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**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RECONQUISTA (718-1492 AD):  
CONQUEST, REPOPULATION AND LAND DISTRIBUTION**

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## **Abstract**

This article is an attempt to summarize in the space of barely twenty pages some of the characteristics of the historical process known as the Reconquista in the territories of today's Spain. Since this was a process that spread across eight centuries, this brief history obviously is not and does not claim to be exhaustive. On the contrary, it goes without saying that it is partial, biased and incomplete, and should be considered simply as an introduction to the subject. It looks at the Reconquista from a territorial perspective with the intention of presenting some of the key elements that led to the creation of particular institutions. These varied from region to region and, it can be argued, had an impact on the long-term economic evolution of the various territories within Spain. On the one hand, the work focuses on the timing and evolution of the military conquest of territory, from north to south, in different historical stages, while on the other it looks at the subsequent repopulation of these conquered territories as the military action moved southwards. The institutions that were created and the way society was organized at each stage of the Reconquista, including the distribution of land ownership, depended on the different factors and circumstances prevailing in each historical period.

**Keywords:** land distribution, geography, institutions, Reconquista

## **Resumen**

Este trabajo es un intento de resumir en el espacio de apenas veinte páginas algunas características del proceso histórico conocido como Reconquista en el territorio que hoy ocupa España. Obviamente, tratándose de un proceso que se extendió a lo largo de ocho siglos, esta breve historia no es, ni pretende serlo, exhaustiva. Al contrario, es parcial, sesgada e incompleta, como no puede ser de otra manera, y tiene un carácter meramente introductorio. El texto se aproxima a la Reconquista desde una perspectiva territorial con objeto de presentar algunas claves para la creación de determinadas instituciones, regionalmente diferenciadas, que habrían persistido en el tiempo y tenido un impacto sobre la evolución económica de largo plazo. En particular, el trabajo se centra, por un lado, en presentar la evolución de la conquista militar de los territorios, de norte a sur, en diferentes etapas históricas. Y por otro, en ofrecer las principales claves de la posterior repoblación de los territorios conquistados a medida que se avanzaba hacia el sur. Las instituciones que se crearon y la manera en la que se organizó la sociedad en cada etapa de la Reconquista, incluida la distribución de la propiedad de la tierra, dependió de los diferentes factores y circunstancias que prevalecieron en cada período histórico.

**Palabras clave:** distribución de la tierra, geografía, instituciones, Reconquista

**JEL CODES:** D02, N93, Q15, R10

## Introduction

At the beginning of the eighth century the Umayyad dynasty, with its ties to the Caliphate of Damascus, was expanding rapidly across North Africa. In 711 AD this expansion took a new turn when an expedition of Berber tribesmen led by Tariq ibn Ziyad under the orders of Governor Musa ibn Nusair crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and landed in Algeciras. These troops defeated the army led by the Visigothic king, Roderic, and in a few short years the Muslims had taken control of much of the Iberian Peninsula. Groups of Christians took refuge in northern areas protected by mountains, and it was these populations that made up the original nucleus of resistance. From then onwards over the course of eight centuries, the Christians would advance southwards from their stronghold in the north. This historical process, generally known – not without controversy – as the Reconquista, is usually defined as the change of political power in the peninsula from Muslims to Christians between 718 and 1492, this being the year Granada was taken (Lomax 1978)<sup>1</sup>. We are therefore talking about an extremely lengthy process which, moreover, did not take place gradually but in occasional leaps and bounds, giving rise to historical stages with clearly differentiated characteristics.

There were two main aspects to the Reconquista. First, it had a military component – the conquest of other territories – and as we have just said, this came about intermittently and spasmodically<sup>2</sup>. And second, just as importantly, once territories had been won, they had to be repopulated and made secure before expansion could continue southwards (Moxó 1979; García de Cortázar et al. 1985). Thus, the characteristics of the Christian advance varied over the years, especially as regards its timing and the way repopulation was carried out. The institutions that were created and the way society was organized at each stage of the Reconquista, including the distribution of land ownership, depended on the different factors and circumstances prevailing in each historical period. These included the distribution of power among the ruling classes (monarchy, nobility and the Church), the geographical size of the areas conquered, the methods of conquest, the density of the population in the areas taken and its assimilability, and the procedures used by the victors to colonize these territories. Elements such as these explain why the conquest and

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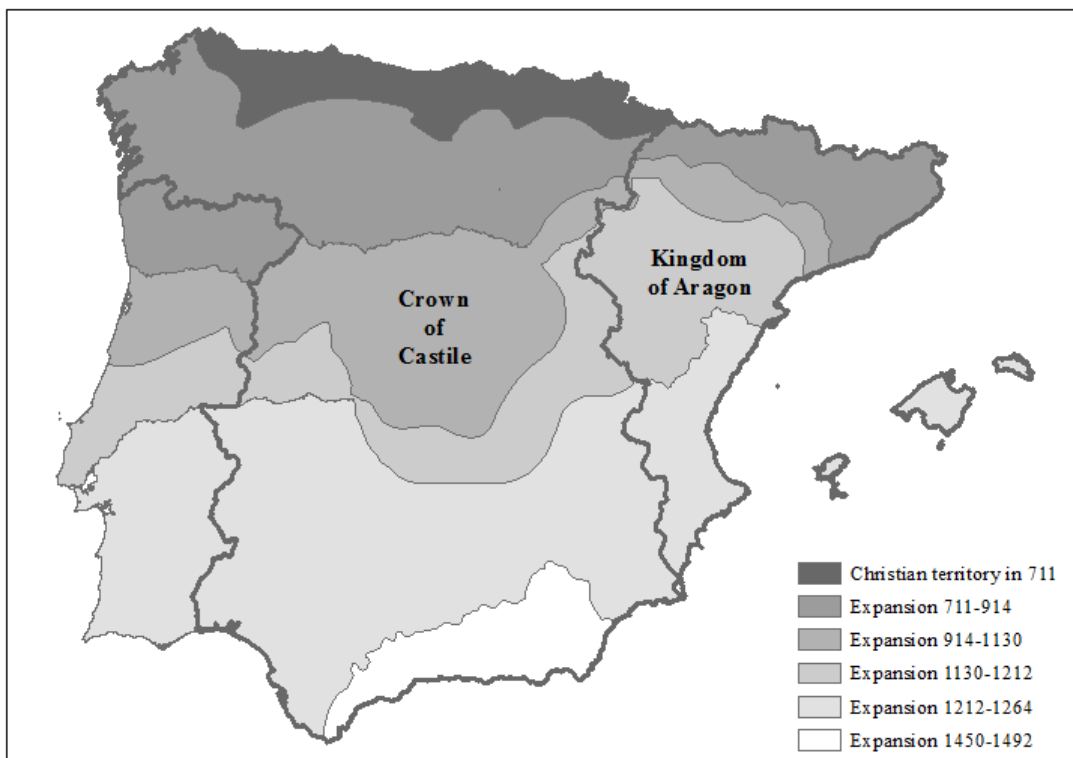
<sup>1</sup> Lomax (1978), MacKay (1977), Moxó (1979) and García Cortázar et al. (1985) stand out as classic works on the Reconquista and the subsequent repopulation. More recent accounts can be found in O'Callaghan (2004), Valdeón (2006) and Ladero (2014). It is these works that have been used as the basis of the summary contained in the following pages.

