

# Fortress and Frontier at the End of the Middle Age – The Example of the Kingdom of Murcia (Spain)

Jorge A. Eiroa Rodríguez

*Fortress; Military Orders; frontier; kingdom of Murcia*

## Abstract

Taking as example some of the most important castles of Santiago Military Order in the Kingdom of Murcia, there will be analysed the function of the fortress in the configuration of the defence of the Christian Kingdoms against Islam in the Low Middle Age. For that purpose, there would be studied the texts of the 15th century that describe this kind of installations and the archaeological information.

highly influenced by military activities, the depopulation and creation of a “no man’s land” in front of islamic territories, the drift from rural lands and the subsequent gathering of people in the most important centres of the kingdom.

These characteristics started to appear in the 13th century and became the norm in the 14th century, reaching their summit in the 15th century and prevailing, in a latent state in most cases, until the 17th century (Molina/Jiménez 1996, 51–58).

## The Kingdom of Murcia in the Low Middle Ages: A Frontier Strip

The kingdom of Murcia acquired the typical characteristics of a frontier territory from the second half of 13th century, and these remained during the following two centuries. Once the advance of the Christian forces came to an end, the kingdom of Murcia became a political wedge in South-East Castile, functioning as a “landmark” in the Mediterranean territories in front of the last redoubt of the muslim territories, the residual Nasrid kingdom of Granada (Torres/Molina 1980).

Lying behind the other great Christian political entity of the peninsula – the kingdom of Aragón – the territories that made the kingdom of Murcia acquired the characteristics typical of the hispanic medieval frontier zones. Among these, we can highlight the following: the establishment of an economy based on cattle farms and war booties, the militarization of everyday activities, the development of a particular human context prone both to charismatic leadership and political asylum, the establishment of a specific social organization

## The Function of the Order of Santiago’s Fortresses in the frontier panorama

The frontier status the kingdom of Murcia had acquired not only fostered socio-economic changes in the zone, but also favoured a population gathering around strong places – the fortified centres – in view of a real and present danger in the zone. Even though we should avoid thinking of “frontier” in its modern sense of a linear border (Burns 1989), we should nevertheless bare in mind that various demarcations roughly drew the Castilian borders in front of the muslim *tugur* of that sector. Even though the geographical and political uniformity of the kingdom fostered the development of a co-ordinated defensive system, there were various jurisdiction fields (royal territories, secular domains and Military Orders domains). In this context, the fortresses of the Order of Santiago had a crucial role in the defence of the kingdom.

After the establishment of the commandery of the Segura de la Sierra in 1242, the Order of



Santiago slowly won several territories in the kingdom of Murcia, thus establishing a web of settlements that ruled most of the Segura river valley from its birth to the capital (fig. 1). This was the beginning of an introduction process that would not have an end until the 14th century and that is well documented (Rodríguez 1986).

In the context of a war oriented society, the fortresses of the Order of Santiago developed, in the first place, several military functions according to the refuge role that Claude Gaier established as a strategy (Gaier 1968). In the second place, these fortresses channelled the “colonization” process of the territory by defensive means. The fortresses to which we allude in this essay were located in the first row in front of the Islam occupied territories and therefore had a crucial role in defining the frontier space in two ways – in one way, towards the inner Christian territories and, in another way, towards the outer islamic ones. In this sense, we understand frontier as a ground reality with blurred borders that lacks a full integration in the social context to which it belongs (Ayala 1996, 73), and which lies between the transitional space and the breaking point (Castro/Gonzalez 1989, 9).

