

Mur castle (Pallars County, Catalonia) and its spatial organization in 10th – 12th century

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Castral system; natural resources; feudalisation

Introduction: situation and history context

The castle of Mur is located in the mountain range of el Montsec in the Pre-Pyrenees, in the present region of el Pallars Jussà (province of Lleida). These mountains go in a east-west direction along 45 km in length and 4.5–10 km in width. Its highest point is situated at 1684 m. This range of mountains has always been considered as the border that separates the Mediterranean plains of the south and the Pyrenean Mountains of the north.

The castle of Mur is part of the fortification process of the border lands between al-Andalus and the Catalan counties. This process was made in parallel to the repopulation effort produced during the 9th–11th centuries in this zone of Catalonia. Therefore this castle would work not only as a political element to structure the territory, but also as a defensive point of the population (Fig. 1).

The eldest reference we have about this fortress is of the 969 in relation to the church of Sant Fruitós, situated in Castro Muro (Bochaca/Portet/Puig 1991, 16). We have no other documentary information since 1037 and 1038 where are mentioned the limits of the castle of Mur to situate some donations of the count of Pallars to his loyal men. In documents of 1053 and 1055 we can find the lord of the castle, Arnau Mir de Tost, and the count of Pallars Jussà, Ramon III (Miquel Rossel 1945).

The limits of the castle of Mur are perfectly defined in the betrothal document of Valença, Arnau Mir Tost's daughter, in 1056. In this document are specified all the things she received because of her marriage to Ramon IV, the count of Pallars Jussà (Fig. 2). During the

second half of the 11th century was built the Augustinian abbey of Santa Maria de Mur, located at the eastern part of the castle. It became the familiar necropolis of the counts of Pallars Jussà. The document of consecration and endowment of its church confirms the limits of Mur. (Catalunya 1992, 348–355).

In 1071 Arnau Mir died and in his will he left Mur to his daughter Valença and to his grandson Arnau. And this was the beginning of the lords of Mur dynasty.

The castle of Mur belonged to the counts until 1280, when it passed into the hands of the kings of Catalonia and Aragon. They gave it as a fief to different noble families from Catalonia and Valencia until the 20th century when it became a municipal propriety. The archaeological research shows us that the castle was firstly abandoned during the 13th century. However there was a later military occupation, in the 15th century, coinciding with the contemporary warlike conflicts (Sancho 2001). During the abandonment, the control of the territory belonged to the abbey, what caused a lot of struggles with the noblemen who owned Mur.

The Castle: Description and building characteristics

The present structure of the castle is attributed to the domain of Arnau Mir de Tost, during the first part of the 11th century. However it seems to remain some older parts and later unremarkable removals. The castle of Mur stands on a rocky base which is used as foundations (Fig. 3). It presents a triangular plan with round corners. It has few openings through the exte-

rior, only four loopholes. The front door is situated at the south-west frontage. It is a small door with a round arch with voussoirs. The most singular element of the castle is the round tower next to the front door. It is 16 m high and it has an external diameter of 8 m. Its door is 8 m over the ground level. The wall in its base is 3m thick. The inside is structured in five levels, two of them under the entrance level. Each level can be perfectly seen thanks to the brackets that supported the beams and the floor should have been made of wood. A flat roof may have crowned the tower. There is only a window that goes through the wall trough a niche where there would have been an altar of a small chapel located on the uppermost floor of the castle (Fig. 4).

In the north-west end, the external enclosing wall rises up like a tower, supported by a big arch and crowned by a gallery with six openings with voussoirs in all directions. This is one of the most characteristic sights of the castle. Five small drains are opened at the first floor level in the south-east frontage. Two of them are related to internal structures designed to clean up the enclosure. The other three are located on the same level as the interior ground floor. There are two other outlets situated at both ends of the north-west façade, corresponding to the latrines located in the inside.

The cistern is located next to the tower and placed against the north-east enclosing wall. It was covered by a stone vault and the access to the sentry walk was over it, through wooden ladders and platforms inserted into the tower and the mentioned enclosing wall.