<sup>2</sup> The geographical limit marking the advances made at each stage of the Reconquista was determined by rivers, which in the Iberian Peninsula mainly flow crosswise (E-W/W-E).

repopulation of the northern part of the peninsula took place under very different conditions to those in the south (Malefakis 1970, pp.50-51).

Just as important is the fact that the Reconquista did not take place uniformly across the territory. The Christians who had withdrawn to the mountainous areas of the north after the Muslim invasion had settled in both the Cantabrian Mountains and the Pyrenees. These bastions of resistance, each acting alone, would advance over time towards the south, conquering territory previously occupied by Muslims and giving rise to the great kingdoms of the peninsula, including Castile and Aragon (Figure 4)<sup>3</sup>. However, the conquest and repopulation of the territory by these two crowns differed in their chronology and in many of their main characteristics, so we will give separate accounts of both the Castilian and Catalan-Aragonese expansion processes.

Map 1. Stages of the Reconquista, 711-1492



Source: Mackay (1977), Lomax (1978), García de Cortázar et al. (1985) and Ladero (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Portugal is not covered in this brief history and the Kingdom of Navarre was relatively small and made only limited advances in the Reconquista compared to the Crowns of Aragon and Castile. Ultimately it was annexed by the Crown of Castile in the sixteenth century.

## The Crown of Castile

After the Muslim invasion, small groups of Christians initially took refuge in the mountainous areas of the north, in Asturias. Confined to the Cantabrian Mountains, the first uprisings against Muslim control came about in the eighth century, eventually leading to the formation of the kingdoms and their territorial expansion across the peninsula. It was at this time that King Alfonso I (693-757) crossed the mountains and advanced as far as the River Duero, a rather sparsely populated area. After the victors had laid waste to the territory north of the river and expelled its Muslim inhabitants, a relatively unpopulated belt of land was created, a no man's land to protect Asturias from the Muslim raids and surprise attacks that had frequently taken place until then (Sánchez-Albornoz 1966).

The territory that been conquered was by this time composed of a number of small Christian kingdoms and, once they had consolidated their position, in the second half of the ninth century they began to spread further southwards to occupy the almost unpopulated plains of the Duero basin. Kings Ordoño I (821-866) and Alfonso III (c.850-910) were the main driving forces behind this process. The repopulation of the Duero valley was led by the monarchs and attracted mainly Christian colonists who came down from the mountains to settle on the Meseta. These were joined by Mozarabs from the south, who were descended from the original Christian population that lived in the Muslim area but had not wanted to renounce their religion and now chose to return to Christian territory.

To encourage colonization of the rural areas north of the Duero, new settlers were granted favourable legal conditions. Incentive was given through the use of the appropriation system (*sistema de presura*), which in essence guaranteed settlers individual ownership of the barren unowned lands that they now occupied<sup>4</sup>. The repopulation expeditions that took place ranged from those directly led by the king and organized by nobles, state dignitaries and religious orders, to those involving families and individuals who simply occupied the land. In some cases such settlers occupied land without even having sought royal permission, but their effective ownership was acknowledged by the king as long as they could show that they had occupied barren land and prepared it for cultivation (*escalio*). When the free assignment of land did not provide a big enough incentive, town charters

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<sup>4</sup> Roman-Visigothic tradition established that land was property with no owner (*bona vacantia*) and that it was therefore at the disposal of the king, who was responsible for approving colonization (Vicens Vives 1964:1959, p.121).

and charters of franchise provided more advantageous conditions to settlers, who were thus able to improve their social position or see the extinguishment of former obligations.

This expansion, which due to the nature of the times sought to offer incentives to encourage people to become permanently established on the land, gave rise to an egalitarian society characterized by a predominance of free peasant farmers who owned small areas of land and, prototypically, a horse and arms to use in the war. The egalitarian, independent character of these societies is reflected in the fact that they were governed by relatively democratic assemblies, and also by the existence of an institution like the *bebetría*. This meant that, unlike under the feudal organization typical of Europe at the time, the peasants had the right to freely elect or change their lord *de mar a mar*, i.e. from among the members of noble families of the whole kingdom, or *de linaje a linaje*, i.e. from within a particular line of the nobility (Vicens Vives 1964, p.97). The expansion also brought about the creation of a network of countless small settlements of the same type, the *aldeas*, which with the passing of time led to the “formation of a network of municipalities that were smaller and more numerous than in any other area of the peninsula” (García de Cortázar et al. 1985, p.80).

The next stage of Christian expansion needed to push the frontier southwards, from the Duero to the Tagus, and would continue until the end of the eleventh century, culminating in the taking of Toledo in 1085. However, Muslim resistance had grown stronger during the tenth century with the reunification of the emirate carried out by Abd al-Rahman III (891-961), who was proclaimed caliph in 929 and made Cordoba the caliphate’s capital<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the eleventh century (1008) the caliphate was broken up into various kingdoms (*taifas*). Meanwhile, on the Christian side the opposite was happening. Greater unity was achieved after reorganization when Ferdinand I (1035-1065) ruled over Galicia, Leon, Castile and, from 1054, La Rioja<sup>6</sup>. The subsequent capitulation of Toledo in 1085 at the hands of Alfonso VI (1047-1109) was an event of huge – and symbolic – importance to the Reconquista, since this was not only a central kingdom in Muslim territory that protected Al-Andalus and acted as a communications hub, it was also the old Visigothic (and Christian) capital.

