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Barcelona, a Medieval Capital

FLOCEL SABATÉ

University of Lleida, Consolidated Research Group in Medieval Studies, Plaça Víctor Siurana, 1. 25003 Lleida, Catalonia, Spain.
E-mail: flocel@historia.udl.cat

Barcelona became a capital in the Middle Ages. As the Episcopal See and County Capital, it remained a commercial centre in the eighth and ninth centuries, benefited from the occupation of the border to the west of the city between the 10th and 11th centuries, and throughout the 12th century witnessed the strengthening of its elite. Thanks to economic growth, the ruling classes assumed representativeness over the entire city, especially in political and fiscal negotiations with the sovereign, and were recognised as a municipal government in the 13th century. The city's growth spread within the administration of the surrounding land through several institutional formulas. Owing to the city's economic and social growth, and the King's weakness, during the 14th and 15th centuries local government promoted several initiatives to exercise and hold a capital status over the country and the regions united under the same Crown.

1. Continuities and Innovations (8th–11th Centuries)

The Visigoth city of Barcelona was assimilated within the Muslim territory of Al-Andalus in the early eighth century and conquered, with considerable effort, by Charlemagne's son in 801. Upon the division of the Carolingian Empire in 840, this land met the same fate as *Francia occidentalis.* After King Louis II of France appointed Guifré el Pilós Count of Barcelona in 878, never again did a king designate the Count of this region, although the monarchy's hierarchy was acknowledged through occasional visits to Court and the request of privileges until the penultimate decade of the 10th century and the dating of documents according to French sovereigns until the penultimate decade of the 12th century. The Carolingian political crisis thus led to regions so far from the French capital establishing county dynasties, and the conversion of the public treasury into a *fisco comtalis*, tied to the dynasty.

In 878, Louis II awarded part of the *teloneus* of Barcelona to the city's bishopric, in accordance with a common practise in nearby Episcopal Sees. Interest in this tax based on the movement of goods signals that Barcelona was a significant market for trade by both sea and land. Specifically, in the 10th century the demographic weight and agricultural production around the city increased, coinciding with what has been

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historiographically corroborated in other areas, such as the south and west of France. In the vicinity of the city of Barcelona's main gate an important weekly market developed, while the population it attracted expanded the city from a town-planning perspective by adding neighbourhoods known as 'burgs'.

This growth paralleled that in neighbouring counties and contributed to consolidating lands belonging to the same count, thus permanently linking the counties of Barcelona, Girona and Osona. Barcelona thus found a common point with cities that had acquired ruling power and also possessed renowned markets and obvious expansive urban planning, such as Girona, Vic and Manresa. Simultaneously, the tenth century saw the occupation of the Border, a wide strip of disorganised land that to the west of the city separated it from Muslim territories which, on the other side, were consolidating around the cities of Lleida and Tortosa. The Border was systematically brought under the control of baronial lineages and an ecclesiastical hierarchy, who appropriated the land by structuring it into castle districts, within which population growth and agricultural expansion were encouraged. This development had an impact on the city. On the one hand, ecclesiastical hierarchs, starting with the Bishop of Barcelona followed by Abbots from nearby places such as Sant Cugat del Vallès, as well as distinguished noblemen – such as the Viscount of Barcelona – accumulated considerable fortunes thanks to the Border, thus becoming the most important inhabitants of the city in the early 11th century. Simultaneously, this increased wealth and the movement of goods directly affected the strengthening process of commercial and craft activities within the city, next to leading to population growth and further town planning.

Indeed, speculation on the land upon which the city was growing strongly contributed to its owners organising a bourgeoisie urban elite. In the last third of the 11th century, as José Enrique Ruiz Doménec specified,[1] a group of bourgeoisie investors became established. They carried out activities and investments thought profitable: management of stately incomes, livestock monopolisation, building of windmills, dealing in goods in demand in the city, etc. Benefits were invested in a number of urban and rural properties, thus placing city housing and fieldwork up for rent through the so-called *cens,* and benefiting the group that was becoming the city's elite. Quite significantly, at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries, Barcelona experienced an increase in loans, which should not be related with financial needs but with an increase in investments. With this dynamic, social values evolved as positive acceptance in investment in property and perception of wealth grew.

