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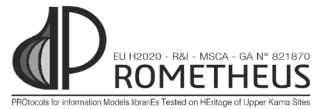
Architectures along James I itinerary in the Valencian Province



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Persistent forms in Valencia Cathedral. © Sandro Parrinello

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The Almonecir Castle, located in the western part of the Sierra de Espadán, is a military construction of considerable historical and architectural relevance. Its isolated position from the main communication routes had a significant impact on the development of the surrounding villages, conferring it a strategic role in different historical phases. The relevance of the castle in the region underlines its prestige as an emblematic landmark within a complex defence system that spread to the entire territory of Sierra de Espadán. This defence system was established to preserve the security and integrity of the local communities over the centuries¹.

The Sierra d'Espadán region represents a territorial unit that shows its autonomous identity, both in terms of geographical and historical aspects. The mountain system constitutes an element unifying military works - such as castles, towers, and other fortifications – that provide its distinctive character and a peculiar identity².

Taking into consideration the Almonecir Castle, a series of investigations took place to understand the construction technologies and be able to read the historical stratifications. On-field investigations were conducted to increase the comprehension of the castle to develop hypotheses on its original configuration and subsequent transformations. Through stratigraphic analysis of masonry structures, it was possible to obtain important information regarding the historical evolution of the complex. These visual surveys were performed to define the construction techniques used in the fortified elements of the castle and later integrated by archival research. The analysis helped to complete an informative framework necessary for a better understanding of the constructed fortified system, allowing hypotheses on the structure of elements that no longer exist.

Origins and History of the Castle

Providing an historical background it's crucial to properly contextualise the Castle of Almonecir and to outline its evolution over time, analysing the cultural, social and architectural influences that have contributed to its current form. The origins of the Castle are closely related to the Moorish conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and the origin of a new state known as Al-Andalus³.

¹ Selma Castell (2005), *El Alto Palancia en época islámica*.

² Forcada (2011), *Torre y Castillos de la Sierra d'Espadán*.

³ Rodríguez (2005), *Historia del Castillo*.

Side page, Fig. 01

The Castle in the Landscape of the Almonacid Valley

Situated in an elevated position, the castle offers a broad visual command over the surrounding territory.