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<sup>5</sup> From this moment on, having lost the territories of northern Africa, the Umayyads concentrated their efforts in the peninsula, and over the rest of the century the Muslims inflicted serious defeats on the Christians. The figure of Almanzor (938-1002) exemplifies the military might of the Muslims in this era.

<sup>6</sup> The loss of La Rioja meant that Navarre was no longer connected to the Muslim zone and was therefore unable to extend southwards and participate in the Reconquista. It thus remained a small kingdom hemmed in by Castile and Aragon (Lomax 1978, p.53).

The impact of this defeat for the Muslims of the peninsula was enormous and, acknowledging their weakness, they sought help from the Almoravids, a Maliki Muslim sect from the Maghreb<sup>7</sup>. Almoravid troops defeated Alfonso VI at the Battle of Sagrajas (1086), near Badajoz, thus checking the Christian advance, but they were unable to recapture Toledo. However, they reunified the *taifas* (1095) and won numerous military victories such as the Battle of Uclés in 1108<sup>8</sup>. Escalation of the war with the Almoravids and the fierceness with which it was fought meant that the Christian frontier made no significant advance. Broadly speaking, this situation would continue unchanged until the early thirteenth century.

While the territory between the Tagus and the Guadiana saw clashes of extraordinary ferocity, the repopulation of the territories conquered by the Christians south of the Duero continued. This would not be done in the same way as the repopulation north of the river<sup>9</sup>, although it would have similar consequences in terms of the resulting property structure, i.e. a predominance of small agricultural holdings and the creation of a group of peasants who were small landowners<sup>10</sup>. The role played by the crown was now more important because it was in more direct control of the task of repopulation, establishing councils and municipalities – relatively democratic institutions appointed by the king – which developed an organized system for dividing and sharing out the land. Each council covered a large area of land (known as an *alfoz*) that was divided into six parts (*sesmos*), which in turn were divided into twentieths (*veintenas*). These were the blocks of land to be allocated in a process that could take decades to complete because there were not enough Christian settlers (Vicens Vives 1957, p.273).

Nevertheless, the process did attract people from all over, people who were willing to fight to protect their new properties and who ended up joining together and forming the basis of the council militias that were set up as a defence against Almoravid hostilities. The *caballeros villanos* (peasant knights, owners of a horse and arms) played an essential role in the

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<sup>7</sup> After the fall of Toledo, the arrival of the Almoravids marked the end of more than three centuries of Umayyad power in the peninsula. The dynasty dated back to the arrival on the peninsula of Abd al-Rahman (731-788), an Umayyad who fled Damascus after it fell to the Abbasids in 750 and unified the Muslim kingdom in 755 under the name Al-Andalus (Lomax 1978).

<sup>8</sup> At this time Almoravid superiority was challenged only by El Cid (c. 1048-1099).

<sup>9</sup> “There were two prevailing criteria: one, to respect the Muslim and Jewish populations that lived in the towns and cities that were taken. This was Alfonso VI’s repopulation policy in Toledo. And two, to give municipalities or councils the job of repopulation” (Vicens Vives 1964, p.148).

<sup>10</sup> “The tradition of small settlers in effective possession of their lands, which the *presuras* has established north of the Duero, was continued by means of the *consejos* to the south of that river” (Malefakis 1970, p.54).

administration of the territory, even more so than in the north<sup>11</sup>. They also tended to dedicate themselves to livestock farming, especially sheep, which became the basis of their economic activity. As a result of all this and unlike in the villages further north, the southern part of the Meseta had a denser network of urban population whose basic hubs were the towns and villages that were home to council headquarters. In the repopulation process of this zone, different areas had their own distinctive characteristics. The space between the Duero and the Sistema Central was sparsely populated and therefore received population from the northern settlements like in the previous stage, along with Mozarabs from further south who were fleeing the unstable situation in the area of Toledo. Elsewhere, the territory located in the former Kingdom of Toledo between the Sistema Central and the Tagus valley was more heavily populated and, because of the way they had capitulated, much of the previous population was allowed to remain there.

Meanwhile the Almoravids were gradually losing ground in Africa and their control was weakening. After the collapse of the dynasty, around fourteen city-states came into being, giving rise to a second period of *tajfas* (1146). It was at this time that the Almoravids were replaced by the Almohads who had fought them in the north of Africa. The Almohad offensive put pressure on the Christian forces and council militia to the point where they had to seek help from the religious orders, who from this time on would play a prominent role in defending the southern border to the south of the Tagus. The creation of the military orders of Santiago (1170), Calatrava (1176) and Alcántara (1177), which worked closely together and with the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller who arrived from other parts of Europe, marked the appearance of a new actor in the military conflict that would be an essential element influencing outcomes between the Tagus and the Sierra Morena<sup>12</sup>. To these forces should be added the significant participation and involvement of the nobility. The fierceness of the confrontation meant that hardly any advances were recorded in the twelfth century, although the Christians did manage to extend one part of the frontier (to the east) as far as the River Guadiana. The Almohads would eventually be

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<sup>11</sup> “The peasant knights were possibly the most distinctive social result of the Christian occupation of the area between the Duero and the Tagus during the eleventh to fourteenth centuries” (García de Cortázar et al. 1985, p.114). Men who owned a horse and arms became peasant knights, and the loss of these possessions also meant the loss of the title. Meanwhile the commoners (*pecheros*), who held no title, had to fight in the council militias as foot soldiers and pay tributes and other taxes, although they could become peasant knights by acquiring a horse and weapon.

<sup>12</sup> The appearance of the religious military orders would be connected with the interest which, in the eleventh century and following the Gregorian Reforms, Pope Alexander II (1061-1073) had shown in the Reconquista and the idea of expanding the western frontier of Christianity against Islam. Indulgences and papal bulls attracted crusaders from other parts of Europe (Lomax 1978, pp.60-61) and, importantly, it was from this time that the Reconquista took on the aspect of holy war (García Fitz 2009).



defeated in 1212 at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, within sight of the Sierra Morena, leaving the way clear for the Christians to conquer Andalusia.