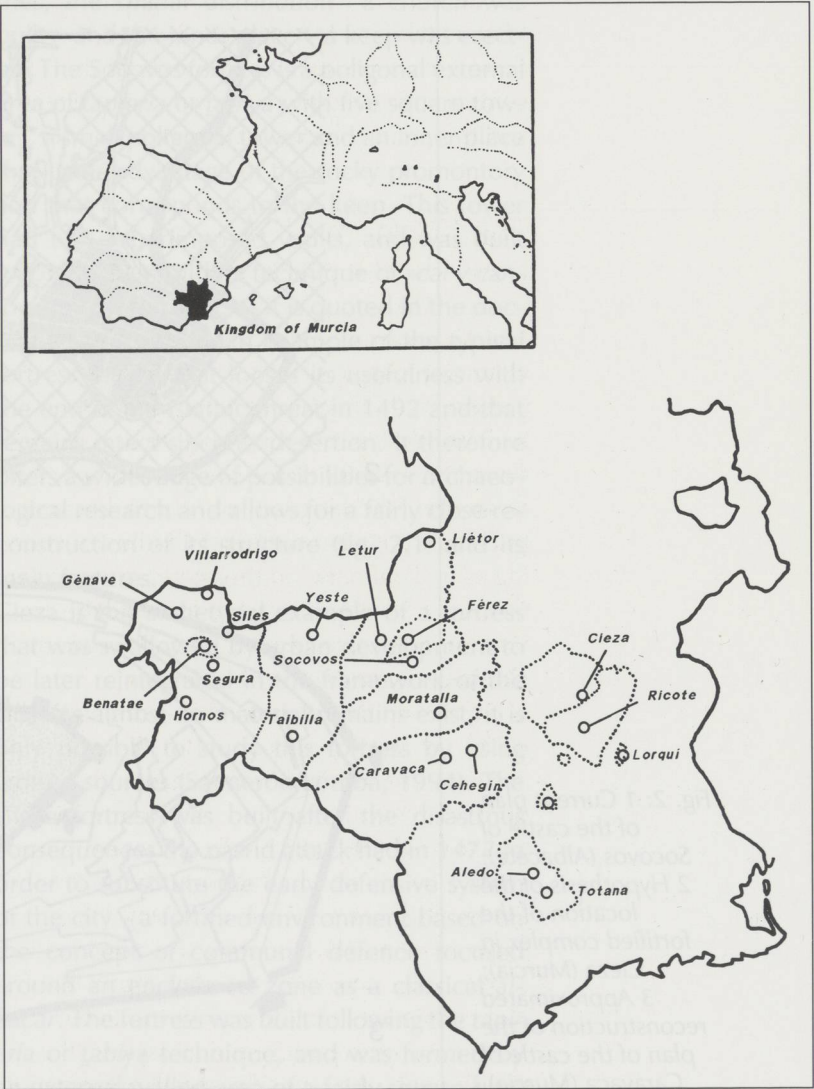
Later on, and due to the gradual establishment of the castilian organization structures, the Order of Santiago’s fortresses had a multiplicity of functions, thus overshadowing their previous predominant military role (Ayala 1993, 21–33). The fortress became an organising centre in a geographical and economical environment that had inherited islamic administrative structures. The fortress functioned as an administration centre of a cattle and cereal based economy and also as both a collector and producer of income. It also organised the political space and in most cases, functioning as an official residence for local authorities and as an unmistakable symbol of power (Varela 1996). To sum up, the fortresses can be considered as the key centre of the socio-economic territory.

### Sources and Methodological Issues for the Study of the Order of Santiago’s Fortresses

We are able to reconstruct the functional and structural characteristics of the Order’s for-

tresses in the kingdom of Murcia due to medieval records and archaeological information. In the first place, the 23 Order of Santiago’s Visit Books – kept in the Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid) – record the inspection of the Order’s goods and territories from various perspectives and points of view. These documents show the necessity the institution had of controlling and establishing communication as its properties were scattered throughout a wide territory. Even though these documents may appear as mere inventories – due to their “proceedings” style – they are a crucial source to reconstruct the characteristics of the fortresses as they record a detailed inspection of them. These inspections include a description of the building and a series of valuations and recommendations the visitors established in order to repair structural breakdowns and make up for functional shortages with either refurbishments or new buildings.

Fig. 1: Territories and main fortresses of the Order of Santiago in the kingdom of Murcia.





