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Castles landscape in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula: the example of Castalla Castle between the 11th and 15th centuries

Abstract

Castalla Castle (Alicante, Spain), built between the 11th and 16th centuries, is one of the most outstanding fortifications in the province of Alicante, as part of *al-Andalus*, first, and the Kingdom of Valencia, after. The present work aims to deepen the knowledge of its landscape on a medium scale for a large part of the Middle Ages. In this way, analysing some material (archaeological) and cultural (written) sources, it has been possible to better draw the Castalla Castle landscape in the Foia de Castalla district, a geographic territory located in the north of the province of Alicante, between the 11th and 15th centuries and during two different chronocultural periods: Andalusian (11th century – 1244) and Christian (1244-1499).

Keywords: *Andalusian landscape, Castalla Castle, feudal landscape, Foia de Castalla district, province of Alicante*

Introduction

As it has been shown in several works [Mira 2016a, 2017], the historical vicissitudes of the province of Alicante have become it in a territory rich in castles. Thus, it is configured as a privileged place for the analysis on fortifications and their landscape in any of its forms and at different scales: on a macro scale, as part of Andalusian castles from Šarq al-Andalus [Azuar 2016] or the defensive system in the southeast border lands of the Crown of Aragon with the Crown of Castile [Guinot 1995]; on a medium scale, analysing the fortifications themselves through general and specific works [Azuar 1981, 1994; Ferrer and Català 1996; Menéndez et

al. 2010; Segura and Simón 2001]; and on a micro scale, knowing in a more detailed way the heritage reality of castles, as in the case of Castalla and Sax [Mira 2016b].

The present work aims to deepen the knowledge of the Castalla Castle landscape on a medium scale. This type of research, as the National Plan for Defensive Architecture highlights [Spanish Cultural Heritage Institute 2010: 14, 17], is essential to fully understand the defensive architecture, like the case of castles. On the other hand, this research is also a new contribution to medieval landscape studies on a medium scale focused on the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula and, specifically, in the current province of Alicante: for example, the landscape analysis of *Šarq al-Andalus* between the 8th and 10th centuries [Azuar 2015], that of castles from Alicante and Cocentaina between the 12th and 13th centuries [Azuar 2016: 147-152], the orchard analysis of Orihuela between the 7th and 11th centuries [Gutiérrez 1995] and that of River Segura [Parra 2017].

For this, different historical sources have been used with the purpose to obtain information under the best conditions and achieve the most reliable analysis. Following the qualitative criteria pointed out by Julio Aróstegui [2001: 387, 388], the historical sources used have been those material, as the archaeological ones, and those cultural, as the written ones. In this sense, the works of Rafael Azuar [1989: 165-171] on the taifa de Dénia and the Andalusian settlement in the Foia de Castalla district (11th century – 1244) have been basic; as well as the works of Josep Torró [1999] on the Christian conquest of *Šarq al-Andalus*, the creation of the Kingdom of Valencia and its process of colonisation. In addition, there are others more concrete such as those executed in the Andalusian necropolis of Almarra (Castalla) by Gabriel Segura [2002] and José Lajara [2009], in the Andalusian necropolis of Horta del Pont (Ibi), as well as the synthesis works of José Ramón Ortega and Marco Aurelio Esquembre [2010]. Henceforth it is necessary to add the different actions carried out within the Castalla Castle Heritage Site Social Regeneration Project [Mira, Bevià and Ortega 2015], among which can be quoted the compilation and study of medieval written documentation about Castalla and its castle [Baldaquí 2016; Rangel 2017; Torró 2016], the analysis of human remains recovered from the necropolis of Almarra [Gómez 2017], the publication of the results about plant use in Castalla Castle [Mira et al. 2017] and the analysis of those materials used in its construction [Mira et al. 2017].

However, it must be recognised that, in spite of the work done, it is still far from reaching a similar knowledge to the territories closely and intensely studied, such as the Vinalopó valleys [Jover and Navarro 2004; Segura and Simón 2001; Ponce 2016].

Foia de Castalla district: Castalla Castle landscape on a medium scale

From a geographical point of view, the Foia de Castalla district is a depression surrounded by a set of mountains that is located in the north of the province of Alicante and forms a perfectly defined natural region (fig. 1). Their geographical

characteristics have been analysed elaborately in several works [Giménez 2010; Santos 1987]. However, as it can be seen in fig. 1, the Foia de Castalla district is currently formed by four municipalities (Castalla, Ibi, Onil and Tibi). All of them have their origins in the Middle Ages, the most important historical period in the region.