The stiff resistance mounted by the Almoravids and then the Almohads had contained the Christian advance for around 150 years. However, after the Muslim defeat in Las Navas de Tolosa, a great belt of peninsula territory suddenly passed into Christian hands. After the fall of Toledo, the Kingdom of Castile and Leon controlled an area of around 200,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The land conquered between 1225 and 1250 added another 150,000 km<sup>2</sup> to its territory (Malefakis 1970, p.55). A series of characteristics would make the repopulation of this zone noticeably different from the colonization carried out further north. First of all, the area to be repopulated was much bigger. Second, it was sparsely populated, especially in Extremadura and La Mancha, as a result of the long period of conflict between Christians and Muslims. And third, there was a shortage of Christians to repopulate it, since they had already been absorbed by earlier repopulations. The contingent of Mozarab population in the south that could have added numbers to the colonization – as it had in the past – had also decreased for the same reason.

The space to be repopulated had hardly any towns, and therefore the role played by the councils and militias in the north could not be repeated here (García de Cortázar et al 1985). Instead the military orders and secular nobility, who had been in charge of leading the fight between the Tagus and the Sierra Morena, were essentially in control of repopulation in this zone. Unable to deal with the organization of the immense territories that had been conquered, Ferdinand III (1199-1252) and Alfonso X (1221-1284) assigned the job of repopulation to the military orders and members of the nobility, thus rewarding them for their actions in the field of battle by granting them numerous extensive estates (*encomiendas*)<sup>13</sup>. Besides, the soil characteristics were different from those in more northerly areas of the peninsula. The land of the southern Meseta was more suited to livestock farming, and as a result “the orders usually did not encourage immigration but were content to inaugurate a pastoral economy, less exigent of manpower than agriculture, on their lands” (Malefakis 1970, p.57). Taken together, these factors would explain the appearance – in contrast to the north – of a system of large estates on the other side of the Tagus, in parts of Extremadura and La Mancha. Thus, to the south of Toledo a process

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<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the main towns remained under royal control through the establishment of municipal councils.

came about whereby rural property was concentrated in the hands of the Church and the nobility<sup>14</sup>.

The conquest of the Guadalquivir valley was completed over the course of the thirteenth century. After the Almohad defeat of 1212, the conquest of the south came about very rapidly. Cordoba fell in 1236, Seville in 1248 and Cadiz in 1262, and thus it took the Christians barely fifty years to reach the southern end of the peninsula. With the Kingdom of Murcia finally taken in 1266, only the Kingdom of Granada remained in Muslim hands. The Christians at once concentrated on repopulating the wealthy Andalusian cities from which they had expelled the Muslim population. However, after the revolts of 1263 the Muslims that lived in the country, who at first had been allowed to remain on their land, were also expelled. A large part of this Mudejar population sought refuge in the Kingdom of Granada. The vast territory that had been conquered therefore needed to be repopulated, but for a number of reasons this turned into a long drawn out process.

First of all, there was a great shortage of people to repopulate rural areas because most were attracted to the towns and cities. Moreover, this shortage was exacerbated by the demographic crises of the fourteenth century. Secondly, the Christians arriving from the north to repopulate the territory were accustomed to a different natural environment with a different agrarian tradition to the intensive agriculture that predominated in Andalusia<sup>15</sup>. This made potential settlers from the north reluctant to start working in a different ecosystem with which they were unfamiliar. Due to the difficulties involved in maintaining the technical skill that this type of agriculture required, farming activities were gradually redirected towards the booming livestock trade, cereals and olive production.

Finally, for the next two centuries much of this territory was a frontier zone with the Kingdom of Granada. It was unsafe because of clashes between Christians and Muslims and therefore had to be protected. This was a task that again fell to the military orders and the nobility. As Vicens Vives (1964, p.150) remarked, “this frontier process is extremely important because it meant that huge latifundia belonging to the military orders and the

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<sup>14</sup> As summarized succinctly by Vicens Vives (1964, p.149): “A certain lack of incentive to move south was noted among the settlers of northern Castile. And it was for this reason that, in order to guarantee the safety of the conquered areas, the monarchs of Castile handed over the territory to the military orders: the Order of Alcántara, which occupied the western part of Extremadura; the Order of Santiago, ensconced in the centre; and the Order of Calatrava, which occupied the region of La Mancha. The way the property was distributed was simple: the king donated territories to the grand masters of the orders, who handed over the castles and fortresses to the knights commander, who assembled groups of officials who defended the population against the Moors and profited from the peasants’ work and income, and especially from the movements of livestock and the selling of wool”.

<sup>15</sup> The crops of the Hispano-Arabic population of Al-Andalus included cotton, sugar cane, rice and safflower (García de Cortázar et al. 1985, p.177).

great families of Castile were established along the entire border with Granada. All the dukes, marquises and counts that played some role in the history of Spain from the fifteenth century onwards had their power base in this latifundia system". The military orders and the Church would be the main beneficiaries of manorial estates in the border region during the reigns of Ferdinand III and Alfonso X, while the secular nobility would benefit most once Sancho IV (1258-1295) came to the throne (García de Cortázar et al. 1985, pp.184-185). Altogether, these factors contributed significantly to the emergence of a lengthy process of land accumulation that turned the Church and the nobility into owners of huge estates characteristic of the south-west of the peninsula<sup>16</sup>.

It would not be until two centuries later that the Reconquista would culminate in the capture of the mountainous Nazarid Kingdom of Granada by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492. This time the occupation and repopulation of the territory would follow a new pattern unlike that of previous periods. It was characterized by greater continuity as regards the previous Muslim order and by the key role played by the royal authority. The conquered land was crown property, and therefore it fell to the crown to carry out the *repartimiento* (division and distribution) and bestow its *mercedes reales* (royal favours). The crown also took charge of appointing clergy, setting up councils in the cities (which were less independent than in the past) and deciding on what tax exemptions would apply to the new settlers (whose main destination was the cities). As Lomax (1978, p.171) points out, there was "greater royal authority but also a stronger nobility, for the baronial families which had encroached on royal, civic and church lands now demanded the lion's share of this new conquest and the monarchs give it to them"<sup>17</sup>.

