

Jaén's castles, fortresses and walled sites

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Many authors have remarked upon the huge number and variety of fortified structures in the province of Jaén^[4]. This rich heritage is now undergoing exhaustive archaeological research, led by the Medieval History Department of the University of Jaén, and supported by public bodies and institutions. Also, several routes for cultural tourism have been created, including the Castles and Battles Route, with the support of the Provincial Government of Jaén.

The long and eventful history of the upper Guadalquivir (Jaén province) has produced a wide range of important defensive structures. Some of them

can be traced back to prehistoric times, being reused and altered at different times in history. But it is in the Middle Ages, in the 8th to 15th centuries, when these buildings reached their peak of splendour.

The most significant defensive structures were built in cities to protect the new urban developments of the Muslim governors, whose political programmes made the city the epicentre of local social organisation. The important role of these centres led the Andalusí rulers to provide them with complex structures, comprising solid stretches of wall punctuated by slender towers, surrounded in turn by barbicans, antemurals, moats, etc., which can still be seen in Jaén, Úbeda, Andújar



and Baeza. The increase in fortifications was largely due to being close to a military and social frontier which remained active for four long centuries (12th – 15th C). This circumstance made it essential to maintain these centres, adding strategic alcazars and alcazabas (Arabic fortress types), with luxurious palaces within (Jaén, Arjona, Segura, Baeza, etc.). The security and control of this large area was completed by small rural castles and watchtowers^[3], built to dominate the space militarily, and to control roads, fords, bridges and economic resources of all kinds. The war in the upper Guadalquivir was a struggle to control the space, meaning that a large part of the military operations concerned the conquest and defence of cities, strongholds and fortresses scattered around this frontier, which were the true articulators of the territory. In this active frontier situation both sides began a thorough fortification of their lines, building new fortresses or improving existing ones.

Thus the land around the upper Guadalquivir became a continuously changing geographical area, evolving

cyclically as Castille expanded. As a result, various very different political and administrative regimes were established in the area, which occasionally came into conflict with each other:

On one hand, the territories of the crown of Castille, forming the domains known as Comunidades de Villa y Tierra (Communities of Town and Land) or Concejos de Realengo (Crown Land Councils): Jaén, Andújar, Úbeda, Baeza, Arjona and Iznatoraf.

On the other hand, the territories forming part of the feudal domains of the Military Orders (Calatrava and Santiago), or lay and ecclesiastical lords (Adelantamiento de Cazorla).

And opposing them, the territories under Islamic rule, defended by numerous fortresses built using a very characteristic technique, rammed earth and mortar walls, enabling fast and efficient construction to meet the strategic needs for increased military control of the area.

In this context, the threat of enemy advance was a reality, as were raids and attacks launched by either side into enemy territory, conceived as operations to weaken the adversary, as not only did they gain whatever was looted, but they destabilised the enemy economically and psychologically, destroying their resources and supply bases.

The security of the territory was regulated according to a radial, hierarchical organisation, with the most important city at its centre, usually the one with the longest historical tradition, the most inhabitants and the largest array of defensive structures. These strongholds quickly became authentic military and political bases, supplying and organising the war on the frontier, and co-ordinating the actions of the other elements making up the system. In the second rank, other towns and fortified enclaves in the territorial domains of the Councils or feudal lords played a more active role in defence and attack. This category included a large number of fortified places such as small forts, tower houses, watchtowers, beacons, etc., of varying plan and architectural form.

Finally, the Christian conquerors adapted their fortresses to the new military and social situation, with castles becoming residences for the noble class, adding to their complex defensive structures all types of residential quarters, organised around porticoed interior courtyards, richly decorated, with galleries leading to ceremonial halls, chapels, private areas, and rooms used by servants (kitchens, storerooms, stables, etc.), an organizational structure which can be seen at the fortresses of Alcaudete, Lopera, Castellar, Tobaruela, etc [1, 5, 6].



Because of this the province of Jaén boasts a great number of fortified structures throughout its territory, with a wide variety ranging from the oldest Islamic castles (*Husun*), built in the first centuries of occupation (8th – 9th C) as a consequence of the civil war which set Arabs, Berbers and Muladis against the Umayyad authorities; through the great alcazabas of the Almohads (12th – 13th C), the protagonists of major episodes of war; and ending with the castle palaces built in the 16th century by members of the nobility such as Francisco de los Cobos, Secretary to Emperor Charles V, in the Villas of Canena and Sabiote, bastions which symbolised their power and wealth and featured the work of notable artists, architects (Vandelvira) and military engineers.

The many different types of this archaeological and historic heritage gives us an opportunity to go back in time to other centuries and form a fuller picture of life in the area, where the dominant insecurity and social and political conflicts were the forces shaping this frontier and the construction of wide range of defensive structures.



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