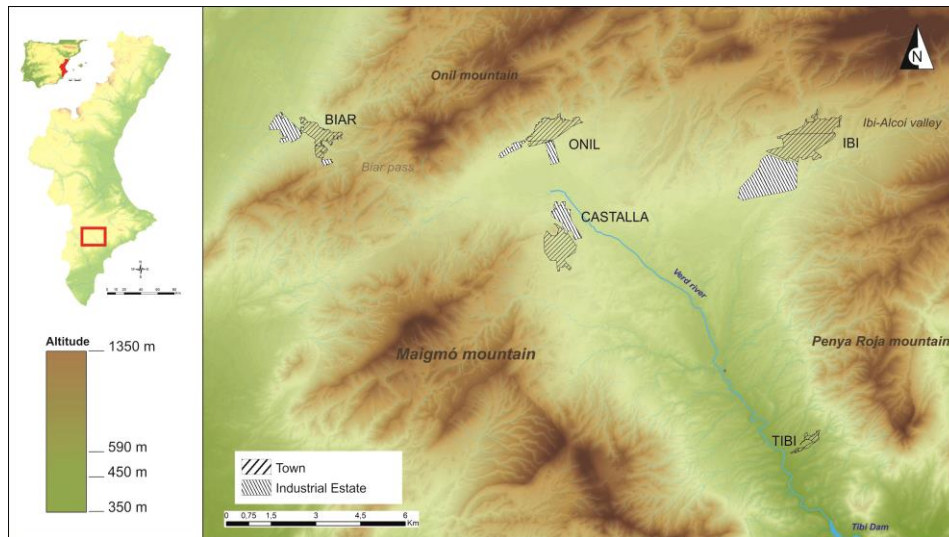


Fig. 1. The Iberian Peninsula, the province of Alicante and the Foia de Castalla. Fig. by author, 2010

Andalusian Foia de Castalla district (11th century – 1244)

As J.R. Ortega and M.A. Esquembre point out [2010: 92], the origin of Castalla Castle dates back to the 11th century. Therefore, it is an Andalusian fortification that was part of the taifa de Dénia (11th century), first, and probably of the city of Murcia (12th century – 1244). From a military, administrative and fiscal point of view, it was built to control the Foia de Castalla district [Azuar 2010: 291; Torró 2016: 4]. Thanks to its strategic position near water resources and farmlands, this fortification would control the natural corridors towards the coast, following the River Verd course, and the inland through the mountain pass of Biar and the valley of Ibi-Alcoi.

These works make possible to identify a landscape articulated around two levels (11th century – 1244) from the point of view of human occupation (fig. 2) [Azuar 1989: 165-172, 2010: 289-298; Lajara 2009; Ortega and Esquembre 2010: 100-106; Segura 2001; Segura and Torró 1985]. Both are the result of a historical process of formation, development and transformation in cities and castles from *Šarq al-Andalus*, which dynamics have been well studied and defined by R. Azuar [2016].

