Landscapes of (re)conquest: dynamics of multicultural frontiers in medieval South-west Europe

Article

Published Version

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Project Gallery

Landscapes of (re)conquest: dynamics of multicultural frontiers in medieval South-west Europe

Guillermo García-Contreras[1], Aleks Pluskowski[2,*], Michelle Alexander[3],
Rowena Banerjea[2] & Marcos García García[3]

[1] Departamento de Historia Medieval y Ciencias y Técnicas Historiográficas, Universidad de Granada, Spain
[2] Department of Archaeology, University of Reading, UK
[3] Department of Archaeology, University of York, UK
* Author for correspondence: ✉ a.g.pluskowski@reading.ac.uk

The 'Landscapes of (Re)Conquest' project investigates the dynamics of medieval frontier societies in Southwest Europe through the lens of the cultural landscape. It compares diverse regional borderlands in Spain, created by successive waves of Islamic and Christian conquests, with the Pyrenean frontier on either side of the Albigensian Crusade and aims to reconnect the castles of frontier authorities with their associated territories from a heritage perspective.

The 'Landscapes of (Re)Conquest' project (LoR) is a new programme of research investigating the character of medieval frontiers in the Western Mediterranean. Societies here were characterised by multiple and shifting frontiers during the Middle Ages, a formative period for modern Europe (Bartlett & MacKay 1992; Bartlett 1994; Abulafia & Berend 2002). These frontiers were created by periods of conflict between opposing societies defined, above all, by religious differences, with populations composed of fluctuating resident and migrant communities. Their material legacy is exemplified by spectacular monuments—the fortified centres of authority built to secure and control these frontiers. In Iberia, these dramatic castles are emblematic of the military conquests that have been merged into one lengthy, unrelenting *reconquista*; a term popularised in late nineteenth-century historiography with the aim of promoting a nationalist agenda of unification (Ríos Saloma 2013). Following this narrative, the process of unification was the direct result of a 'reconquest' of Christian Visigothic territories that had been lost to Arab and Berber Islamic forces. This was completed in Portugal in 1249 with the capture of Faro, and in Spain in 1492 with the annexation of Granada (Figure 1). Since 1978, many Iberian scholars have rejected the term reconquista in favour of regional 'conquests', but it still has international currency and remains in use within conservative sectors of Spanish society (Torró 2000; García-Sanjuán 2018). Its main effect is to present an essentialist dichotomy between Christianity and Islam as driving the emergence of modern Iberian societies. In order to engage critically
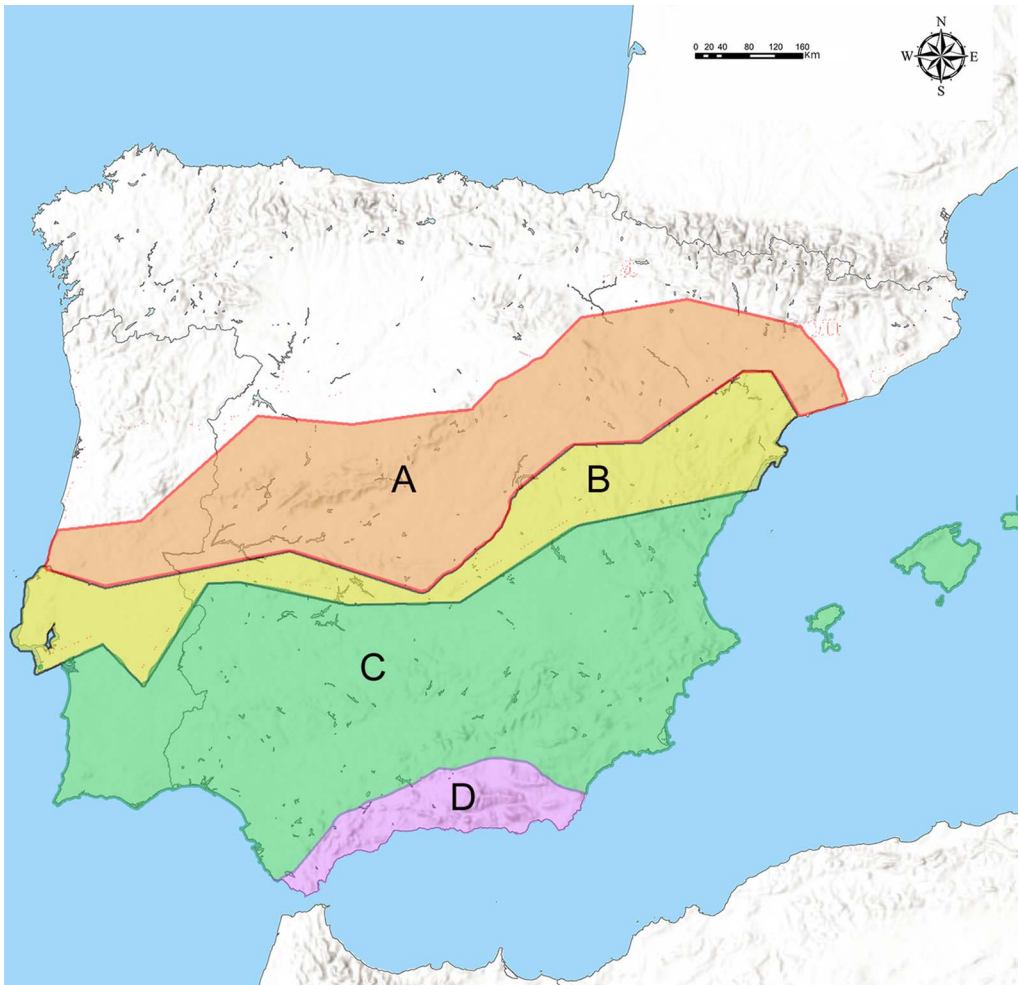
Figure 1. Map showing the process of the Christian conquests of Iberia: A) Christian conquests of Islamic Taifa kingdoms and lands of Almoravid Emirate, AD 1080–1130; B) Christian conquests of lands of Almoravid Emirate and Almohad Caliphate, AD 1130–1210; C) Christian conquests of lands of Almohad Caliphate, AD 1210–1250; D) Christian conquests of Nasrid Emirate, AD 1480–1492 (figure by Aleks Pluskowski).