2. The Establishment of an Urban Elite (11th–13th Centuries)

Some historians have emphasised that the Barcelonan elites of the 11th and 12th centuries were different, because the interests of the initial group were predominantly agricultural whereas those of the second group were commercial. In truth, rather than a predominant activity, one should address the attitude of the ruling class, focused on investments and a growing acceptance of profits (*lucrum*). This is not unique, since the ruling elite in other towns and cities throughout the

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country were consolidating in the same way, as can be seen in extremely dynamic cities such as Lleida and Tortosa, which in the mid-12th century had been conquered, the Muslims had lost these cities. The accumulation of capital, investing attitudes and the sharing of common values around profits meant that throughout the 12th century a handful of families gained strength within Barcelona and thus the *burgenses* replaced the noblemen and barons as leaders. Trade, particularly maritime trade, became important, although a variety of activities was upheld and especially the strategy of investing in property, which simultaneously expanded the city's influence over its surroundings. Therefore, as studied by Banks and Benchs,[2] between the mid-12th century and the first decades of the 13th, an oligarchy consolidated itself in Barcelona.

Barcelona did not have a recognised organic and regular municipal authority until the mid-13th century. This has led certain branches of historiography to postulate that the city had a small local government that moreover emerged only late. Reality was very different, because the key lay in representativeness. In 1127, for instance, the *probi homines barchinonensis* made decisions about Sant Pau del Camp church, because *in quorum consilio et dispositione constructores ipsius ecclesie eam commendaverant*.[3] This was possible because a financially and socially prominent group in Barcelona took over the representation of the city in all aspects, as it repeatedly did throughout the 12th century: regarding the inner part of the city, it mediated in private disputes, differences between classes and entities (the fishermen and Cathedral canon in 1171 at odds due to the fish tithe, for example), or tensions at sea between vessels of different origins. Urban elites thus consolidated a mediating position as well as defending the city's interests and citizens, as emphasised in the 13th century when it was advocated that the city's citizens' privileges be respected whenever a Barcelonan felt questioned.[4] The city's representation was also exercised in fiscal and political negotiations with the sovereign, who favoured this practice as it eased dialogue, especially regarding taxes. This is not really a unique situation: in Lleida, for instance, the strengthening of a new ruling elite, after the city was conquered and the Muslims lost the city in 1149, followed the same pattern based on the establishment of a socio-economic elite that immediately invoked representation in all senses over the entire city.

From here on, and always on behalf of the city, the urban elite interfered in administrative and judicial proceedings undertaken by royal officers, such as the bailiff (*batlle*) mainly in charge of managing royal income, and the jurisdictional officer, the vicar (*veguer*), and participated in the issue of court judgments. The same social group also accessed the King's inner circle and assisted him with his political activities, mainly by loaning him money: in the mid-12th century, for instance, the Count of Barcelona Ramon Berenguer IV received a loan of 7700 *solidos* from the burghers of Barcelona for his military campaign against Muslim Tortosa and Lleida. These cooperative relationships strengthened the position of these emerging urban groups. Before the end of the century, the sovereign was assisted by prominent members of Barcelona and Lleida urban elites in implementing an administrative reform.[5] This was necessary due to the territorial complexity created around the Count of Barcelona who had added to his possessions other Catalan counties and,

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specifically, the Royal Crown of Aragon. Simultaneously, lawyers, also of urban origin, drew upon arguments from the recovered Roman Law to build a pre-eminent speech to aid the Count of Barcelona and King of Aragon overcome the weak jurisdictional and revenue bases.

Documentation distinguishes between *burgensibus Barchinone magnis et parvis*,[6] reflecting different social levels within the urban collective, which was subjected to the mobility coherent with the social and economic dynamic. Therefore, the idyllic vision of traditional historiography, which imagined the urban collective to be homogeneous, well-matched and of interests in keeping with the city's progress, could not be further from reality. Urban power, in fact, was quite tense. On the one hand, this was because the emerging sectors tried to participate in local decision-making while the higher sectors strove to prevent this; and, on the other, due to the influence of fragmentation within factions, which happened in all urban centres.[7] This explains the strong internal tensions that in Barcelona led to severe outbreaks such as that of 1257.