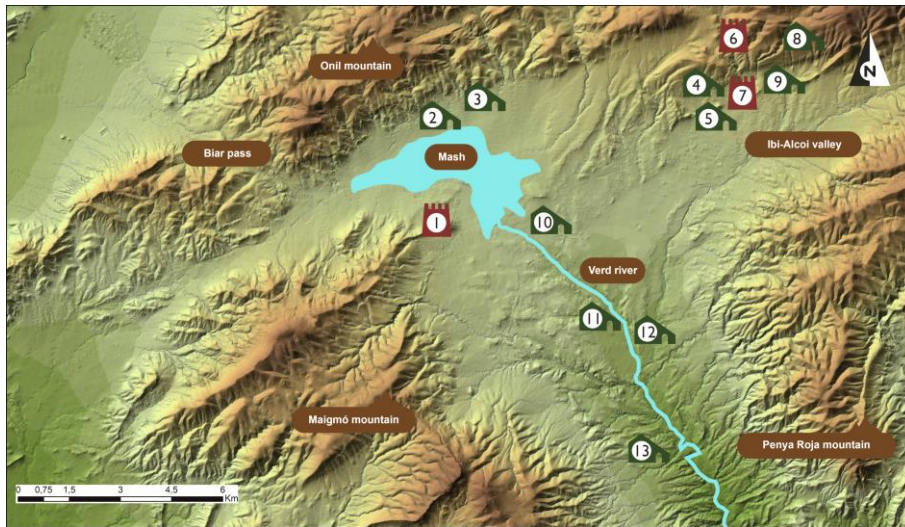


Fig. 2. Andalusian Foia de Castalla 11th century – 1244. Castles: 1 – Castalla, 6 – Vermell and 7 – Vell. Hamlets: 2 – Torre d’Onil, 3 – Favarella, 4 – Fernoveta, 5 – Sant Miquel, 8 – Horta del Pont, 9 – Altet de Campos, 10 – Almarra, 11 – Casa de l’Escrivà, 12 – Torreta de Cabanyes and 13 – Torrosella. Fig. by author, 2016

The first level is made up by Castalla Castle (11th – 16th centuries, fig. 3), the largest fortification and the central nucleus, and the subordinate Vell Castle (12th – 13th centuries?) and Vermell Castle (13th – 14th centuries?), both located in the municipality of Ibi and practically disappeared at present. Their characteristics have been described in several works [Bevià et al. 2017; Lajara 2009; Menéndez et al. 2010; Mira and Ortega 2015; Segura and Torró 1985].



Fig. 3. Castalla Castle. Photo by author, 2014

The second level has a series of hamlets (*al-qurâ*), where Andalusian population would reside, focused on three zones: a first group consisting of Torre de Onil (12th – 15th centuries) and Favarella (12th – 15th centuries), placed at the foot of the mountain in Onil; a second group around Vell Castle and Vermell Castle, formed by Altet de Campos (11th – 13th centuries), Fernoveta (11th – 13th centuries), Les Hortes (12th – 13th centuries), Horta del Pont (12th – 13th centuries) and Sant Miquel (11th – 15th centuries) located in Ibi, two of which would correspond to Benetabib and Benetaulea settlements [Azuar 1989: 169]; and a third group made up of Almarra (12th – 13th centuries), Casa de l'Escrivà (11th – 12th centuries), Torreta de Cabanyes (12th – 15th centuries) in Castalla, and Torrosella (12th – 15th centuries) in Tibi, located along the River Verd course through the Foia de Castalla district. This case is very interesting: although the waters of the river were intended for the irrigation of the orchard in Alicante both in Andalusian and Christian periods, it is nonetheless true that the inhabitants of hamlets used them for their own benefit in spite of what was pointed out by R. Azuar [2010: 292]. This fact originated in later centuries several lawsuits between the municipalities of the Foia de Castalla district and Alicante due to the water [Marquegui 2013].

Castalla Castle controled hamlets of groups 1 and 3, while Vell Castle and Vermell Castle supervise those in group 2. In addition, as it can be seen in fig. 2, all of them are placed near hydrological resources: the marsh or the river for hamlets of groups 1 and 3, and Barranc dels Molins, a ravine for hamlets of group 2 [Marquegui and Lajara 2014]. And also near farmlands for hamlets of groups 2 and 3, which would be exploited. Within the latter group, the proximity to Almarra, Torreta de Cabanyes and Casa de l'Escrivà is reinforced by toponymy. The first two are located in the land of Alfàs (*al-fahs*), an Arabic name that designates farmlands [Barceló 2010: 71; Epalza 1987], where dry land and irrigated land would play a crucial role thanks to the river, natural springs and large water irrigation ponds called *safareig* (*aş-şahrīj*), a place name of Arabic origin also documented in 1456 [Baldaquí 2016: 101]. The third one is located in El Campello, a pre-Arabic place name that also refers to farmlands [Epalza 1987]. Moreover, the geographical location of Almarra (the old road between Castalla and Ibi) fits perfectly with the meaning of its name in Arabic: *al-mara* or place of passage [Segura 2002: 202].