with public and scholarly perceptions of this problematic term, the use of '(re)conquest' in the LoR project is deliberate.

The geopolitical situation in the Western Mediterranean was far more complex than suggested by the previous narrative, and frontiers not only existed between nominally opposed Christian and Muslim states, but between those sharing the same world-views. Within Iberia, these were created between rival Islamic and Christian territories. To the north, the Pyrenees, which had formed a frontier between Carolingian and Islamic polities in the eighth century, the so-called 'Spanish March', saw the development of distinct Occitan lordships that were annexed by the Kingdom of France after a brutal crusade in the early decades of the thirteenth century. In 1258, the mountains became a new frontier between the kingdoms of France and

Aragon (Sahlins 1989). From an archaeological perspective, the imposition of French authority has been linked to a programme of rebuilding and expanding frontier castles, while the impact on communities has been dominated by studies of the suppression of Occitan heresy (e.g. Moore 2012). In both Spain and the eastern French Pyrenees, these castles are major tourist attractions, often presented as centrepieces within enduring narratives of violent struggles for cultural hegemony (Figure 2).

A crucially important aspect of these sites remains largely neglected, however—their cultural landscape. In recent decades, landscape archaeology has reshaped our understanding of medieval communities, stressing the connection between places and their associated territories. This perspective has had limited impact on the European heritage sector. At the same time, the UNESCO Geoparks programme has sought to "explore, develop and celebrate the links between that geological heritage and all other aspects of the area's natural, cultural and intangible heritages" (UNESCO 2017). Our approach is inspired by this statement and the principal pilot for the LoR project was developed at the castle of Molina de Aragón (García-Contreras Ruiz *et al.* 2016), whose historical territory is partly encompassed by the Molina-Alto Tajo UNESCO Geopark (Figure 3). The landscapes around Molina, including the Geopark, can be characterised as a frontier between Christian and Muslim societies, and between opposing Christian societies, for a period of several centuries. In the context of frontiers created in a climate of religious tension, the cultural landscape provides a fundamental lens for understanding the impact of a new regime and social norms on its resident population. The aim of our project is therefore to reconnect key regional medieval monuments with their cultural landscapes, and to explore the nature of multiculturalism resulting from the interaction of migrant and resident communities in different frontier regions.

While significant advances have been made in understanding frontiers, the LoR project provides a new approach, connecting site-specific archaeology with landscapes and heritage perspectives. The LoR project is a comparative investigation of three different frontier regions in Spain and Pyrenean France, as well as the province of Granada, involving collaborations with existing projects (Figure 4). Within each region, we will focus on discrete macro-regions corresponding to historically defined frontier lordships. Frontiers are regions with fixed temporality, and by adopting a long-term diachronic perspective we will contextualise the impact of multiple periods of conquest. The key questions we will ask are: how did conquering authorities deal with the creation of multicultural societies in these frontiers, how did they relate to central authorities and how did conquered communities respond to the imposition of new political and social norms?