On the left side of the court, there is the wing destined to the habitat. Its frontage opens out the court and it presents two windows on the first floor and a door on the ground floor. Two groups of granary have been found on the ground floor. They were built with adobe and flagstones and they had the inside covered. The enclosing wall of 1.5 m wide was crowned by a sentry walk, where we could find such a type of primitive battlements made of untied stones forming an undulating line.

The castle of Mur presents a stone face joined with a very hard mortar of lime and sand which is of a great quality. The blocks of stone, which have a medium size, do not present a very neat cut, although they form a regular face, alternating some blocks sideways. The

covers were made of flagstones from the country. The stone used to build the castle was taken out from the base where it stands on. Therefore we cannot affirm that the castle adapts its plan to the soil conditions, but it was conditioned to the type of plan they wanted to build.

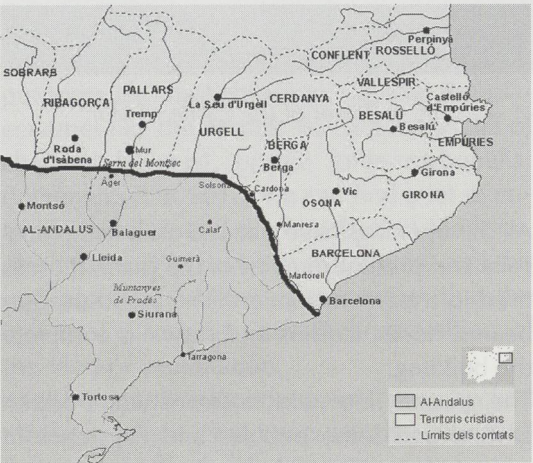


Fig. 1: Map of the border between al-Andalus and the Catalan counties and the situation of the castle of Mur.

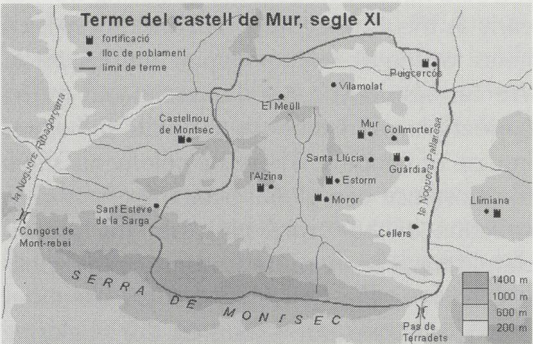


Fig. 2: Map of the limits of the castle of Mur with its principal fortresses.



Fig. 3: General view of the castle of Mur from the south.



Fig. 4: Tower of the Castle of Mur.

All the openings have a round arch with voussoirs and present remains of the plank moulds used in their construction. The wood used in beams, floors, ladders and catwalks complete the building.

The ground floor was made of well-trodden ground and some pebbles and flagstones in order to keep it out of irregularities.

The general structure of the castle obeys to a global project, although the main tower seems to be built before, probably during the second half of the 10th century. After the main tower, it would have been built the enclosing wall, as early as the 11th century. The inside presents holes for the beams to support the first hole. We can also find some drains situated in the correct places in order to evacuate the water in case of flooding. These two elements show the existence of a global planning of the construction of the castle. However the project should have been built through different phases, because the walls that defined the different spaces are not joined to the enclosing wall.

The territory experienced: defence, habitat and production activities

During the 10th and 11th centuries, Mur is the centre of a territory situated at the first line of the border with the Islam. This situation compels to design some measures of protection like a network of castles and watchtowers with a visual communication between them. This kind of network allows the communication between distant zones and in all directions – to the north with the county of el Pallars So-

birà, to the east with the county of Urgell and to the west with the Aragon kingdom. This network will be gradually extended to the south as new territories are conquered to the Islam. There is a great variety of castles inside the limits of Mur and almost all the inhabited settlements have some defensive system. We could highlight the castles of Guàrdia, Mirabet, Puigcercós, Meüll, Montllobar, Estorm, Moror, Alzina, Castellnou, Coscó and the fortified farms of Ginebrell, Formicó, mas de l'Eloi, all of them inside the limits of Mur. From them, you could get in touch with other castles like Llimiana, Llordà, Orcau, Alsamora, Xiribeta and Viacamp, for example.