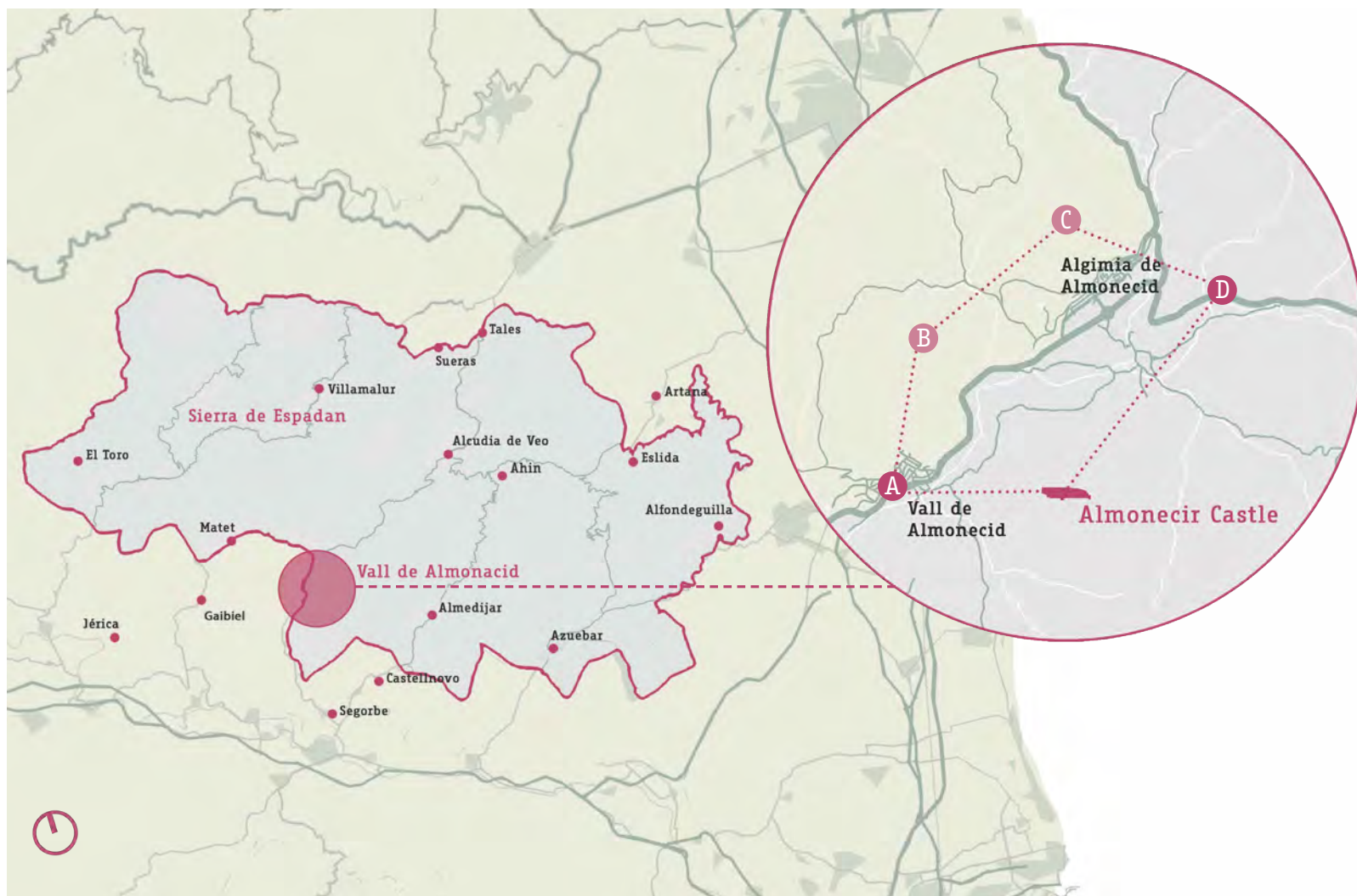


Fig. 02

Before the restoration works

View of the Homenaje Tower prior to the restoration works carried out in 2008.





↑
Fig. 03
The Sierra de Espadán and Its Network of Castles
 Map showing the main fortified centres within the Sierra de Espadán. The inset focuses on Vall de Almonacid and its defensive system, highlighting the strategic position of Almonécir Castle.

Originally forming part of the Umayyad Empire of Damascus, Al-Andalus split off in 756 A.D. and reached the height of its power with the Caliphate of Cordoba (929-1035 d.C.)⁴. The castle of Almonécir in its early phase was probably a fortified monastery or ribat, inhabited by a community of Muslim known as Murabitin⁵. In the second half of the 11th century and the early years of the 12th century, administration and government inefficiency led to significant insecurity in rural areas of Al-Andalus, especially in Murcia and Valencia regions. As a result, peasants were forced to leave their homes and farms, seeking refuge in castles erected on hills and strategic locations, including Almonécir Castle⁶. Following the Catholic Reconquista of the Espedan area⁷, King James I of Aragon granted Almonécir Castle to the royal chancellor Berenguer de Palou, Bishop of Barcelona, along with

⁴ O'Callaghan (1983), *A History of medieval Spain*; Guichard, *Al-Andalus: 711-1492: une histoire de l'Espagne Musulmane*.

⁵ For a more in-depth overview on this topic, see: Epalza (2004), *La Rápita islámica: Historia Institucional*; Martínez Salvador (2004), *El ribat en al-Andalus. Enclaves militares y centros de transmisión mística (siglos IX-XI d. C.)*.

⁶ Rodríguez (2005), *Historia del Castillo*, cit.

⁷ For a more in-depth treatise on the events of Catholic Reconquista in Valencia and the formation of the Kingdom see: Arteta (1981), *Orígenes del Reino de Valencia, cuestiones cronológicas sobre su reconquista*.



all the lands, villages, and inhabitants associated with it, as a reward for his contribution to the conquest of the Kingdom of Valencia⁸. During the 16th century, the castle played a central role in the Espadán War, which broke out following the 1525 decree by Charles V, mandating all Muslims in the Crown of Aragon to convert to Catholicism or leave the Iberian Peninsula⁹. Following the rebellion and the expulsion of the Moorish from the Espadán area¹⁰, the castle of Almonecir gradually lost importance and its military functions became unnecessary. Today, the castle is evidence of the historical events that have shaped the region over the centuries. Its ruins stand as a tangible example of military art and fortified architecture over time, revealing the complexity of social, economic, and political relations that involved the castle throughout the centuries.