In accordance with their respective abilities, all members of the urban oligarchy invested in properties around the city, thus establishing a region of influence whose population became intertwined through contracts, loans and obligations. This is why the city's area of influence really expanded in accordance with its socio-economic strength. Therefore, this land was highly important to the urban elite, due to all its investments and interests. Nevertheless, in the 13th century the Monarch's weakness led to a highly fragmented jurisdictional setting, to the point even of obstructing justice: delinquents and even those not complying with contractual obligations escaped judicial punishment if they sought refuge in a neighbouring area belonging to another jurisdiction. To combat this, in 1258 the city of Barcelona requested and obtained from the King the *sagramental* privilege, a kind of urban militia with which to counter the adverse neighbouring jurisdictions.[8]

3. The Territory, a Mirror of its Capital Status (12th–14th Centuries)

The city's impact on the surrounding area generated several spaces and denominations with which to organise this effect. First, the so-called Barcelona boundary – *terme* – accurately indicated the city limits: *de la riera d'Orta tro a la riera de Sants e de Puig d'Aguilar tro a la mar* (from the Orta stream to the Sants stream and from the Aguilar hill to the sea).[9] Second, in its immediate surroundings there was the 'territory of Barcelona' which defined the city's area of greatest influence. This was also the most stable throughout the centuries. In fact, the Carolingian counties had become established by joining areas homogeneously perceived as valleys or territories. This is why the territory of Barcelona has been well-defined since the 10th century as has the area surrounding the city, between the mountains and the sea and the two rivers, Besòs and Llobregat. This outline remained stable, although occasionally during the 10th century certain parts of Vallès – an adjacent region – and Penedès – an area taken from the border on the west – were also said to belong to the land of Barcelona. Beyond these occasional mentions, the Territory of Barcelona strengthened its original area around the city. It was a common perception: when describing places these were often located

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in the Territory of Barcelona, immediately followed by a boundary and, if necessary, a place: *in territorio Barchinonense in termino de Provinciana ad locum que dicunt Terrios Albos*, is stated, for instance in 988.[10] The boundary could coincide with an old *villa*, church or, especially after the second half of the 11th century, a parish.

The Barcelonan elite, consolidated since the end of the 11th century, understood the Territory of Barcelona to be the area of the city that was the main object of its acquisitions and investments. Often, references in testamentary donations were transferred to parishes included within the Territory of Barcelona. The investments were usually organised in the same way: in 1092, for instance, Bellesèn and his sons, when describing where the property they were selling was located, precisely outlined the Territory of Barcelona: *cum omnibus directis nostris et vocibus quas habemus et habere debemus in omni loco a Monte Cati usque in alveum Lubricati et a cacumine montium usque ad mare*.[11]

The Territory of Barcelona encompassed some 275 square kilometres that were the main object of Barcelonan investments, and this is why the city's elite understood this ensemble as intrinsically tied to the city. From the outset, the city's government assumed and claimed that its ordinances had to be applied throughout this territory. Even before the end of the 12th century the sovereign granted protection to the Territory of Barcelona, well-defined within the legislative code of the County of Barcelona, in the form of *Usatges*.[12] In this sense, in 1319, King James II supported local regulatory power over the area, which as a matter of fact had to be applied by royal officials. During the late Middle Ages a popular assumption was also upheld quite clearly in the locations used. One spoke, for instance, of *I hom que era mort en lo territori de Barcelona* (one man who was killed in the Territory of Barcelona),[13] and just as naturally the places were located within the territory and then specified in minor boundaries, especially parishes.

In any case, several barons were taking hold of this territory, which led to numerous and growing tensions between the city's municipal government and the lords of several parishes of the Territory of Barcelona due to competition for lesser jurisdictional ability. In several cases, in the 13th and 14th centuries, the royal vicar intervened, although in reality he was very influenced by municipal government and became the image of the alliance of interests between the King – who was trying to strengthen his jurisdictional capability – and the Barcelonan elites – who were trying to preserve their interests and investments within their area of influence.