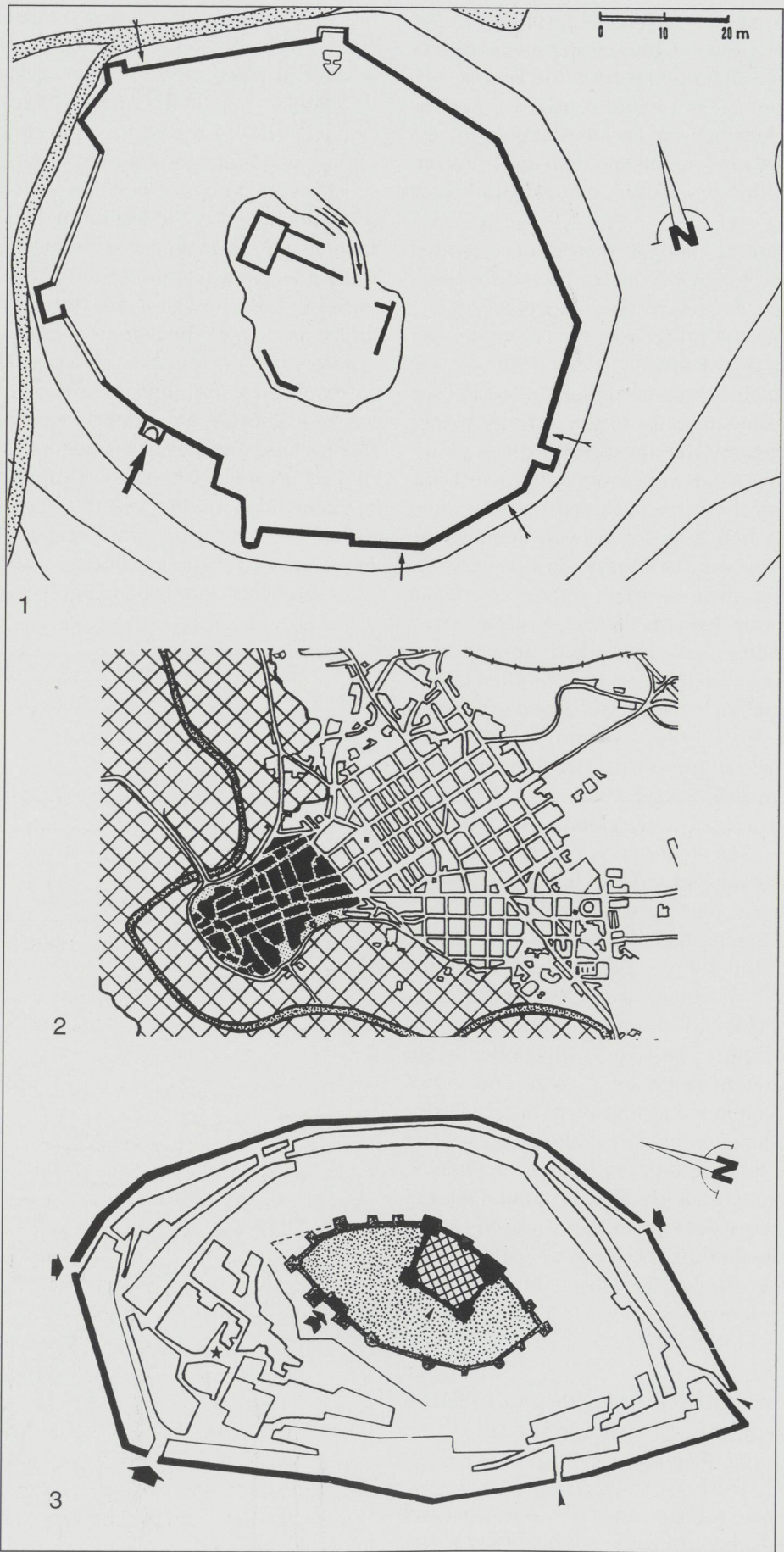


Fig. 2: 1 Current plan of the castle of Socovos (Albacete); 2 Hypothesis of the location of the fortified complex in Cieza (Murcia); 3 Approximated reconstruction of the plan of the castle of Caravaca (Murcia).



The information obtained from the written sources must be carefully contrasted with the data gathered from the strictly material sources and the fortress structure itself. We thus follow the "extensive archaeology" methodology (Bazzana/Guichard 1988, Bazzana 1994), based in the systematic surface survey.

As has been claimed in the last years (Carrero 1992; Palacios 2000), the simultaneous use of both documental and strictly material sources is the best method to gain knowledge about the fortresses of the Military Orders in the Middle Ages.

Even though we are facing two registers that are not always complementary (Barceló 1988, 11) and that the archaeological reading of the texts shows a number of methodological difficulties (namely polysemy and ambiguity in the use of terms, inherent subjectivity, etc), the data the descriptive written documents offer can be considered as essential if they are rightly contrasted with the information obtained from the castles themselves and from their archaeological materials.

## Essential Characteristics of the Fortresses of the Order of Santiago in the Kingdom of Murcia.

In an effort to record the essential characteristics of the fortresses of the Order of Santiago in the Kingdom of Murcia, and bearing in mind the scarce studies carried out by contrasting archaeological and written sources (Lillo/Molina 1981; Navarro/Martínez 1994; Sánchez 2000), we have started a research project that focuses in the fortresses of Socovos (Albacete), Cieza (Murcia) and Caravaca (Murcia). These three fortresses had a high strategic relevance within the web of fortified settlements the Order of Santiago established in the granadian-castillian frontier (Torres 1966). However, they show a number of differences that make each of them an archetypal model.

With regard to the medieval fortified complex of Socovos (fig. 3), whose origins can be traced back to the Bronze Age, this fortress was restructured in the islamic period (12th century) as we learn both from an allusion by Ibn al-Jatib and from the fortress' formal characteristics. The fortress was won by the Order of Santiago in 1242 and became the centre of a relevant commandery (Peinado 1984). The Order