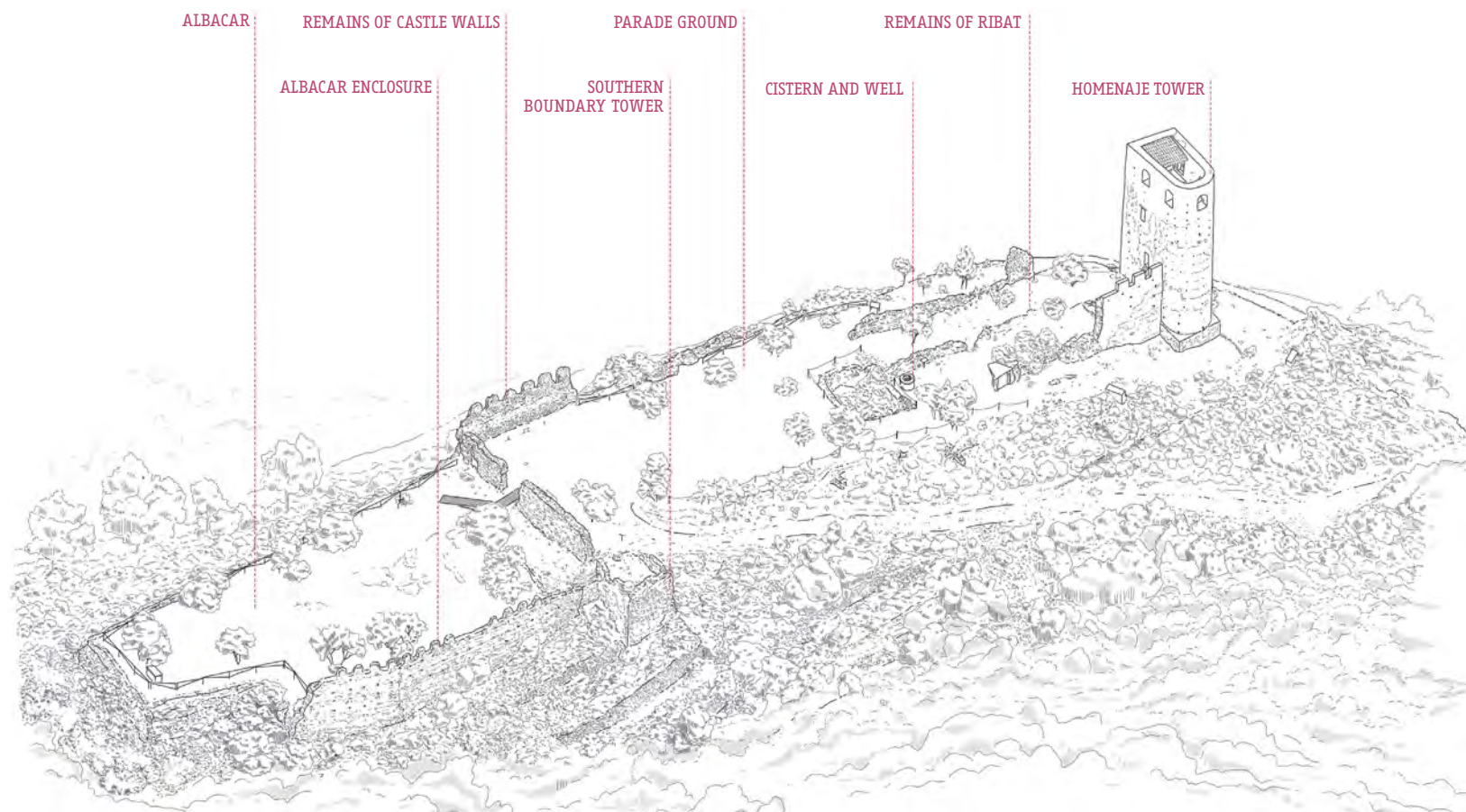
⁸ Llibre del Repartiment, donación del Castillo y Villa de Almonezir a Berenguer de Palou, Archivo de la Cathedral de Barcelona, sala 3, estancia 3, pergamino n°29, cf. Rodríguez (2005), *Historia del Castillo*, cit.

⁹ Chabás (1890), *Los moriscos de Valencia y su expulsión*; Molero, Francisco, *La Guerra de Espadan, 1526: una cruzada en la Valencia del Renacimiento*.