Drawing on a range of archaeological, environmental and historical data, the LoR project will investigate changes in settlements, religious, commercial and political centres alongside environmental changes, assessing whether territorial reorganisation and the influx of migrants resulted in intensified resource exploitation, or to what extent earlier trends continued. Although changes in the character and intensity of environmental exploitation at the frontier are valuable indicators of the effective reach of the conquering authority and the economic demands of the polity's heartlands, this dimension is the least well-understood aspect of frontier societies in the Western Mediterranean. Important studies of Iberian landscapes have certainly been produced (e.g. Glick 1996; Torró 2000; Clemente Ramos 2001; Kirchner 2010; Torró & Guinot 2012; Malpica 2014), but environmental and conventional
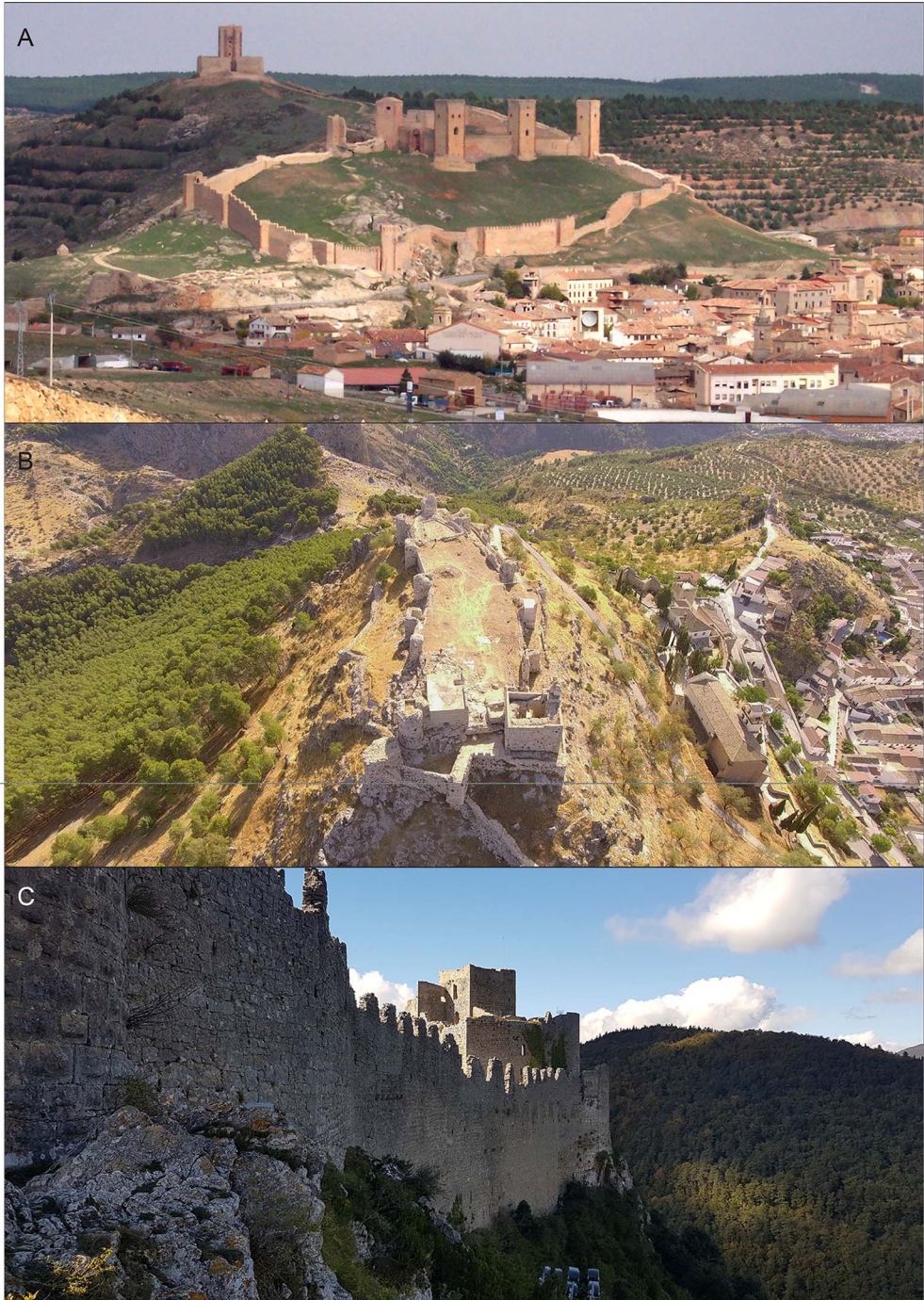