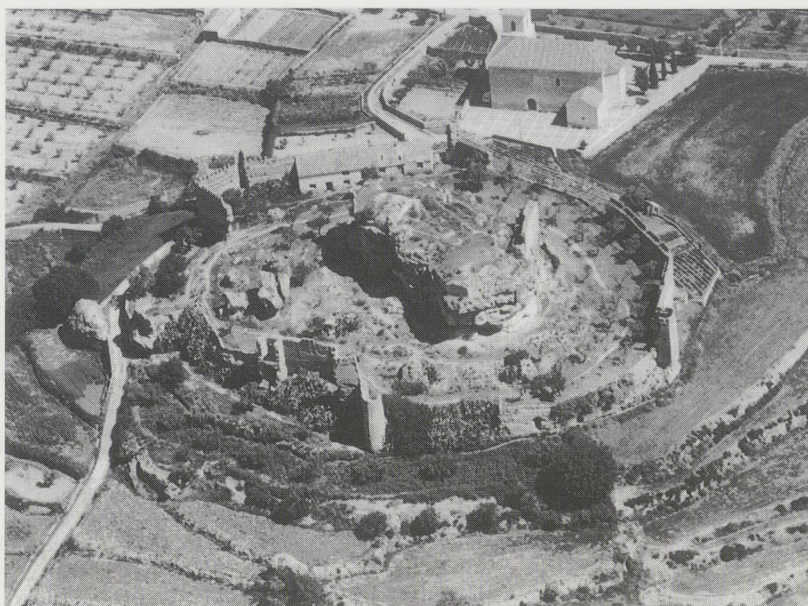


Fig. 3: General view of the castle of Socovos (Murcia).

maintained the fortress' islamic structural pattern, although it substantially modified its entries, the spatial distribution – a church was built – and the inner place – a keep was erected. The Socovos fortress is a polygonal external area of *tapiería* or *tabiya* with five square towers, a small polygonal tower and an inner place that takes advantage of the rocky promontory and that corresponds to the keep. This tower had two superimposed vaults, and was built following the building technique of «cal y canto» (lime and stone), as it is quoted in the documents. Socovos is an example of the typical fortress model that loses its usefulness with the end of the Islamic threat in 1492 and that remains intact since its desertion. It therefore offers a wide range of possibilities for archaeological research and allows for a fairly close reconstruction of its structure (fig. 2.1) and its main features.

Cieza is the archetypal example of a fortress that was swallowed by urban development to be later reintegrated in the framework of the *villa*. As almost no material remains exist, it is only possible to study this fortress by using written sources (Salmerón/Lomba, 1994). The Cieza fortress was built after the disastrous consequences the nasrid attack had in 1477 in order to substitute the early defensive system of the city – a fortified environment based on the concept of communal defence focused around an enclosed zone as a classical *al-bacar*. The fortress was built following the *tapiería* or *tabiya* technique, and was formed by an external walled area of a fairly square base





Fig. 4: External place of the Caravaca Castle.

surrounded by towers. It had an internal place or keep which was preceded by a defence line made of a *barbacana* with its pit and a sole entry. These surrounded the whole fortress. The external fence was built of *tapiería* and had a remarkable height. It had a square shape with several towers of two different heights. The written sources have made possible the reconstruction of the fortress' characteristics and its possible location (fig. 2.2). This fortress dominated the Segura meander where the *villa* lies and the access to the *Camino Real* of Granada. The Caravaca castle epitomises great fortresses, and although it has undergone massive repairs, an approximate reconstruction of its essential characteristics in the Low Middle Ages can be made. The fortified centre had a greater complexity due to the military and political importance of the settling. It was made of two different spaces, or, as it is quoted in the sources, two "*apartamientos*" – "departments" – (fig. 2.3). The first of these was a huge external area

of a polygonal shape that was preceded by a ante-wall and a pit. It was surrounded by eleven towers of quadrangular base and three towers of round base (fig. 4). In this "department" several structures were erected, such as a cistern, a dungeon, a church, stables and pantries. The inner "department" was equally protected by a pit and an ante-wall, and is referred to in the written sources as "*el castillo de dentro*" – the "inner castle". This had a square base with four great towers in each corner – the Northeast tower would function as keep – and several other small towers. To sum up, these three different castles exemplify the typical fortified environment that is incorporated in a castral complex, thus guaranteeing the seignioral power and the defence against enemies.

The poor building materials used (essentially earth, but also stone, wood or reeds) do not overshadow an otherwise complex structure. The centre of the fortress is surrounded by a wall that guarantees both control and survival. Both the *albacar* or external place – related to the population – and the inner place – erected as a symbol of authority – are isolated by ante-walls and pits.

In this way, the South-East of the Iberian peninsula, a transitional frontier space, became an exceptionally fortified zone of a complex and discontinuous interconnection. In this area, fortresses and castles had a crucial socio-economic role that overshadowed their decisive military function. The building and structural characteristics of the fortresses of the Order of Santiago guaranteed the development of these two roles, thus assuring both the management of the socio-economic issues and the military defence.

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#### Address

Jorge A. Eiroa Rodríguez  
University of Murcia (Spain)  
c/ Santo Cristo, 1, E-30001 Murcia