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that, in spite of being nucleated settlements oriented to the exploitation of the territory, at least in four cases (Torre de Onil, Favarella, Torreta de Cabanyes and Torrosella) [Azuar 1989; Torró 2016] they would have defensive towers, now disappeared or not visible. It is a type of construction that would leave its mark in toponymy, as it can be seen in some documents written during the Christian period [1272, 1292 and 1300]: Alfàs farmland in Torreta de Cabanyes is called Foçalboraya, Fas Alburay or Fasalboraya, a place name that comes from the Arabic *Fahs al-Burayya* or turret field [Torró 2016: 23]. Almarra and Horta del Pont have necropolis (*maqâbir*), which analysis is essential to better understand Andalusian populations in the Foia de Castalla district [Lajara 2009; Segura 2002]. Almarra is of special interest: it has two necropolises, one of them with an area of about 3,720 m² (Almarra I). In its partial excavation

(320 m²) 44 graves were documented with 39 inhumed people and at present it is the subject of a detailed study [Gómez 2017; Segura 2002: 200].

This distribution of castles and hamlets follows the same patterns, at least for the 12th century and 1244 (the year of Christians' arrival), of other Andalusian districts such as those of Cocentaina and Santa Bárbara (Alicante). In the first case a main castle has been documented (Cocentaina Castle), around which there are three secondaries (Penàguila Castle, Planes Castle and Perputxent Castle). Below them there is a series of hamlets placed near the River Serpis, one of which (Almudaina) had defensive tower [Azuar 2016: 150-151]. Partially, Santa Bárbara Castle repeats the same scheme: a main castle with five secondary fortifications around – Agost Castle, Busot Castle, Mola Castle and Río Castle – and, below these, a series of hamlets nearby to irrigated areas and communication routes. Santa Bárbara Castle controlled the hamlets of Mutxamel and Alcoraya; Busot Castle controlled the hamlets of Aigües de Busot, Baranyes and Cabrafich; and Río Castle – hamlets of Aspe and Monforte [Azuar 2016: 149-150].

Finally, Castalla Castle was again a fundamental piece to know, at least partially, the neutral landscape of the Foia de Castalla district between the 11th century and 1244. In a recent work [Mira et al 2017] some coal and fauna remains from the archaeological excavations in Castalla Castle were analysed. From the Andalusian period (11th century – 1244) it has been documented *Olea europaea* (olive tree), *Pinus halepensis* (Aleppo pine), *Pinus sp.* (pine) and *Quercus perennifolia* (oak or kermes oak), which use could correspond to building material. These species are available in the Foia de Castalla district, either in the large areas of Alfàs or El Campello (olive tree), or in the surrounding mountains (Aleppo pine, pine and oak or kermes oak). In any case, they are far from offering a complete image, since more woody and shrub resources would be used [Mira et al 2017: 312, 313]. Future studies, such as that of coal remains documented in Almarra hamlet [Segura 2002: 202], will help to complete this poor outlook.

Feudal Foia de Castalla district (1244-1499)

The Christian occupation of the Foia de Castalla district began in 1244, during the siege of Biar Castle by the Aragonese king Jaume I [Torró 1999: 50]. After this fact, Castalla Castle became immediately a key point of the south Aragon lands defence against Castile (fig. 4). This is evidenced by its appearance in the Treaty of Almisra (1244), which established the border of the crowns of Castile and Aragon [Soldevila et al. 2007: 379, 380].

Following the previously proposed scheme, between 1244 and 1499 the Foia de Castalla landscape is re-articulated in two levels regarding human occupation (fig. 5) [Azuar 1989, 2010; Lajara 2009; Ortega and Esquembre 2010; Segura and Torró 1985]. It is due to the inheritance of Andalusian inhabitants and the transformations carried out by new Christian inhabitants.



Fig. 4. South border between Aragon and Castile in 1244. Fig. prepared by author. After Wikipedia (https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tratado_de_Almizra#/media/File:Tratadode_Almizra.png), 2016