The vicar's district (*vegueria*) largely coincided with the Territory of Barcelona. It was bordered to the west by the vicariate of Penedès and, to the north and east, by that of Vallès. In fact, the urban elite's socio-economic power transcended the city's territory and affected these neighbouring areas, especially Vallès, which over the 13th century had become the object of the Barcelonan elite's property acquisitions and investments. In these circumstances, the city's government struggled to influence neighbouring regions. In 1289, King Alfonso the Liberal decreed that the royal vicar of Vallés was to no longer be appointed by the King, but by the vicar of Barcelona. Therefore, from 1297 the vicar of Barcelona became known as *veguer de Barcelona i el Vallès*, and in 1371 he was explicitly authorized to intervene in the criminal matters of Vallès. Throughout the 14th century the city's municipal council especially made

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sure the King respected these concessions, not hesitating to confront him in the matter.

Jurisdictional fragmentation increased because the sovereign, due to the serious challenges of the 14th century, had to cede territorial jurisdiction as a warranty for loans received. If the loans were repaid, jurisdictional unity could be recovered. This is what the municipal government intended because jurisdictional homogenization was the best way to preserve interests and ensure that justice worked. Since the sovereign did not have or was likely to have the money required, local government urged the population of the affected areas to repay the loan, thus endowing them again within royal jurisdiction. When negotiating compensation in exchange for the population returning the money, those affected often sought to be welcomed by a large and important city, which would enable them to have the same privileges and receive legal and, if necessary, armed support. This established a relationship called *carreratge*, derived from the Catalan word *carrer*, which means street, because the places encompassed were like city streets. Thanks to this strategy, starting in the penultimate decade of the 14th century, the city of Barcelona went on to coordinate 74 towns in Catalonia.

This strategy was combined with seigniorial possessions. In 1391, the city of Barcelona purchased all the rights and jurisdiction over several towns in Catalonia and Valencia from Prince Martin, brother and future successor of King John I. In 1400, it acquired Flix, a strategic place that enabled it to control river traffic of important supplies for the city, such as grain, along the Ebro River. In 1409, Barcelona started to share the control of a whole county, that of Empúries, purchased from the King, and, before the turn of the century, in 1490, it had acquired the barony of Montbui. This feudal control forced the city to intervene in many different conflicts; for this reason, between 1456 and 1473 it chose to gradually relinquish jurisdiction. In any case, it is clear that municipal government, in complete harmony with the city's elite, had no problem combining different control strategies to suit each case.

4. Defending the Capital Status of the Country and the Crown (14th–15th Centuries)

The increase in jurisdictional fragmentation due to transfers made by the King in the 14th century had led to a growing judicial paralysis, because of the lack of collaboration between different jurisdictions. Barcelona's municipal council had started to complain and had not ruled out armed strategies. Invoking a denial of justice by the contending jurisdictions, it urged the royal vicar to summon men with weapons, in accordance with the *sagramental*, against baronial jurisdictions that, in one way or another, were protecting those persecuted by the law. Although the officer who formally summoned the urban militia was in charge of royal jurisdiction, in practice the *sagramental* was the city's armed forces. This was not only perceived in this manner, but also proudly demonstrated: the urban militia was mobilised like a municipal army symbolically headed by the city's flag, while the local emblem decorated numerous elements, such as the saddles of the horses. With the excuse of

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chasing criminals and their protectors, attacks were launched against noble neighbours, like that occurring in 1417, when the castle of the Lord of Mataró was destroyed.

Thus, the city of Barcelona wanted to appear as the guarantor of royal jurisdiction, although in reality it was seizing it and equating it to its own interests, as it proudly demonstrated: following the practice of marking points where jurisdictions changed by erecting scaffolds that symbolically represented the highest judicial power, in 1319 the government of Barcelona obtained royal permission to put up stone gallows all around the limits of the Territory of Barcelona; upon restoring them a century later, the King's sign and that of the city were explicitly combined: *en quiscun pilar foren esculpits senyals, ço és del senyor Rey e de la Ciutat* (in each pillar was carved both shields, those of the king and the city).[14]

This ostentation occurred when Barcelona was strengthening its socio-economic capital status in Catalonia. From the economic and social viewpoint evidenced in the 13th century, this central position did not cease to grow stronger. At the beginning of the 15th century a large part of Catalan textile production was traded in Barcelona, which was the centre for most overseas trade, so leading merchants from other Catalan cities took care to at least have a presence there, while investments by Barcelonan citizens affected all kinds of income and businesses throughout Catalonia. Equally, the requirements posed by the municipal government of Barcelona to the sovereign, such as the value of currency or trade protectionism, during the first two thirds of the 15th century, affected the entire country. The city of Barcelona did not hesitate to discuss with the King his international policy in the Mediterranean upon understanding that it might harm the city's commercial interests; thus managing, at the end of that century, to accompany him when negotiating foreign policy.

