

## Review

# Forgotten and ephemeral? The Palace of the Kings of Majorca, Perpignan

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OLIVIER PASSARIUS & AYMAT CATAFAU (ed.). *Un palais dans la ville, volume 1. Le Palais des Rois de Majorque à Perpignan*. 2014. 567 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. Canet en Roussillon: Trabucaire; 978-284974-189-4 paperback €39.

AYMAT CATAFAU & OLIVIER PASSARIUS (ed.). *Un palais dans la ville, volume 2. Perpignan des Rois de Majorque*. 2014. 432 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. Canet en Roussillon: Trabucaire; 978-284974-190-0 paperback €37.

The titles of these weighty tomes invite questions: the palace of whom? The kings of where? A palace when? Olivier Poisson, concluding the first volume, writes of the restoration programme of 1943–1960 that “*le palais est resté, malgré le pari des restaurateurs de la décennie 1950, le souvenir un peu vide et abstrait d’une ‘monarchie oubliée et éphémère’*” (p. 539). This ‘forgotten and ephemeral monarchy’ of Majorca, a scion of the kings of Aragon, ruled from 1270–1344. In 1276, the monarchy had made Perpignan the capital of the Kingdom of Majorca and began work on the ‘Palais des Rois de Majorque’. To posterity’s good fortune, the final Majorcan monarch, James III (‘the Unfortunate’), left the ‘*Lois palatines*’ (Palatine Laws) of 1337 that provide key insights into the etiquette and even the significance of colour in the early fourteenth-century palace. Following the dispossession of James III in 1344, Perpignan came into the hands of the Aragonese monarchy until 1462. The Palace then passed into French ownership and was used as a barracks for three decades in the late fifteenth century. Following return to Spanish ownership in 1493, Emperor Charles V, Philip II and their successors made further modifications. The Palace finally came back into French hands in 1659 and was henceforth a barracks, graced by significant extension of the fortifications by Vauban. Under French military control, benign neglect preserved early architectural phases, a signal advantage for those

subsequently involved in the restoration of the Palace. Following the fall of France in 1942 (and with Spain in fascist hands), the buildings were largely released from military use and handed to the local authorities of the Pyrénées Orientales. A programme of repair and restoration was established, and brought to fruition by the local socialist mayor, a former member of the Resistance, towards the end of the 1940s. The restored buildings were opened to the public in 1958.

Thus, a rationale begins to emerge for the titles of these books, emphasising their focus on the contribution of this short-lived monarchy to the development of the medieval palace and to the wider urban landscape of Perpignan. Construction of the Palace was begun at arguably the most exciting period (the ‘triumph of the Gothic’) of the building programmes of European medieval monarchs. Further, the location of Perpignan placed it between the competing monarchies of Spain and France, as well as incorporating Arab influences found in the Majorcan kings’ residences in Palma, Almadaina and Belver. For all these reasons, the Majorcan royal focus of these volumes is amply demonstrated. It is therefore wrong to dismiss the palace works of the late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kings of Majorca—their sudden eclipse furnishes a snapshot *ante quem* of elite developments in this most grand age of the Gothic.

The authors provide an excellent conspectus of developments in medieval palace building. Comparisons are drawn with the creation of the royal Sainte Chapelle in Paris, of the previous generation, with its upper and lower chapels designed for the display and preservation of relics. This chapel format is central at Perpignan. That the Majorcan kings were Spanish has encouraged fruitful comparisons with palaces of their contemporaries in the Spanish kingdoms as well as with southern, French nobility. Comparisons do not stop there, however, and

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wider reference includes the Sicilian-based Emperor Frederick II (d. 1250), and parallels are also drawn with the castle palace at Windsor of Edward III of the 1350s. The ‘ephemeral’ Majorcan monarchs are then placed in a Europe-wide context and their special position in the developing political web of south-western Europe is revealed. This golden age of Gothic palace building, led by Louis IX of France (d. 1270) and Henry III of England (d. 1272) and their immediate successors—highlighted at Perpignan by suites of apartments for both king and queen—was all too soon to be disrupted not only by the outbreak of the Hundred Years’ War in 1337, but also by the Black Death of 1347–1350. The disaster of Lluçmajor of 1349, at which James III was killed, brought the Majorcan kings’ early phases of building to a summary halt.