Figure 2.   The castles that functioned as centres and symbols of fronter authority: A) Molina de Aragón (Guadalajara) (https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_Se&per;C3&per;B1or&per;C3&per;ADo_de_Molina&hash;/media/Archivo: Molina_de_Aragon2.jpg); B) Moclín (Granada); C) Puilaurens (Occitanie) (B–C by Aleks Pluskowski).
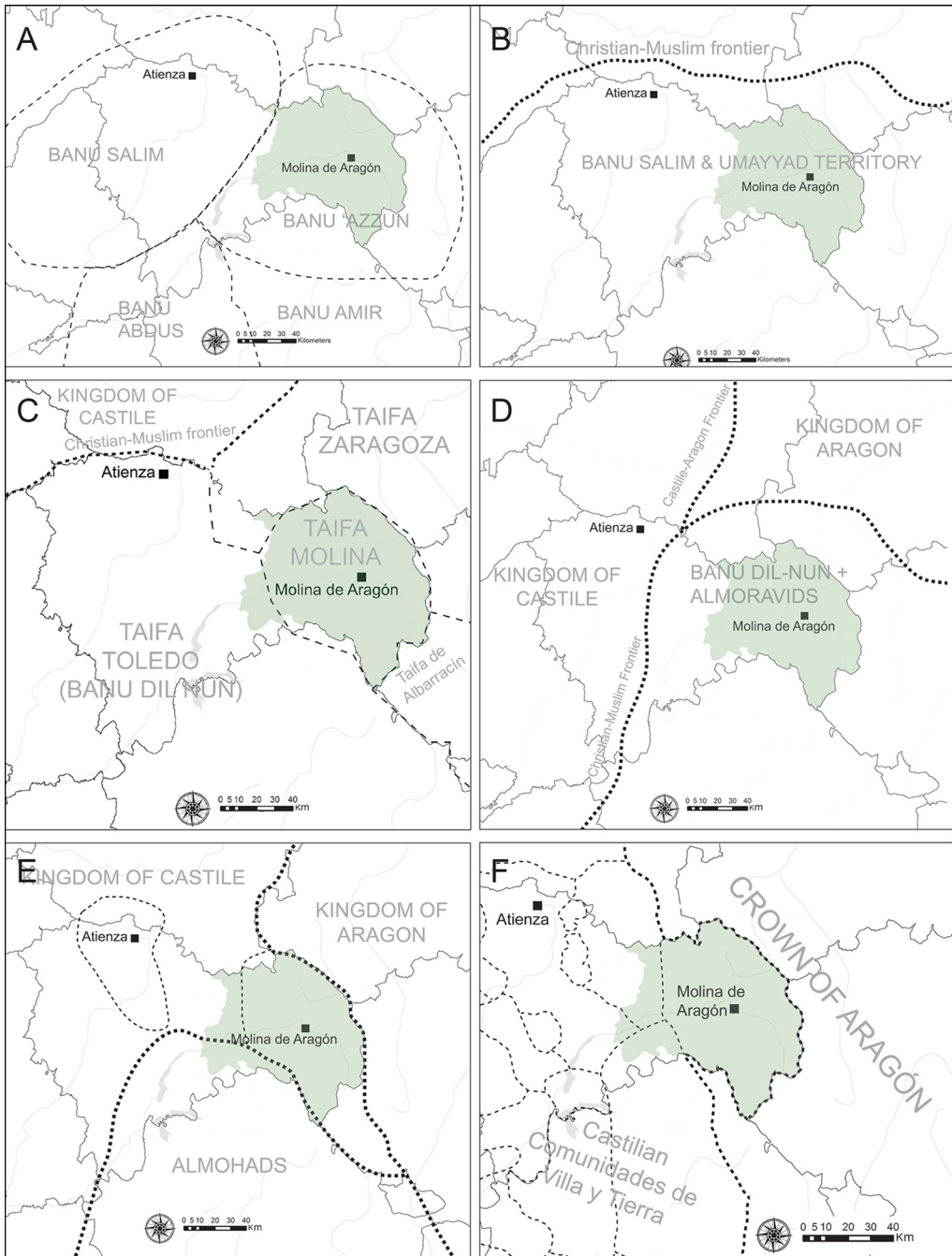
Figure 3. The historical territories of Molina de Aragón, showing the location of the UNESCO Geopark in green and the outlines of the modern provinces in the background: A) the distribution of Berber tribes during the Emiral period, AD 756–929; B) the Christian-Umayyad frontier (AD 929–1031); C) the frontiers between Taifa kingdoms and Castile after the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate; D) the Christian-Almoravid frontier until AD 1125; E) the Christian lordships are formed, c. *AD 1125–1177; F) late medieval boundaries between the Christian polities of Castile and Aragon (figure by Guillermo García-Contreras).*