¹⁰ Rull Villar (1960), *La Rebelión de los moriscos en la Sierra de Espadán y sus castillos*.



Fig. 04
Fortified Heritage and Its Territorial Context
Examples of the region's fortified heritage in relation to the surrounding landscape and urban centres. On the left: Castellnovo; top right: Castle of Artana; bottom right: Castle of Gaibiel.



The current image of the Castle

The current appearance of Almonecir Castle is affected by the unavoidable passage of time, which has substantially altered the perception of its defensive systems. The castle has an irregular layout with terraced earthworks and an NE - SW orientation. Its walls cover an area of approximately 2,700 square metres and are internally organised into two main spaces separated by an inner curtain wall. The main defensive structures are placed in the first area, in the northeast portion of the castle, where are located the most well-preserved elements: the remains of the Homenaje Tower¹¹, the water system (well and underground cistern), and the common quarters¹².

In the second area, southwest of the first one, the complex extends to a lower enclosure, intended for non-permanent residential use, typologically identified as Albacar¹³.



Fig. 05
Axonometric Drawing of the Castle Complex
Illustration of the castle showing its main elements. (Drawing credit: Giulia Porcheddu)

Side page, Fig. 06
Geometry of a Stronghold
Illustration of the Homenaje Tower, highlighting its monumental character and recent reconstruction works on its upper section.

¹¹ *Torre de l'Homenaje* is the Spanish term, with a *Christians* significance, designated to indicate the keep. The origin of its name comes from the fact that inside was held the ceremony of homage where the lord gave to his vassal a feud in exchange of *auxilium et consilium*, i.e. help and advice. For a general discussion of the tower, see: De Mora Figueroa (1994), *Glosario de arquitectura defensiva medieval*.

¹² The remains of the masonry in these spaces was discovered during the archaeological excavations carried out in the 2000s and still partially visible today, c.f. Arandiga (2005), *Excavaciones arqueológicas en el Castillo de Almonecir*.

¹³ The term *Albacar*, strictly referring to a specific late medieval defence system, consisting of a boundary wall used as a refuge for the inhabitants of a town or neighbouring territory, in case of attack. A broader meaning extends the term *Albacar* to any walled enclosure located outside a fortress, preceding and usually located at a lower level than the main one, and associating its use with the housing of livestock (Epalza (1984), *Funciones ganaderas de los albacares en las fortalezas musulmanas*; Elum (2002), *Los Castillos Valencianos en la Edad Media (Materiales y técnicas constructivas)*.

