this was a castle of refuge, enclosing some 650m². The absence of luxury table wares and the simple "rooms" suggest a permanent watchpost of low prestige. Pottery of the destruction level (6) is dominated by porous water vessels, with few table wares; since the region capitulated peacefully in 1242, destruction probably relates to the subsequent Sierra Muslim revolt of 1276-77. Late Medieval activity suggests a short-lived, Christian watchpost. In sum, a rustic tower and enclosure were initially built of local rock, followed by an expanded and more systematic structure, employing the North African *tabiqa* technique (pouring mortar and rock into movable casements).

The castle of Alcudia de Veo is similar, with an awkwardly primitive interior precinct, built of mortared rock, less massive than at Aín; this was followed by *tabiqa* construction of a 12m parapet tower, and a stretch of wall and projecting turrets along the most vulnerable side. Strengthened from the inside with mortared rock, this wall was breached in a subsequent siege. Seriation of the surface pottery indicates an age identical to Aín, and there is no trace of Christian reutilization. Even if the greatly expanded outer enclosure

(1900m²) was intended to include village livestock, both Aín and Alcudia imply population growth and some elapsed time between the initial and the expanded structures.

The *castro* of Suera originally was a rock-built enclosure on a high pinnacle, subsequently raised by a concrete parapet; the rock walls of the enclosure below were later re-mortared but are probably also Is-

lamic. This castle had an appointed castellan 1382-1475, but minimal Mudéjar surface pottery argues for no more than a very small garrison, during times of tension. The tower of Alfándiga, directly above a hamlet abandoned ca.1450, is a strong concrete structure, with basement cisterns but no enclosure, whereas that of Xóvar has remnants of a mortared enclosure wall (340m²); the surface pottery here is Mudéjar, of ca. 1350-1400, possibly reflecting use during the Castilian war of 1363-65.

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 potsherd 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 Eslida 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-

Xinqer has striking remnants of

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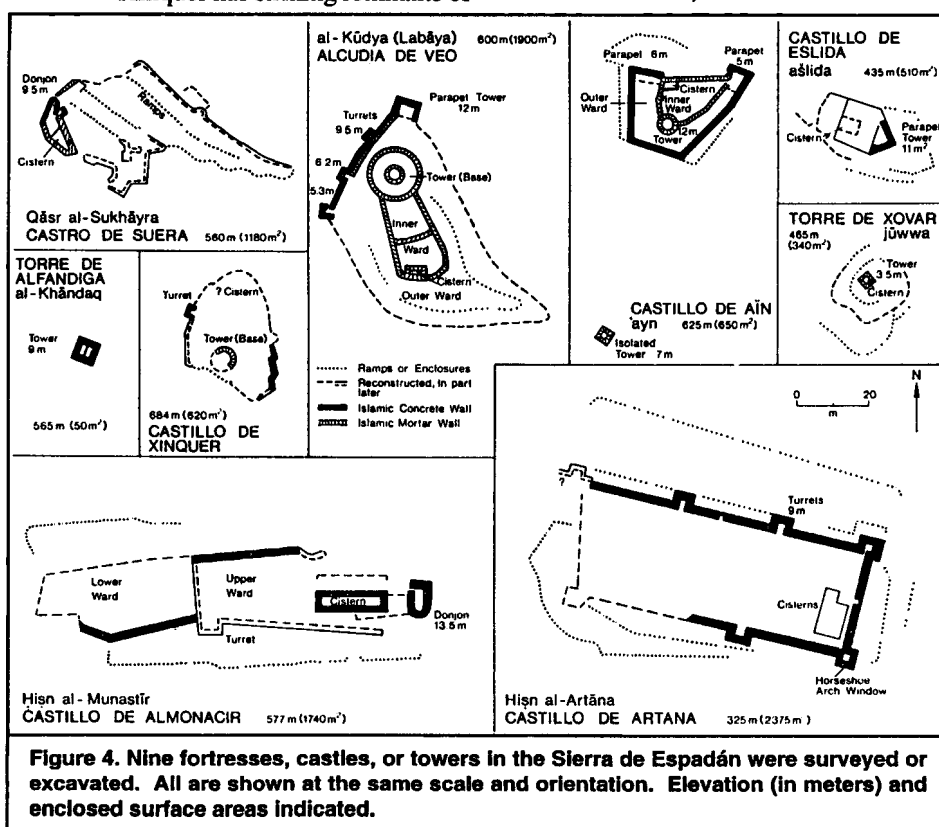


Figure 4. Nine fortresses, castles, or towers in the Sierra de Espadán were surveyed or excavated. All are shown at the same scale and orientation. Elevation (in meters) and enclosed surface areas indicated.

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and Power and on Marshall Hodgson as a world historian.

KEITH WEISSMAN recently completed "Mongol Rule in Baghdad, Evidence From the Chronicle of Ibn al-Fuwati." He continues his research on Ibn al-Fuwati's *Al-Hawadith al-Jani'a*, and on urban renewal in Cairo under the Khedive and French. He also continues his work as a "scholar-journalist" at the Center for Middle East Research in Washington, DC.