Figure 4. The case-study regions in the 'Landscapes of (Re)Conquest' project, showing the three primary regions and the secondary study region of Granada (figure by Aleks Pluskowski).

archaeology remain segregated from each other, more broadly from historical research, and from how these sites are presented to the public. We will integrate animal and plant remains, alongside palynological, geoarchaeological and biomolecular data, as well as the better-known historical sources, to map changes in natural resource exploitation and their connections with social and ideological transformations associated with regime changes in our selected case-study regions (Figure 5). One of the most important indicators of these changes will be long-term changes in diet based on multi-proxy data. Food culture in frontier societies connected the dietary choices of individual households with nearby rural provisioning and longer-distance trade networks (e.g. García García 2019).

We will also compare the permeability of the range of frontiers encompassed by the study, and to what extent people, animals, commodities and ideas moved across them. Finally, we will bring all this information together to assess levels of cultural resilience in frontier societies—

Figure 5. Excavations of a medieval irrigation channel in the town of Molina de Aragón (figure by Aleks Pluskowski).

the ability of conquered communities to adapt to the imposition of a new regime. Environmental exploitation is an increasingly used index of this resilience. From this, the LoR project will develop visual and digital resources to enable public beneficiaries to engage with the cultural landscapes associated with the iconic monuments of frontier authorities.

Acknowledgements

References

Abulafia, D. & N. Berend (ed.). 2002. *Medieval frontiers: concepts and practices*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Bartlett, R. 1994. *The making of Europe: conquest, colonization & cultural change 950–1350*. London: Penguin.

Bartlett, R. & A. MacKay (ed.). 1992. *Medieval frontier societies*. Oxford: Clarendon. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198203612.001.0001

Clemente Ramos, J. (ed.). 2001. *El medio natural en la España medieval*. Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura.

García-Contreras Ruiz, G., R.Y. Banerjea, A.D. Brown & A.G. Pluskowski. 2016. Molina de Aragón: archaeological investigations of environmental change in the frontiers of medieval Iberia. *Antiquity* Project Gallery 90 (349). Available at: https://www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/ruiz349 (accessed 6 April 2020).

Garcia García, M. 2019. Explotación y consumo de los animales en el Sudeste de la península ibérica durante la alta edad media (siglos VII–XII): Perspectivas históricas y

arqueozoológicas. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Granada.

García-Sanjuán, A. 2018. Rejecting al-Andalus, exalting the *Reconquista*: historical memory in contemporary Spain. *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 10: 127–45.
https://doi.org/10.1080/17546559.2016.1268263

Glick, T. 1996. *Irrigation and hydraulic technology: medieval Spain and its legacy*. Aldershot: Variorum.

Kirchner, H. (ed.). 2010. *Por una arqueología agraria. Perspectivas de investigación sobre espacios de cultivo en las sociedades medievales hispánicas*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Malpica, A. 2014. *Las últimas tierras de al-Andalus. Paisaje y poblamiento del reino nazarí de Granada*. Granada: Universidad de Granada.

Moore, R.I. 2012. *The war on heresy: faith and power in medieval Europe*. London: Profile.

https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674065376

Ríos Saloma, M.F. (ed.). 2013. *La Reconquista en la historiografía española contemporánea*. Madrid: Sílex.

Sahlins, P. 1989. *Boundaries: the making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Torró, J. 2000. Pour en finir avec la 'Reconquête': l'occupation chrétienne d'al-Andalus, la soumission et la disparition des populations musulmanes (XIIe–XIIIe siècle). *Cahiers d'histoire* 78: 79–97.

Torró, J. & E. Guinot (ed.). 2012. *Hidra'ulica agraria y sociedad feudal*. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia.

UNESCO. 2017. Earth science for society. Available at: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/earth-sciences/unesco-global-geoparks/frequently-asked-questions/is-a-unesco-global-geopark-only-about-geology/ (accessed 6 April 2020).