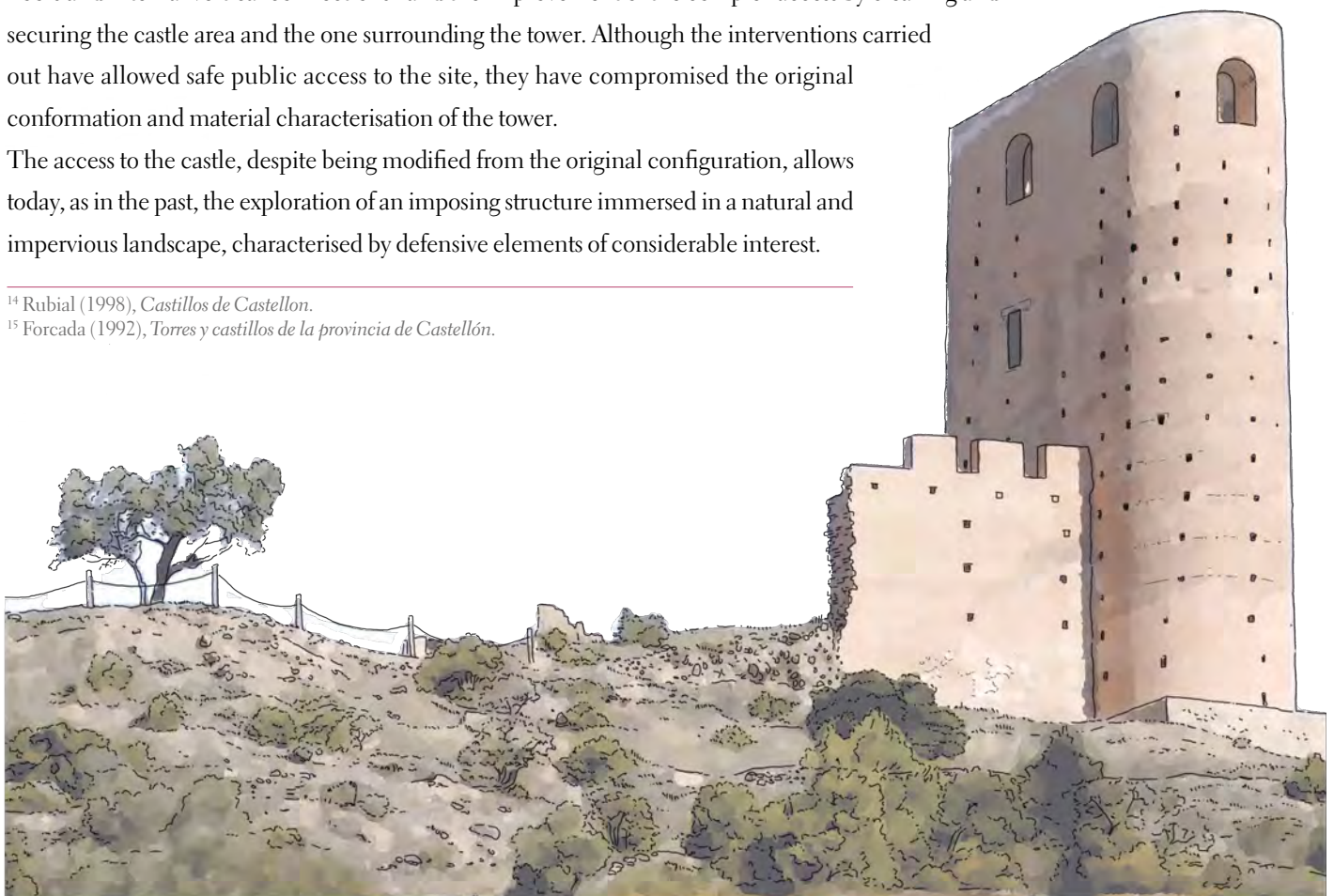
In this sector there are the remains of a boundary tower¹⁴, probably the main one of the castle, intended to guard the outer walls. The tower, with a square plan, protected the southern portion of the castle's wall and the inner wall between the two areas of the complex.

The most remarkable element of Almonecir Castle is its impressive Homenaje Tower. This tower presents an unusual layout plan, consisting of a rectangular shape with a semicircular side facing southeast. The tower is placed in the most vulnerable point of the castle's defence, near to what must have been the main access to the complex. It may be possible that one could access the fortress by rounding the main tower from the outside, passing between its basement and an antemurale or barrier, a small wall lower than the main one, of which there are almost no remains¹⁵.

Due to the advanced state of decay of the structures, in 2008 the Castle, and particularly the Tower, underwent restoration and consolidation works to allow its tourist fruition. The interventions involved the base of the Homenaje tower and the reconstruction of its upper part - with the insertion of wooden floors and internal vertical connections - and the improvement of the complex access by cleaning and securing the castle area and the one surrounding the tower. Although the interventions carried out have allowed safe public access to the site, they have compromised the original conformation and material characterisation of the tower.

The access to the castle, despite being modified from the original configuration, allows today, as in the past, the exploration of an imposing structure immersed in a natural and impervious landscape, characterised by defensive elements of considerable interest.

Next pages, Figs. 06, 07
The Features of the Castle
 A selection of descriptive images highlighting the most significant fortified elements.



¹⁴ Rubial (1998), *Castillos de Castellón*.

¹⁵ Forcada (1992), *Torres y castillos de la provincia de Castellón*.





Study of constructive features and evolution of the fortified system

To investigate the evolutionary process of the castle's structures and defensive systems, a process of knowledge was crucial to understand its remains and, in particular, the wall equipment. Currently, two sections of the boundary wall are still clearly visible (12 m and 32 m long respectively) and well preserved. The wall section presents a difference in height between the outer and inner portions. The outer portion supports the battlements, while the inner lower portion served as a patrol walkway.

From a constructive point of view, these wall structures consist of two layers, not connected, partially made in rodeno, a red sandstone of the Sierra d'Espadan area.