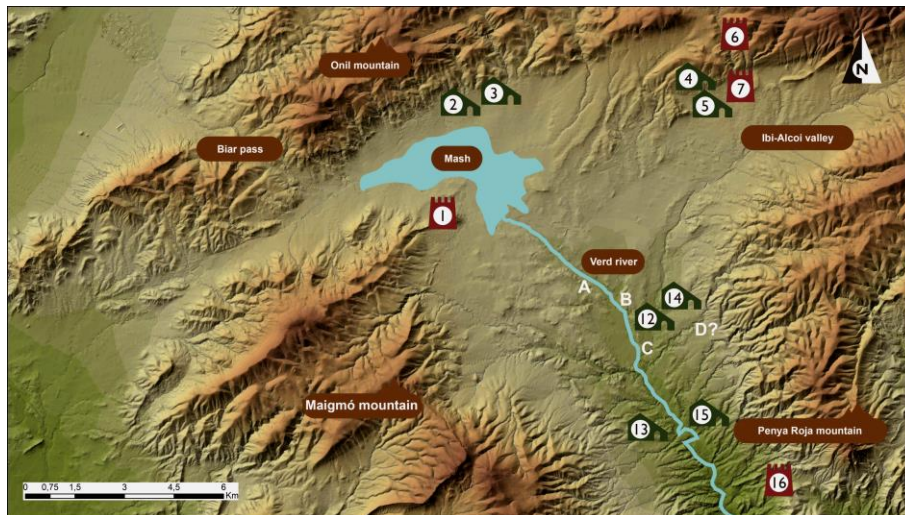


Fig. 5. Christian Foia de Castalla 12th and 15th century. Castles: 1 – Castalla, 6 – Vermell, 7 – Vell and 16 – Tibi. Hamlets: 2 – Torre d’Onil, 3 – Favanela, 4 – Fernoveta, 12 – Torreta de Cabanyes, 13 – Torrosella, 14 – Sarganella and 15 – Tibi. Mills: A – Pas, B – Cabanyes and C – Forcall. Tower: D – Armengol? Fig. prepared by author, 2016

The first level is headed again by Castalla Castle and, below it, Vell Castle, Vermell Castle and Tibi Castle (2nd half of the 13th – 14th century), placed in the municipality of Tibi as its name indicates [Azuar and Navarro 1995; Franco 1988].

The second level is formed by a set of hamlets that, in spite of being concentrated in those areas pointed out above, reduced their number for many reasons: the abandonment of these lands by Muslims due to the arrival of Christians; their death because of the different conflicts following the Christian conquest, such

as the War of Murcia (1264-1266); or its concentration in certain nuclei for its better control by Christians. The first group is integrated by Torre de Onil and Favarella, which are located at the foot of the mountain in Onil; the second group, placed around Vell Castle and Vermell Castle, is formed by Fernoveta and Sant Miquel; and the third group is made up of Torreta de Cabanyes and Sarganella (2nd half of the 13th – 15th century) in Castalla, and Tibi and Torrosella (2nd half of the 13th – 15th century) located along the River Verd course through the Foia de Castalla district. Those indicated in the previous group would have towers. In addition, a new tower near Sarganella hamlet (Armengol, figure 2) is documented, although it is unknown if it would be part of Sarganella or another unidentified hamlet [Baldaquí 2016; Rangel 2017: 13].

As it can be noted again, Castalla Castle controls hamlets in group 1 (Torre de Onil and Favarella) and part of group 3 (Torreta de Cabanyes and Sarganella), while smaller castles supervise hamlets framed in group 2 (Fernoveta and Sant Miquel) and part of group 3 (Tibi and Torrosella). At the end of the 15th century, Torre de Onil and Tibi gave rise to the current municipalities of Onil and Tibi; Sarganella continued populated (in fact it is still standing but without population); Favarella, Torreta de Cabanyes, Fernoveta, Sant Miquel and Torrosella were abandoned or with very few inhabitants.



Fig. 6. Torreta de Cabanyes hamlet and its landscape. Photo prepared by author, after José Ramón Ortega, 2010

The written documentation, much richer than in the previous phase, allows to affirm that Christian inhabitants were protected around castles, as Castalla Castle and Tibi Castle. In respect of hamlets, most of them, like Torreta de Cabanyes,

Torrosella or Tibi, were inhabited by Muslims subjected to Christians. In contrast, Torre de Onil and Favarella had a mixed population, that is, new Christian inhabitants along with Muslims [Torró 2016: 20-22]. On the other hand, this documentation also provides more precise information about crops in the Foia de Castalla district. Thus, for the period between 1272 and 1313, Alfàs would house dry farming while the area occupied by the old Almarra hamlet, now differentiated from Alfàs and known as Almarra (fig. 2), would undertake irrigated land [Torró 2016: 23]. In mid – 1456, the book of *peita* – a royal tax that was perceived as a percentage of the estimated value from urban and rustic properties by people in Castalla – provides information on the type of crops that were carried out: vineyard, olive tree and almond tree [Baldaquí 2016: 3, 51, 101] and it is supposed that cereals would also be grown. Because previously, in 1297 Bernat Despuig received a royal authorisation for the construction of a flour mill, with a house and a pond [Baldaquí 2016; Torró 2016: 67]. This would correspond possibly to one of the three mills located near the river and Torreta de Cabanyes (fig. 6): Pas mill, now disappeared, or Cabanyes and Forcall mills, practically disappeared too [Marquegui 2013: 933, 934].