These castles were the residence of the noblemen during the feudalization period, but once all the territory was conquered to the Islam, they became the centre of the feudal power. So they became the legal and administrative centre and the point of reference for the inhabitants under their repressive machine.

The archaeological survey and the documentary research allow us to define a model of concentrated habitat, although some dispersed farms have been identified. All these castles have inhabited settlements immediately around them, that in some cases display a real process of incastellamento. It happens in Mur, but also in Puigcercós, Coscó, Castellnou, Alzina and Moror. In other cases the habitat is a little bit further, like in Miravet or in Guàrdia, although there is a clear relationship with the castle. Moreover we could find dispersed settlements that have no relationship with any castle like, for example, Fabregada, Vilamolera, Torrenta or Sant Fruitós. But all of them have some fortified place within a radius of less than 2 km. The dispersed farms that appear in the documents are very difficult to identify, because we have few information and they frequently change of name. As an exception, there are the farms of Ginebrell and Formigó, documented in the 11th and 13th centuries and they have been identified on the spot. The rest of farms located during the survey could not have been identified, even though they present some elements that could correspond to the medieval age.

The landscape of this zone is covered by forest and pastures, more than fields that we can find down the valley and in the sunny slopes.

The cattle activities do not appear so often in the documents, although we could find some

references in the payment of taxes where we could find stock products. The remains dispersed among the territory shows also the existence of this kind of activity: milestones, cattle tracks, stockyards, pastures, watering places. The breeding stock is formed by sheep and pigs, although we cannot forget the fowl and the beehives.

The agriculture is based on cereals, vine and olive trees, but also irrigated crops that are related to a hydraulic infrastructure and some fruit trees. The remains that can be identified on the spot and the documents confirm it.

With regard to watermills, we have got very interesting archaeological and documentary information. In 1075 we find the name of a village called Vilamolera in a document. Next to this village we can find a stony quarry where millwheel were extracted. The negatives of the millwheels can still be identified.

The remains of extraction activities can still be identified in other places next to castles and inhabited settlements. The flagstones were taken out in places where the rock could be extracted in layers, like a place close to the church of el Serrat de la Capella, nowadays almost disappeared. Its proximity to the flagstone quarry and the fact that its walls were built with flagstones show that the exploitation of this kind of material was very common during the Romanic period. The eldest buildings of the valley, even the churches, present this typology of construction covered with flagstones (Sancho 1997b).

Other materials, like lime and chalk, were used in the construction of bridges, castles and churches. The analyses of the mortar proceeding from these buildings show that lime and chalk were used for covering internal walls.

The iron extraction has to be related to reduction furnace in order to transform it. The iron settlement of Fabregada is documented since 1010. Such place must have been the centre of iron production and the first place of iron

extraction and charcoal production of the area (Sancho 1997a; 1999).

We have not talked yet about the forest exploitation, not only to obtain wood for the construction, for tools and other objects, but also to obtain calorific energy, such firewood or charcoal. But there are other activities related to the forest, like fruits recollection, the tar production, as the placename of Obaga de Peguera (the slope of the tar) shows. But also we cannot forget the use of plants for different purposes like basketmaking. Besides the placenames like the barranc de carboners (cliff of charcoal burners), or the fonte carbonella, documented in 1010, we can find a lot of coaling places around the forests of el Montsec. The relationship between this activity and the iron production allow us to confirm that the forests of el Montsec have been the object of this kind of exploitation.

As to communication routes, we have checked the existence of a road network that covers all the territory. In the documentary sources we can find a lot roads facing different properties, but also a survey on the spot has allow us to identify a lot of them. There are roads that lead to the legal and administrative centre, Mur, from each inhabited settlement, roads that lead to the fields, the pastures and the forests, to the watermills the most of them are bridle paths, but some of them still remain paved, specially in those more sloped places (Nolasco 1997).

This brief summary of the traces remaining allow us to confirm that the production activities carry out in el Montsec, around the first millennium, were of a big variety. The necessity of supplying the population implied such an effort. This example allows us to consider that the medieval rural world present a great variety of production activities, that means that it was not exclusively dedicated to the agriculture as the documentary studies let us suppose.

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