In reality, the municipal government of Barcelona assumed and demanded capital status over the entire country. This is seen in its 14th-century correspondence, when it attempted to channel information to other cities and towns in the country about important events such as royal deaths. It also required formal recognition of its supposed pre-eminent position: it demanded and obtained that at the gravely ill King's bedside a municipal representative be included among the high authorities that could speak with the doctors. In 1479, at the death of John II, the city imposed its will on the royal relatives in the management of his funeral.

In reality, the city of Barcelona was convinced it was *caput dicti Principatus Cathalonie seu comitatus Barchinone*,[15] and had managed to impose its judgements not only on Catalonia but on all the territory ruled by the same King at several key moments: in 1396, when making sure that John I be succeeded by his brother Martin and not his daughter; and in 1410, when bringing the succession of the deceased Martin to election by the states gathered in the general parliament. However, reality has demonstrated that its power was less than was thought: in the latter case, the city of Barcelona lost control of the process and the final outcome was not what it had initially wanted; furthermore, in 1462, when trying to depose the King, it faced a long civil war that ended not as desired by the city. During this war, Barcelona maintained a leading position, next to parliamentary representatives, and even claimed to be the heart of Catalonia, by appropriating the bodily image previously invoked by the

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King over the entire country: *Tortosa és ull dret, Perpenyà lo squerra e Barchinona lo cor del cors místich de Cathalunya* (Tortosa city is the right eye, Perpignan the left one and Barcelona the heart of the Catalonia mystic body).[16]

5. Conclusion

Political setbacks in the 15th century proved Barcelona weaker than claimed. The capital status of Barcelona was contested by the large cities of the other territories under the same Crown, such as Saragossa and Valencia, but also, in other level, by Catalan cities, such as Lleida, which in 1410 claimed for more recognition in front of Barcelona. In any case, Barcelona's pre-eminence over the whole of Catalonia was unquestionable, as was the fact that the city's elite influenced the image and administration of the country with its interventionist policy with regard to the participative institutions which led to the recognition of representation.

Barcelona's economic strength was joined by the efforts for monopolisation of the municipality discourse in Catalonia which, for its part, had dominated the participative political model of the late Middle Ages. The sovereign's weakness, municipal strength, and the strong spiritual and political influence of different authors, mainly Franciscan, turned the Crown of Aragon and specifically Catalonia into the ideal setting for the theories surrounding popular sovereignty that had been proposed by authors such as Marsilius of Padua or Baldus de Ubaldis, in the 13th and 14th centuries, to fructify in a municipality sense. A good example is the powerful impact achieved by Francesc Eiximenis both in the Court and in the municipalities in the 14th century.

The city of Barcelona thus became a paradigm of municipal power, because its elites confused their own benefit with the general interest. They did so by appealing to the common good and assuming an increasingly broader representativeness which ended up being identified with the entire country, while continuing to agree with the interests of the ruling elite. This is why the relationship with the sovereign might seem ambiguous, because they initially offered their support to the royal power but later confronted him to the extremes described by the Castilian writer Alfonso de Palencia who, at the end of the 15th century, diagnosed that the Barcelonans *monarchiam perpetuo odissent et ex innato libertatis desiderio in morbum incurrissent*.[17] In reality, the urban elites, upon taking over the late Middle Ages' participative ideas, developed a representativeness that was cast over the entire country (*la terra*). This became a legacy of the Middle Ages that, in the centuries following, played a specific role in the new context of the Hispanic Monarchy.

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About the Author

Flocel Sabaté is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Lleida (Catalonia, Spain), ICREA Researcher, Member of the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans* (Barcelona) and Doctor Honoris Causa of the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (Mendoza, Argentina). He has served as invited professor in universities and research centres such as Yale, Paris-I, Poitiers, ENS-Lyon, UNAM-Mexico, CONICET-Buenos Aires, Concepción, etc. He has led different European Research Projects and published many works about European Medieval Society and its legacy, such as *El territori de la Catalunya Medieval* (1997), *La feudalización de la sociedad catalana* (2007) or *Fin del mundo y Nuevo Mundo* (2011).

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