The industrial activity as imprint in the landscape is not only reduced to the transformation of cereal into flour. Gypsum mining has also been documented in certain points of the Foia de Castalla district. For example, Barranc dels Algepsars is a ravine that may correspond to the current Barranc del Negre, near the gypsum mining of the Foia Catalina, a surrounding place which material was used during the Middle Ages in Castalla Castle [Mira et al. 2017].

On this point, the fortification is again a mandatory reference to know the vegetal landscape of the Foia de Castalla district, as well as the animal species consumed between 1244 and 1499 [Mira et al. 2017]. For the Christian period (14th – 15th centuries), it has been documented the use of *Pinus halepensis* (Aleppo pine) and *Pinus pinea* (Stone pine) and *Quercus perennifolia* (oak or kermes oak) from the studied coal and wood. Its use could correspond to building material. As in the previous phase, these species were available in the mountains surrounding the Foia de Castalla district. However we are far from offering a complete image, since many more woody resources would be used [Mira et al. 2017: 312, 313].

Conclusion

The province of Alicante is one of the most privileged places in the Iberian Peninsula for the study of castles from different approaches and scales. In the case of Castalla Castle, one of the most emblematic of the province of Alicante, works on a medium scale have traditionally focused on the fortification itself [Azuar and Navarro 1995; Bevià et al. 2017; Menéndez et al. 2010; Mira and Ortega, 2015]. Moreover, this contribution based on the castle landscape analysis must be added: the Foia de Castalla district. It is a research developed by R. Azuar [2016: 147-152] in nearby castles, such as that of Cocentaina and Santa Bárbara (Alicante).

Thus, from those actions developed within the *Castalla Castle Heritage Site Social Regeneration Project*, it has been possible to make a first approach to the Foia de Castalla landscape between the 11th century and 1499. There are two phases: Andalusian, (11th – 12th centuries) and Christian (1244-1499). Both are characterised by presenting an occupation of the territory at two stages: the first stage with castles taking the lead; and the second level with hamlets arranged in farmlands or near water resources, exploited with ponds, irrigation canals, ditches, flour mills, etc. They have not been studied yet although the use of water from the river, at least formally, was destined to the orchard of Alicante [Baldaquí 2016; Azuar 2010; Marquiegui 2013; Torró 2016]. The main difference between both stages lies in the disappearance (Almarra and Casa de l'Escrivà) and appearance (Sarganella and Tibi) of new hamlets and castles (Tibi). In the case of hamlets, this fact is due to the disappearance of a large part of Muslim population because of the post-conquest conflicts (as the aforementioned War of Murcia), the going to other places owing to Christians' arrival and the concentration of the remaining population in some hamlets (Torre de Onil and Favarella) that they had to share with new Christian population.

In addition, the dendrological studies carried out in Castalla Castle have served, although in an incipient manner, to better understand flora in the Foia de Castalla district during the Middle Ages and the medieval landscape of the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula, specifically in the current province of Alicante [Azuar 2015, 2016; Gutiérrez 1995; Parra 2017].

Along with the aforementioned, the use of minerals from the district was essential during the Middle Ages. In this sense, it has been identified a gypsum mining (1456) that would be placed in the current Foia Catalina and from which building material would be extracted. In fact, its use is documented in some buildings, such as Castalla Castle [Mira et al. 2017; Rizo and Guardiola 2004].

On the other hand, this work has shown the need to deepen the knowledge of the castle by going beyond itself and paying attention to its territory. For this, it is essential to continue collecting written documentation on the Foia de Castalla district during the Middle Ages and cross it with the archaeological data. In this way, some disregarded aspects would be better known, as the medieval irrigation canals or ditches, and some elements, which location is unknown (Favarella or Armengol), would be placed. It is also essential to finish the study on archaeological sites, such as that of Almarra hamlet, to learn more about the Andalusian occupation and territory exploitation, as well as the anthropological characteristics of its inhabitants.

Finally, this work is also a good example of local management on cultural heritage and its results thanks to some defined projects with clearly established purposes. In the case of Castalla Castle, it is possible to improve the knowledge of the fortification and its territory, enhancing its attractiveness as a cultural tourism destination.

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