The boundary wall as well as those of the massive Homenaje tower, were built using the *tapial* construction technique: built using formwork (*tapial* or *tapieras* in Valencian) filled with stone blocks of different sizes mixed with mortar, a mixture of lime, gravel and sand mixed with water or other filling materials¹⁶. Tapieras consisted of wooden boards that, placed vertically and parallel, formed the mould to shape the wall. These formworks were supported by transverse passing logs on which the scaffolds and tapieras themselves leaned.

Once the mould was filled with stones, gravel and lime mortar, the logs were removed and the moulds moved to the upper portions. The considerable size of the walls and the tower make the castle of Almonecir "one of the most significant examples built with this technique"¹⁷.

The considerations made regarding the remaining defensive structures of the castle, in relation to historical documentation, have allowed for assessments of its evolution in shape over the centuries. Considering the current condition of the castle, it is difficult to make assumptions about its original configuration. Therefore, several hypotheses had to be considered in order to reach what would be the most logical and coherent layout.

The original configuration of the defensive complex was the Ribat (beginning of 12th century)¹⁸. To formulate hypothesis on this layout several elements have been taken into account: the existing wall remains in the vicinity of the tower and the presence of some typical structures of the time. Unfortunately, the Arabian texts from al-Andalus come down to us are not as meticulous and detailed as those from North Africa regarding everyday life in the Ribat, and archaeological remains from this period are few and far between¹⁹. For this reason, a background study of Ribat in North Africa has been carried out, although the differences between this region and Islamic Spain cannot be overlooked. On the subsequent extension of the complex, from the second quarter of the 13th century onwards, it is possible to refer to a Christian occupation of the castle, in agreement with historical data that mention the donation of the castle in 1238 to the bishop of Barcelona and chancellor Berenguer de Palou.

¹⁶ Llopis García (2005), *Proyecto de rehabilitación de la torre del homenaje del Castillo de Almonecir*.

¹⁷ Forcada (1992), *Torres y castillos de la provincia de Castellón*, cit.

¹⁸ Jover Cerda (2010), *Los Castillos del Alto Palancia-Sierra de Espadán. Las incógnitas del Ribat de Almonecir*.

¹⁹ Marín (2004), *El ribat en Al-Andalus y el Norte de África*.



Based on these informations, it is possible to assume that the castle had already been built before this date, possibly completed between the 12th and 13th centuries by the Almohads²⁰, since it appears recorded in the *Llibre del Repartiment*²¹.

Elements typical of Islamic building traditions can be seen in the construction of the walls, so it is possible to assume that it was built in the Almohad period. However, it must be emphasised that there are signs of reconstruction and improvements, likely occurring after the conquest and in later periods, which have contributed to changes in the original appearance. It can reasonably be inferred that the Christians did not change the layout of the walls, but made additions and consolidation of damaged parts, as well as the destruction of those that did not fulfil a strategic function.

²⁰ Boan-Montenegro (2010), *Antecedentes Históricos del Valle de Almonecir*.

²¹ Arandiga (2005), *Excavaciones arqueológicas*, cit.