There is substantial evidence of the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century buildings to be seen in Agnès Marin’s impressive phased drawings of the major elevations of the Perpignan palace, extracted from her detailed reports. These show how many of the lower courses of the buildings date to the thirteenth to early fifteenth centuries, and some mighty timbers have been dated by dendrochronology to the Majorcan era. Subsequently, the kings of Aragon extended the defences beyond the royal castle with its hall, queen’s apartments, chapel and enclosing walls. Volume 1 includes detailed study of the mortars used in the construction and, especially, of the stone building materials—perhaps a model of an approach largely eclipsed on the English side of the Channel with the loss to France of the Department of the Environment/English Heritage cadre of masons, and the retirement of quarry-by-quarry trained geologists. This work, which reveals the challenges of assigning stone from long-open quarries to particular periods, is followed by a study of pigments and painted motifs. Among other topics, fragments of stained and grisaille glass are reviewed, the best examples of which have been lost since they were recorded in the mid-twentieth century.

If the standing building analysis is exemplary, what of the subterranean archaeology? These volumes are not an archaeological report as such, but they present some detail of what has been discovered by antiquarians, for example, in the drains, and more recent excavations and watching briefs are summarised in a chapter treating 50 years of archaeology at the Palace and 30 years in the town. There has been little deep archaeology on the Palace

site beyond a few sondages. Large areas, however, were cleared by machine both within the courtyards and in the gardens, and accompanied by a watching brief. This work revealed, beneath levels dating to the late thirteenth century, Neolithic and other prehistoric remains. The principal discovery, however, was an impressive cistern in the main courtyard, probably dating to the foundation of the Palace in the later thirteenth century. (There is a useful analysis of generally increasing brick sizes through the medieval and early modern periods, which helped in the dating process.) The drains are substantial, indeed of sufficient size for the King of Majorca to have escaped through them in 1285. Little in the way of artefacts or ecofacts are published here; reference is made to ceramics of various medieval dates, although some levels, for example, in the ditches, were truncated by later cleaning to leave only materials from *c.* 1400 onwards.

The restoration at Perpignan prefigured similar work at former military structures elsewhere, for example at Stirling Castle, Scotland; there, as at Perpignan, a monument by a medieval monarchy has long since vanished in the form it was known in the Middle Ages, along with the monarchy that occupied it. In both cases, modern authorities had to find a ‘location’ for their restoration that did not reflect the military occupation of later centuries. At Perpignan, this involved removing floors later inserted in the hall and chapel to expose the grandeur of medieval room, but how far back to go into the Middle Ages? The restoration at Perpignan includes some ‘Gothic’ replacements, highlighting not the Majorcan/Aragonese phase but the time during the late fifteenth century when the Palace came into French hands—after all this is now a French possession. This has resulted in a disjunction between the name of the Palace and much of its appearance. It emphasises, however, the liminal location of the complex with Arab, Aragonese, French and wider links collected together under the Majorcan nomenclature. This confusion has made display of the building problematic—as visitors observe on the Internet following their visits to empty rooms. It is analogous in a royal context to Clarendon Palace in Wiltshire, with the same late medieval contexts also cleared back to the last perceived occupation layers of royal habitation. This ‘clearance for display’ approach to monuments, echoed at Perpignan, was developed in England in the Office (later the Ministry) of Works under Sir Charles Peers from the early twentieth century. At Perpignan, the Palace was listed by the

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national government as a site of historical importance by the end of the nineteenth century, which may have preserved it while many medieval structures, defences, churches and other religious buildings at Perpignan were subsequently lost. It was local pressure that engaged the attention of the national authorities in the preservation and restoration of the Palace in the form we now see it—again analogous with Stirling Castle, championed by Scottish enthusiasm to embrace a particular period of their history and to expunge military failures and the subsequent conversion into barracks.

These are excellent volumes, containing much on the city of Perpignan (volume 2), prehistory, post-

medieval military history, and the development of central and regional authorities in the care and protection of monuments in France, for which there is no space for consideration here. Contributions from Spain highlight the international origins of the Palace. There are fine plans and drawings, although some are over-reduced in scale to fit the format, and there is no location map. Nor is there an index to the 999 pages of text or any non-French language summaries to help an international readership. Despite these issues, these volumes are well worth the attention of those with an interest not only in medieval palaces, but also castellologists, experts on post-medieval defences and many others. Bravo!