Unlike what had happened in other areas, the Muslims of Granada were initially allowed to remain and keep their religious and property rights. However, conflicts soon arose and it was ruled that they would have to convert under threat of expulsion in 1500-1501. Many Mudejars refused to do so, and this led to a considerable loss of population. Those that did convert – new Christians or Moriscos (converts from Islam) – made up a numerous population that would for the most part remain in rural areas, while the old Christians mainly inhabited the towns and cities. Nevertheless, conflict between the two communities would continue, giving rise to frequent clashes. As a result, loss of population was a

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<sup>16</sup> "At the end of the fifteenth century, especially as far as the big villages of the Andalusian countryside are concerned, the disappearance of small- and medium-sized properties was obvious, to the point where most of the cereal fields and the income from them belonged to big absentee landowners, both secular and religious" (García de Cortázar et al. 1985, p.190).

<sup>17</sup> The military orders had also been losing strength, and at the end of the fifteenth century, by papal concession, they were under the control of Ferdinand II (1452-1516).

recurring event in the Kingdom of Granada during the sixteenth century, for instance during the period 1526-1535 and from 1560 onwards, when many Moriscos fled due to persecution. “Despite everything, the new Christians were still in the majority on the eve of the final uprising: 164,376 as against 127,006 old Christians” (García de Cortázar et al. 1985, p.226).

### **The Crown of Aragon**

The Reconquista in the north-east and east of the peninsula eventually led to the formation of the Crown of Aragon, which, unlike the Crown of Castile, was eventually based on a confederation of four kingdoms with their own political and administrative characteristics: Aragon, Catalonia<sup>18</sup>, Mallorca and Valencia. From a comparative point of view, the conquest and repopulation under the Crown of Aragon was markedly different from that in Castile. To begin with – and importantly – the Catalan-Aragonese Reconquista did not happen as quickly<sup>19</sup>. The slower pace of the advance in the east of the peninsula was to a large degree related to the fierce resistance mounted by the Muslims around the River Ebro. This was an area in which they were very firmly established, partly due to the fertility of the soil, and for this reason the northern Muslim frontier was for centuries marked by the course of the river, which checked the Christian advance (Vicens Vives 1964, p.130; Moxó 1979, p.80). This meant that the territory conquered by the Catalans and Aragonese was smaller in area than the territory that fell to Castilian control, although this in turn meant that fewer people were needed for the purposes of repopulation. Broadly speaking, a higher proportion of the Muslim population continued to live in the areas conquered by the Crown of Aragon. The slower advance also enabled the monarchy to maintain more control over the process, and therefore there was less involvement on the part of the nobility and the military orders (Sobrequés 1972). Finally, from the point of view of the economic organization of the colonized territory, there was less reliance on livestock in this area and a greater presence of irrigated crops, especially in the coastal areas and the Ebro valley.

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<sup>18</sup> Although formally constituted as a *condado*, in practice Catalonia functioned in basically the same way as a kingdom.

<sup>19</sup> “...the Castilians progressed more quickly than the Catalans and Aragonese when we consider that Ferdinand III took Seville in 1248, just ten years after James I the Conqueror took control of Valencia [...] This is hugely important because, first, it gave the Castilians access to the Mediterranean via Cartagena, blocking the natural tendency of Catalonia and Aragon to spread southwards and possibly take Almeria, and second, it meant that the entire south of Spain, and all it brought in terms of economic power and agricultural wealth, fell within the exclusive orbit of Castilian repopulation” (Vicens Vives 1964, p.144).

The Muslim expansion of the eighth century had not ended in the Iberian Peninsula but crossed the Pyrenees, reaching Narbonne and Carcassonne (725) and conquering territory from the Franks. However, the advance came to a halt after the Muslim defeat in the Battle of Tours in 732. Under the leadership of Charlemagne (768-814) the Franks began to set up a series of frontier provinces or marches, whose function was to act as a defence against the Muslim power in the peninsula. These marches were located in western and central areas of the Pyrenees, in the future kingdoms of Navarre and Aragon, and in the east, in Catalonia. They became independent Christian states with the decline of the Carolingian Empire after 814.

In the easternmost area, the city of Girona fell to Frankish control in 785 during Charlemagne's rule, and Barcelona was taken in 801 by his son, Louis I the Pious (778-840). Thus the frontier between Christians and Muslims was established to the south of Barcelona, along the course of the River Llobregat, and there it remained for the next three centuries, with the territory to the north of the river divided into counties initially under Carolingian control. During the Muslim invasion of the eighth century, a good many inhabitants of this eastern geographical area had crossed the Pyrenees and settled in the Frankish kingdom of Septimania, where they were known as '*hispani*'. These '*hispani*', along with inhabitants of the mountainous areas of the Pyrenees, would make up the demographic base that provided people to repopulate the eastern marches during the reigns of Louis I the Pious and Charles II the Bald (823-877), and also later during the comital period, starting with Count Wilfred the Hairy (840-897), who brought together the various counties that would make up Old Catalonia.

From the ninth to eleventh centuries the repopulation of these territories of Old Catalonia took place. The occupation of the land came about mainly through the use of the *aprisio* system, i.e. "the occupation of empty land for possessory purposes, which would be accompanied by a concession by monarch or count, this land to be cultivated or cleared as appropriate" (Moxó 1979, pp.109-119). This system is therefore comparable to the *presura* system used in the western area of Asturias-Leon that predominated to the north of the Duero<sup>20</sup>. The land appropriations or *aprisios* involved various social groups and included, in

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<sup>20</sup> "Shortly after the conquest by Charlemagne, the basis for property was the *alodio*. This could be one of two types: either inherited from ancestors, or acquired by *aprisio* by virtue of the *pro hispanis* terms decreed by Charlemagne. This system is fundamentally similar to the *presura* system in Castile. It consisted of a concession granted by the monarch whereby, as well as being granted the right to receive barren lands, the beneficiary enjoyed the defence of the realm, tax exemption and hereditary rights over the properties seized. Thus, the public property granted to the *hispani* who had taken refuge in Septimania could easily become private property. Most of the cultivated land in Old Catalonia even today derives from the *aprisios* carried out

hierarchical order, those planned directly by the counts, those granted to the monasteries, those carried out by nobles and notables, and – especially numerous – those carried out directly by peasants, even ahead of any action taken by the counts (Vicens Vives 1964, p.134; d'Abadal, 1958; Salrach, 1987; Soldevila, 1962; Vilar, 1987; Feliu 2010)<sup>21</sup>. With the passing of time the spontaneous appropriations by peasants, who would become owners of the barren lands they colonized, would be replaced by a more organized colonization that was increasingly controlled by the nobility and aristocracy (viscounts, ecclesiastical notables, bishops and monastic orders). Meanwhile in the cities the predominant form of organizing the repopulation was the town charter, by which the authorities granted favourable conditions to encourage the arrival of settlers. A typical example of this would be the Charter of Cardona (Font i Rius 1969).