Fig. 08

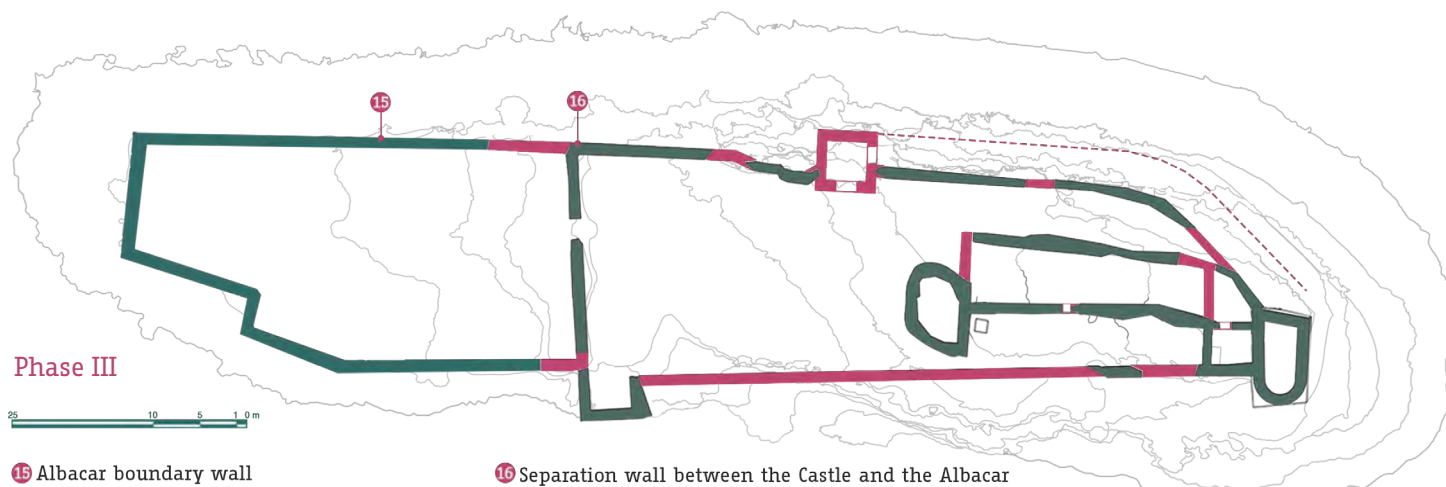
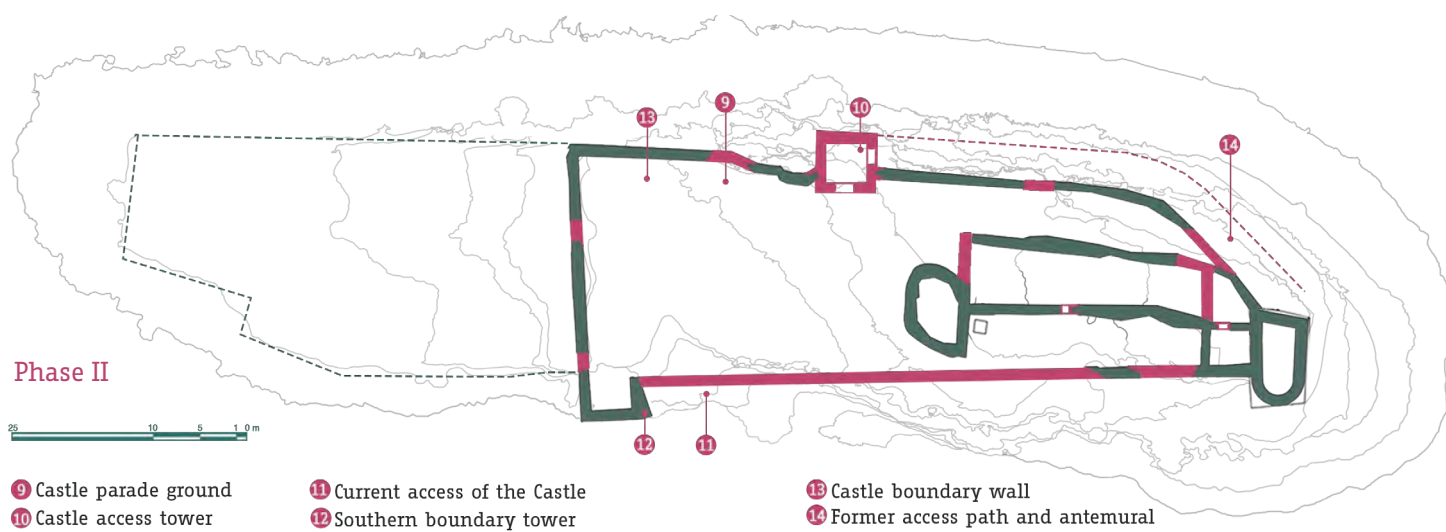
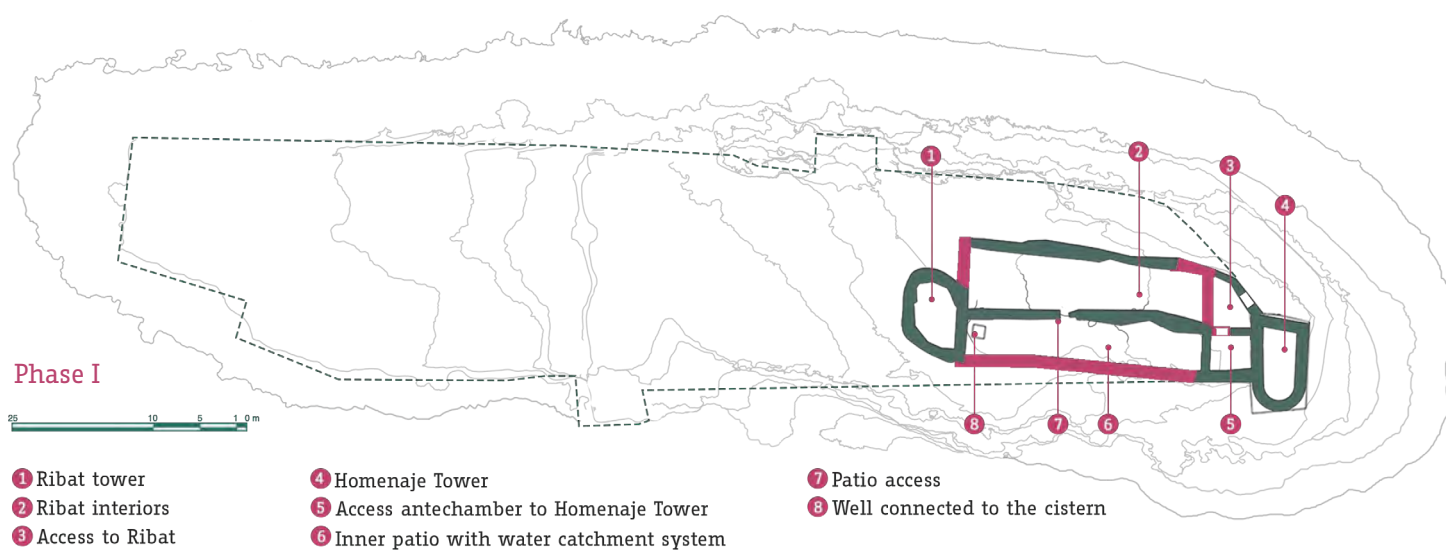
Documentation activities