BRANNON M. WHEELER recently published "Tradition in History: Imagining the Sasanian Capture of Jerusalem,"

Orientalia Christiana Periodica 57 (1991), and has completed "Reading Inside out: A Comparison of the 'Three Worlds of King Ruang' and 'On the Origin of the World'." He continues research toward his Univ. of Chicago dissertation "Applying the Canon: Authority, Definition, and Maintenance of Jama'i-Sunni Fiqh."

DONALD S. WHITCOMB recently returned from a short season of excavation, consolidation and reconstruction at the site of the Islamic city of Ayla at Aqaba, Jordan. He continues his research at Aqaba and on the results of this season, including a hoard of Fatimid *dinars*. He has recently published "Reassessing the Archaeology of Jordan of the Abbasid Period," in M. Zaghoul et al., eds., *Studies in the History*

and Archaeology of Jordan IV, and "Excavations in the site of medieval 'Aqaba," in Y. Raghib, ed., *Documents de l'Islam médiéval: Nouvelles perspectives de recherche* (Cairo: IFAO, 1991). In May 1993, he will present a paper at the Medieval Institute meeting in Kalamazoo on "Text and Context: Qusayr al-Qadim and the Indian Ocean Spice Trade

E. SARA WOLPER is completing her dissertation on the dervish lodges of Tokat, Amasya, and Sivas built between 1250 and 1350 AD.

NEGUIN YAVARI is completing his dissertation on "The Life and Times of Nizam al-Mulk."

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ture was totally rebuilt, with Gothic arches, after 1365, but it is very small. Even if better Mudéjar surface sherds have long been picked up, the common wares are late Islamic (13th century), compatible with Muslim refuge during the siege of 1276-77; the pottery does not support a second siege in 1365, and there probably never was a permanent Christian garrison.

Artana and Almonacir are large, systematic concrete structures, representing real fortresses. Common and luxury surface sherds date ca. 1350-1400, although Almonacir is documented from 1238 to 1410 and had a castellan. Artana is mentioned as a *qarya* ca. 1050, but any earlier castle was razed to make way for the "new" fortress, with its horseshoe-arch tower window. The whole western side of the castle of Artana was destroyed, probably in an Aragonese siege in 1365, and never rebuilt. Almonacir was also besieged by the Aragonese, in April of 1365, and the south-eastern wall was probably destroyed at that time, to be later rebuilt with mortared stone. Both Artana and Almonacir appear to have provided refuge to rebellious Muslims during the war with Castile.

This suite of sites encodes a complex of military and social history, summarized in three phases: (1) "Home-made" defensive structures, with round towers, small enclosures, and built of mortared rock (earlier than ca. 1150); (2) Geometrical structures with rectangular turrets or towers, built in a standardized *tabíqa* tech-

nique, and with large enclosures (after ca. 1150 but before 1242); and (3) Some rebuilding, by Christian castellans, using mortared rock (ca. 1350-1450), or, alternatively, renewed use as refuges by Muslim villagers in 1276 or 1365. This regional detail illuminates the broader historical picture.

The Islamic topography of the Valencia area and the Eastern March is mainly known from the direct observations of al-Udhri (1003-1085) and al-Bakri (died 1094), whose lost work of 1068 was extensively used by al-Yakut (completed 1224). This topography (Fig. 2) represents the decentralized al-Andalus of the *taifa* period, but before the collapse of the Upper March along the Pyrenean foothills. The rapid Moroccan and Arab conquest of the Iberian peninsula (711-20) was possible because the *pax romana* had induced the population to take up residence in mainly undefended settlements on the best soils of the lowlands or upland plains; the defensible hill-top sites and mountain valleys of the Iberians and Celtiberians had long been abandoned. In fact, there is almost no archaeological evidence of settlement in the mountains during Roman, Visigothic, or even Caliphal times. The forests near Aín only began to be cut c. A.D. 1000, and deforestation in the Júcar watershed led to accelerated flooding downstream after the mid-11th century. The topography recorded by al-Udhri and al-Bakri was in some respects a new cultural landscape.

During the 1060s many a *qarya* was nothing but a minor administrative

village in an isolated agricultural tract, but 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 *tabíqa* 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 *tabíqa* 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 *sharq 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 *tablqa* 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 archaeology of the castles elucidates not only rural landscape history but also the progression of the Conquest.

Bibliographical note: The documentary background on the Sierra Muslims and an outline of the archaeology of the Muslim hamlet Benialf and the castle of Afn are given in K.W. Butzer, E.K. Butzer, and J.F. Mateu, "Muslim Communities of the Sierra de Espadán, Kingdom of Valencia," *Viator* 17(1986): 339-413. For changes after the Muslim Expulsion of 1610, see K.W. Butzer, "Adaptation and change in historical perspective," in: *The Earth as Transformed by Human Action*, ed. B.L. Turner, Cambridge 1990, pp. 685-701.

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.

Art of the Persian Courts: Selections From the Art and History Trust. Manuscripts, paintings, calligraphy and other works of art from a private collection in Liechtenstein. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, Nov. 5, 1992 through Jan. 24, 1993.

Islamic Art and Patronage: Selections From Kuwait. More than 100 masterworks of Islamic art from the Al-Sabah collection. Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA, Nov. 15, 1992 through Jan. 10, 1993

Islam and China. Compares and contrasts Islamic approaches to artistic design with those of China. Sackler Museum, Cambridge, MA, Dec. 19, 1992 through Feb. 14, 1993.



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