In the twelfth century the Catalans would push the frontier southwards and westwards, conquering the lands of New Catalonia. The fall of Tortosa (1148) in the south and Lleida (1149) in the west shifted the border to the Ebro and the River Segre respectively, thus adding around 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> to Catalan territory, making a definitive total of 32,000 km<sup>2</sup>. The taking of Tortosa, on the Ebro, by Ramon Berenguer IV, Count of Barcelona (1113-1162), with the help of Genoese ships and the Templars, made it possible to press on with the repopulation of the Camp de Tarragona, a relatively sparsely populated region that had already been conquered by Ramon Berenguer III (1082-1131) in the first half of the twelfth century. This repopulation, which was assigned to Olegarius, the Bishop of Barcelona, and a Norman knight named Robert Bordet, used a charter of franchise to attract new settlers to both the city and the countryside.

To the south, the repopulation of the land around the Ebro would be influenced by the charter granted to Tortosa. This offered the many existing Muslim inhabitants who were still living in both the towns and the countryside, usually under the status of “*exarico*” farmers or sharecroppers, the possibility of remaining and living under relatively favourable conditions guaranteeing freedom and ownership of personal property (Font i Rius 1953). Thus, the repopulation of the area at the mouth of the Ebro was rapid, with the existing

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by the *hispani* in the ninth century” (Vicens Vives 1964, pp.134-135). Moreover, the “lands of Cerdanya, Urgell, the Plain of Vic and the rest of Old Catalonia would thus ordinarily be repopulated through the *aprisio* system [...] If the Frankish monarchs were the legitimate source that could legalize the rights deriving from the *aprisio* system and settlement of abandoned lands, the ploughing and colonization of which were absolutely vital, then starting with Count Wilfred the Hairy, at least, it would be the counts of the March themselves who would grant and confirm the *aprisios* carried out” (Moxó 1979, pp.113-114).

<sup>21</sup> As Vicens Vives (1964, p.131) noted, “although it is true there were no latifundia because the country’s mountainous and fragmented nature did not allow them, there were indeed big landowners who possessed smallholdings scattered everywhere. Surprisingly, this group included the biggest monasteries”.

Muslim population being joined by new Christian settlers. Only in the more mountainous areas further upriver away from the coast was the repopulation process slower (Moxó 1979, p.318). The expansion continued westwards along the Segre basin, and a year later the army that had taken Tortosa took Lleida (1149) under the command of Ramon Berenguer IV, with the help of Ermengol VI Count of Urgell and the Knights Templar. The city was granted a town and franchise charter very similar to Tortosa's.

All of this shows that there was a certain difference in the way repopulation was carried out in the territories of New Catalonia. Along with the traditional land appropriations we see greater participation on the part of the nobility and the Church, plus greater presence and continuity of the Muslim population. The repopulation of the New Catalonia mainly involved people from the north of Catalonia, just as the Old Catalonia had been repopulated mainly with settlers from the Pyrenees. In “appearance there was a considerable difference between the way the Old Catalonia of the counties had been populated – with its defensive military networks and fortified frontier towns, its Benedictine monasteries, villages (*villae*, *villares*, *vici*), farms and farmhouses, new settlements and towns – and the form of the New Catalonia, where the restructuring of the population centres and the organization of the municipalities was the responsibility of the king along with the cities, the cathedral chapters of Tarragona, Lleida and Tortosa, the military orders and the Cistercian monasteries, all held together by a system of social relationships that encouraged an openness and freedom that had been lost or unknown to the peasants of the Old Catalonia since the establishment of the feudal-manorial regime during the twelfth century” (Ladero 2014, p.352).

As for the roots of the Kingdom of Aragon, these were to be found to the west of the Catalan counties, in the central Pyrenees. In the eighth century the Christian highlanders who occupied these territories had initially accepted Carolingian dominion, but after the death of Aureolus of Aragon (809), a comital dynasty was established in the area, laying the foundations for the future Kingdom of Aragon. For a long time the highlanders of this region of the Pyrenees remained on the defensive in this mountainous territory that protected them from Muslim attacks, but their lack of offensive capabilities prevented them from advancing towards the plains of the south. This situation would continue until the end of the eleventh century, when Sancho Ramírez (1043-1094) advanced on the lowlands south of the Pyrenees. His first son, Peter I (1068-1104), took Huesca (1096)<sup>22</sup>, and his second son, Alfonso I the Battler (1073-1134) – who was himself a member of the

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<sup>22</sup> By now it was almost ten years since the Castilians had taken Toledo (1085).

Order of Templars – occupied Zaragoza (1118) with the help of various Frankish nobles and others from different kingdoms and counties of the peninsula, driven now by a widespread sense of crusade against the Muslims. With the capitulation of Zaragoza, the Aragonese had pushed the frontier as far as the Ebro, concluding a sizeable expansion that now had to be completed by repopulating the conquered territory (Lacarra 1951).

As a result of its conquests between 1080 and 1130, the Kingdom of Aragon grew by over 30,000 km<sup>2</sup>. In just a few years it had doubled the size of its territory and, like in the case of the Kingdom of Castile and its taking of Toledo (1085), the mid-Ebro valley was an area that had previously been populated and organized. Indeed, not only did it include urban centres that were larger than those in the north of the kingdom, but the conquered land was richer and more fertile, worked using farming and irrigation techniques unlike those used in the north. Considering this situation, it is not surprising that one of the main aims after the conquest was to repopulate the area with Christian settlers and thus secure effective control of both towns and countryside.