Digital documentaion and survey operations within the Homenaje Tower

Next pages, Fig.09, 10

Castle's evolution

Phased plan illustrating a hypothetical reconstruction of the castle's development over time. On the facing page, the main archaeological and structural remains that support these interpretative hypotheses.





1 Foundational remains of a tower
2 Ribat interiors
3 Access to Ribat



4 Homenaje Tower
5 Access antechamber to Homenaje Tower
6 Inner patio with water catchment system
7 Patio access
8 Well connected to the cistern



9 Castle parade ground
10 Remains of the Castle Access Tower
11 Current access to the Castle
12 Southern boundary tower



13 Remains of the castle boundary wall
14 Former access path to the parade ground



15 Foundational remains of the albacar boundary wall
16 Separation wall between the Castle and the Albacar



17 Patrol walkway
18 Remains of the albacar boundary wall

In the lower portion, identified as Albacar, the well-preserved wall sections have allowed for more reliable reconstructive hypotheses. The remains preserved in the southwest area of the castle (next to the foundations of the enclosure tower) led to reconstruct the battlements and obtain information on the height of the masonry. The enclosure has no openings to the outside and was presumably connected to the castle through openings in the cross wall that separated this space from the main enclosure²². From a compositional point of view, the battlements of the enclosure in this space are different from those in the other existing portions of the walls. This makes it plausible to place the Albacar at a different period, probably later, to provide shelter and protection for the inhabitants of neighbouring villages in case of attack.

The analysis of the castle and its architectural elements offers the opportunity to deepen the understanding of the construction techniques used, the materials employed, and the various transformations undergone over the centuries. This study provides a more complete and accurate view into the history of the castle, including the social, cultural, and political aspects that characterised its life and role within the society of the time. In addition, the study of the archaeological evidence provides valuable information, combined with a cross-analysis of documentary sources and existing studies²³, provides valuable insights, enabling an understanding of the stratification of different historical phases and the evolution of the castle within a broader historical context.

These actions provided a solid basis for the development process of valorisation and knowledge of the castle as a historical testimony of the territory. A process capable of making explicit those historical and cultural implications that contribute to the promotion and dissemination of knowledge of this important historical site.

²² Forcada (2011), *Torre y Castillos de la Sierra d'Espadán*, cit.

²³ C.f. Rodríguez (2005), *El Castillo de Almonecir*; Piquer-Cases, Capilla-Tamborero, Molina-Siles (2015), *The virtual reconstruction of architectural heritage and its methodological application*.

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