

## Between the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean: The Crown of Aragón in the Middle Ages

Report on the field trip of Prof. Dr. Nikolas Jaspert (23.09.2021 – 02.10.2021) by *Jule Meyer and Silvia Girona*

The Crown of Aragón is one of those kingdoms that Norman Davies describes as “vanished kingdoms”<sup>1</sup>. To find out more about the Crown of Aragón, a group of 19 students and staff of the History Department of the University of Heidelberg, led by Prof. Dr. Nikolas Jaspert and Yannika Kuhlmann, followed its traces on a ten-day field trip. In the following we would like to present some of the most impressive stops of our journey.

After departing from the historical border of the Crown of Aragón in Montpellier, we became aware of the vast dimensions of the kingdom immediately. We followed the Crown’s traces to Perpignan, where we visited the Palais des Rois de Majorque, a 13<sup>th</sup> century castle that served as the residence for the Mallorcan kings from 1333 until the Trastámara took over in 1412.

Of particular artistic, cultural, and historical importance for the Crown of Aragón are its monasteries and churches. Among the first were the monasteries of San Joan de las Abadesses and Santa Maria de Ripoll, both founded by Wilfred the Hairy (†897). They stand out for their vast documentary heritage, which allows us to trace both the diversity of religious life and the political component of the consolidation of power. In the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, three Cistercian monasteries were founded almost simultaneously as part of Ramon Berenguer’s IV. conquest. The monastery of Santes Creus is the oldest in Catalonia; its detailed Gothic cloister is particularly impressive. Both Peter III. (1240–1285) and his son Jacob II. (1267–1327) are buried there. Following a donation by Ramon Berenguer IV. to the Cistercians of Fontfroide, the monastery of Santa Maria de Poblet was founded in 1151. It functions as the burial site for several Aragonese kings including Alfonso II. (1157–1196), James I (1208–1276), and Peter IV. (1319–1387). Together with the nunnery of Santa Maria de Vallbona, which we were luckily able to visit spontaneously, they now form the *ruta del cister*. The Vall de Boí in the Catalan Pyrenees is home to nine very well preserved Romanesque churches of the 12th century, which exemplify a particularly high artistic standard in even the more isolated areas of the kingdom. We visited, among others, the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria de Taüll, which in their interiors once bore unique frescoes. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, these appealed to an American businessman who wanted to buy them and subsequently transfer them to the United States. However, this could be prevented and they ended up in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Barcelona, where, to this day, they are exhibited with other Romanesque frescoes of the area.

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, Norman, *Vanished Kingdoms. The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*, London et al. 2011.

Another trace of the Crown of Aragón in modern Catalonia is the Castell de Peñíscola on the peninsula of Peñíscola in the province of Castellón, which exemplifies the constant reuse of palaces and castles in the area. From the 8<sup>th</sup> century on, it became an *alcazaba* (Muslim fortress) during the Muslim conquest until the Templars demolished it in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and built a new castle. From 1409 it came under papal jurisdiction and in the following years it became the residence of the antipopes Benedict XIII. (= papa luna) and Clement VIII. Impressive architectural traces of the expansion of the Crown of Aragon are the towers of Teruel, built in the *mudéjar* style. Even though the conquest of Al-Andalus was marked by hostilities, its history was equally characterised by cultural exchange and mutual influence in language, architecture, and art. The *mudéjares*, Muslims under Christian rule, collaborated in the construction of these late medieval towers. Their style is characterised by the merging of Christian and Islamic art. In addition to phenomena of architectural incorporation, we were also able to examine those of architectural exclusion. Some examples are the great Calls of Girona and Barcelona, the second largest and largest Jewish community in the Crown, but also the mikveh of Besalú, which was used by only 20 families.

During our trip, we were able to visit some archives and trace the history of the Crown of Aragón through the surviving written records. First, we were able to get to know some of the written testimonies in the Chapter and Diocesan Archives of La Seu d'Urgell. The holdings of the Chapter Archive range from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while those of the Diocesan Archive span the period from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Benigne Marquès, head of the archives, led us through the collection and showed us some impressive archival documents, including the Beatus of Urgell with its impressive depiction of the Apocalypse.

In Barcelona, we had the unique opportunity to visit three archives. In the General Archive of the Crown of Aragón, we were able to examine, among other things, an autographical letter of the court jester Mossèn Borra (†1446) sent from the HRE. In the Biblioteca de Catalunya we saw a request for help from the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Eraclius, from 1187. Three documents of Pope Gregory X. (1271–1276), which were badly damaged in a fire, impressively demonstrated how the traces of history are also reflected in the documents' materiality. Our visit to the chapter archives of the Catedral de la Santa Creu i Santa Eulàlia was magnificent. Via the cathedral's triforium, we reached a small archive room still equipped with the original 16<sup>th</sup> century furniture. The archive is home to a large number of documents, of which we were shown codices, charters, and some drawings that had only recently been discovered.

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<sup>2</sup> Arxiu Capitular i Diocesà d'Urgell, Fons Documental, in: URL: [<https://arxiubisbaturgell.wordpress.com/fons-documental/>] (23.11.2021).

The topics of our field trip ranged as far as the Crown's sphere of influence in the Middle Ages. Thanks to the excellent organisation, we were able to understand the geographical, architectural, and historical manifestations of the Crown of Aragon's sphere of influence. After an informative ten days following the Crown's historical traces, we finally parted ways in Barcelona. But the extensive archives of Catalonia give us hope that more evidence of the "vanished kingdom" will soon be brought to light.