Most of the Muslim towns in the Ebro valley had surrendered, and this led to relatively benevolent conditions for the Muslim population, many of whom continued to live in the towns and especially in the country. Continuity of agricultural production needed to be guaranteed. A great many Muslims thus remained, in particular in agricultural areas, where they grew to exceed the Christian population. However, the Muslim population would become smaller in urban settings (Moxó 1979, p.301)<sup>23</sup>. In the cities, especially Zaragoza, the repopulation was supplemented with settlers from abroad, mainly of French origin, whose economic activity in many cases was crafted products and trade (Vicens Vives 1964, p.146). The king also needed to reward the knights who had helped in the fight to conquer the Ebro. These included Gaston IV, Viscount of Béarn, who was appointed Lord of Zaragoza. The general situation that came about in these territories is neatly summarized by Lacarra (1951, p.74): “the king paid the great lords of the peninsula and those from France and the Churches of his kingdom and those of southern France with land and feudal estates in the regions of the Ebro. [...] But neither the lords nor the Church always sent settlers to work this land [...] The fields were tilled thanks to the old Muslim

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<sup>23</sup> Regarding the towns, “it was agreed that the Muslims could stay in their houses for one year, after which they had to move outside the city walls, retaining whatever personal property and crop farms they had within the boundaries of the city or in any other [...] Capitulation therefore encouraged the continued presence of the Muslims in the countryside, since they lost nothing with the change, as [...] they kept their mosques, their judges and their laws. The city Muslims, although they lost their homes in the city, kept their country properties, which were the main source of wealth in the Middle Ages” (Lacarra 1951, p.67). However, “in the end neither their rights nor their property were respected” (Sabaté 1998, p.30).



sharecroppers, whose rights the king committed himself to respecting and the great lords had the most interest in preserving”.

South of the Ebro, however, it was a different matter. Lower Aragon, which was conquered at the end of the twelfth century, was a sparsely populated area with barely any urban centres of any size. These extensive territories, also known as the Extremadura of Aragon, were frontier lands at great risk of war, so their repopulation was slow and difficult. This was the context in which, from the end of the twelfth century to the mid-thirteenth century, there were two main institutions in charge of fighting the Muslims and securing and organizing these frontier territories: the military orders and the councils. The presence of military orders was especially noticeable in this area, ranging from Templars and Hospitallers to the Orders of Calatrava and Santiago – mentioned earlier in connection with the situation in the Castilian zone south of the Tagus – plus local organizations such as the Order of Alfambra (resulting from the merging of the Orders of Montegaudio and the Holy Redeemer)<sup>24</sup>. The towns, using the municipal charters they were granted and with their *alfoces* and their peasant knights, also played an important role in defending and colonizing these territories, with the councils of Calatayud (1120), Daroca (1142) and Teruel (1177) being prominent in this regard.

After the death without issue of Alfonso I (1134), a dynastic union resulted from the marriage in 1137 between Queen Petronilla of Aragon and Ramon Berenguer IV, Count of Barcelona, whose titles would be inherited by their son, Alfonso II (1157-1196). The Crown of Aragon was thus constituted. With the death of Peter II (1178-1213) in the Battle of Muret (1213) to the north of the Pyrenees, which put an end to Catalan aspirations regarding the south of France, this combined territory would continue the Christian expansion along the Mediterranean coast<sup>25</sup>. In the years that followed, the joint territorial expansion of the Catalans and Aragonese was redirected towards the south and overseas, led by Peter II's son, James I the Conqueror (1213-1276), who incorporated the Kingdoms of Mallorca and Valencia into the Crown of Aragon (Lomax 1978).

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<sup>24</sup> “Aliaga was granted to the Hospitallers (1180) and Montalban to the Order of Santiago (1210), both of these being between Teruel and Alcañiz. Security for Alcañiz and its extensive territory, located on the road from Castellón via Morella, was improved when it was granted to the Order of Calatrava in 1179, followed by the granting of the fortress towns of Castellote and Cantavieja to the Templars around 1200. Along the third access route – the coastal route, which gave access to the lower Ebro valley via Amposta and Tortosa in Catalan territory – defence was strengthened by granting the Templars jurisdiction over Tortosa (1182) along with other towns (Ascó, Ribarroja, 1210) granted either to the Templars or the Hospitallers (Amposta from 1150 and Ulledecona from 1178)” (Ladero 2014, pp.337-338).

<sup>25</sup> The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa also took place at this time, providing the opportunity for the Castilians to conquer the south of the peninsula.

The taking of the Kingdom of Mallorca was mainly a Catalan undertaking, led by the king. It was considered a crusade and relied on the participation of the nobility – with whom the distribution of land and the spoils of conquest were agreed – and the Catalan commercial bourgeoisie, interested in strengthening trade in the Mediterranean (Sabaté 1998, p.45). The city of Mallorca was stormed at the end of 1229, with the distribution of its goods and land included in the *Llibre de Repartiment* of 1232. After the occupation, the entire island was divided into portions, which were then split into smaller shares (*cavalleries*) and distributed between the king and the four great lords who had participated in the conquest: the counts of Roussillon, Empuries and Béarn, and the Bishop of Barcelona. The Hospitallers and Templars also received land. The part corresponding to the king (*medietas regis*) totalled 5,674 *cavalleries*, while the four great lords received a total of 7,762 *cavalleries* (*medietas magnatum*) between them (Moxó 1979, p.329)<sup>26</sup>. Settlers became the new inhabitants of the islands and were mainly of Catalan origin, although a minority of Jewish inhabitants continued to live there. Significantly, however, the original Muslim population of the Kingdom of Mallorca practically disappeared or became subordinate to the Christians (Soto and Mas 2015)<sup>27</sup>.

With the conquest of the Kingdom of Mallorca completed, the next step in the Catalan-Aragonese advance was southwards, towards Valencia. Led by James I the Conqueror, the strategy was to focus on the taking of the urban centres, and this was achieved rapidly, in little over a decade. The result was the incorporation of an area totalling approximately 25,000 km<sup>2</sup> that would become the Kingdom of Valencia. The first stage of the conquest pushed the frontier from south of the Ebro to Borriana (1233)<sup>28</sup>. The second would include the taking of the capital, Valencia (1238), along with all the territory down to the River Xúquer, while the third would take the frontier as far as the belt of land between Xixona and Biar (1245). One year earlier, with the Treaty of Almizra (1244), Aragon and Castile had tried to solve their territorial disputes, in particular as regards the boundaries of the Kingdom of Murcia to the south of Valencia, which was blocking the Catalan-Aragonese expansion southwards. The conditions agreed in the treaty were revised over time and the frontier was eventually established in the Treaty of Elx (1305), which ruled

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<sup>26</sup> The taking of Ibiza and Formentera (1235) was led by the nobility. The three nobles involved in the conquest received and distributed land. Menorca, on the other hand, initially escaped Christian occupation by paying tributes, but was finally conquered in 1287.

<sup>27</sup> “Mallorca is a case apart in the repopulation process. It is an example of total colonization carried out in a minimum period of time” (Vicens Vives 1964, p.151).

<sup>28</sup> In fact the conquest had already begun in the north of the kingdom (the taking of Morella in 1231), in the interior districts of Els Ports and El Maestrat, and was led by the Aragonese nobleman Blasco de Alagón, who went on to expel the Muslim population. From then on the king took charge.

that the lands to the north of the River Segura belonged to the Kingdom of Valencia, thereby establishing the geographical limit of the Crown of Aragon's expansion in the peninsula (Furió 1995).

The conquest of Valencia was a joint Catalan-Aragonese undertaking, the effective control of which was in the hands of the king, but which also relied on the participation of nobles, military orders and urban militias. There was a notable presence of the nobility and military orders in the north of the kingdom, but in the central area around Valencia the crown's participation was much greater, as reflected in the *Llibre del Repartiment*, and increased even more in the southernmost area of the kingdom<sup>29</sup>. Most of the territory of Valencia occupied by Christians had a number of typical features, including an abundant presence of Muslims, an almost total absence of Mozarabs, and an agricultural model characterized by irrigation systems and crops that were not generally grown elsewhere, found here mainly in areas of cultivation bordering the coastline.

The occupation, for the most part under the control of the king, was achieved through capitulations that enabled the Muslim presence to continue. In the north of the kingdom there was a predominance of town charters (Morella and Peniscola). Nevertheless, the urban ruling class in the cities generally chose to go into exile and, in the cases of Borriana and Valencia, immediately evacuated the Muslim population (Sabaté 1998, p.47). However, most of the native Muslim population continued to live in the countryside, in rural communities in farmsteads and Moorish quarters, but also scattered across the land as “*exarivo*” farmers or sharecroppers.

The relatively good initial situation of the Mudejar population deteriorated over time with the arrival of Christian settlers in greater numbers. Christian domination gradually became tougher and this led to serious revolts, such as those of 1247 and 1276, which resulted in the eviction and compulsory removal of Muslims from the cities and their coastal farms

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<sup>29</sup> “The sharing-out of territory among the nobles, rather than just rewarding their participation in the conquest, made the subjection and organization of the country easier, with the submission of the Mudejar communities and the establishment of the Christian settlers. However, the small size of the property gifted, generally just a farmstead or tiny hamlet, prevented the creation of big feudal estates and gave shape to a map characterized by the limited extension of each property. The only exception was the large properties granted to a small number of dignitaries such as Blasco de Alagón and Pedro Fernández de Azagra and, in particular, the Hospitallers and Templars in the north of the country, where military initiative had preceded that of the king [...] further to the south the proportions were reversed and the lion's share of the land and property went to the king [...] the production structure in both the manorial estates and the royal domains took the form of small family-run operations, the basic units of the new feudal system” (Furió 1995, p.46). Or, as indicated by Vicens Vives (1964, p.147): “Instead of making generic gifts of property to the lords, in Valencia the monarchy preferred an individual distribution system, which allocated to each occupant a house, a kitchen garden, a vineyard and a few – 2, 6 or 8 – *jovadas* (1.59 acres) of land. This mode of royal repopulation was of great strategic value, especially to the urban centres and their hinterland. It gave rise to a kind of average farm property that ultimately ensured the prosperity of these agricultural units up to the present day”.

and their resettlement in the mountainous areas of the interior (Burns 1967). Therefore, the most fertile agricultural areas of the kingdom, which contained farms that used irrigation systems, were taken from Muslim control and occupied by Christian colonists<sup>30</sup>. The two Muslim revolts were respectively followed by a second and third wave of Christian repopulation, mainly Catalan but also Aragonese, which laid the foundations of a new society (Guinot 1999).

There continued to be a sizeable Muslim presence in the kingdom of Valencia and it was one of the areas of the peninsula that suffered most after the expulsion of the Moriscos decreed in 1609-1614 by Philip III (1578-1621). Of the approximately 300,000 Moriscos estimated to have been living in Spain at the time, around 130,000 were resident in the Kingdom of Valencia, representing a third of the population (Ardit 1987, 2009; Chaney and Hornbeck 2000). Thus their expulsion was “the real end of Muslim political power in Spain, for though no Muslim state had existed since 1492 the *morisco* community was politicaly important throughout the sixteenth century. In a sense, then, Felipe III completed the work of Pelayo and the Reconquest ended as the decline of Spain began” (Lomax 1978, p.172).

## **Conclusion**

This article summarizes some of the characteristics of the historical process known as the *Reconquista* in the territories of today’s Spain. Our aim was to present the key elements that help explaining the institutions that were established in each stage of the Reconquest. The timing and evolution of the military conquest, and the subsequent repopulation of these conquered territories as the action moved southwards, depended on different factors and circumstances prevailing in each historical period. These dimensions, in turn, shaped the institutions that were created and the way society was organized at each stage of the Reconquista, including the distribution of land ownership. As argued by an increasing body of research (Malefakis 1970; Chaney and Hornbeck 2016; Oto-Peralías and Romero-Ávila 2016, 2017; Beltrán Tapia and Martínez-Galarraga 2018; Oto-Peralías 2020), this process had an important impact on the long-term economic evolution of the various territories within Spain.

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<sup>30</sup> The Christian colonists “learned how to continue the Hispano-Arabic legacy as regards farming techniques and irrigation systems, establishing characteristic institutions like the Tribunal de las Aguas and continuing to grow the same products, such as citrus fruits and rice” (Moxó 1979, p.347). See also Glick (1970).

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