

The Kingdom of Castile (1157–1212)

Towards a Geography of the Southern Frontier

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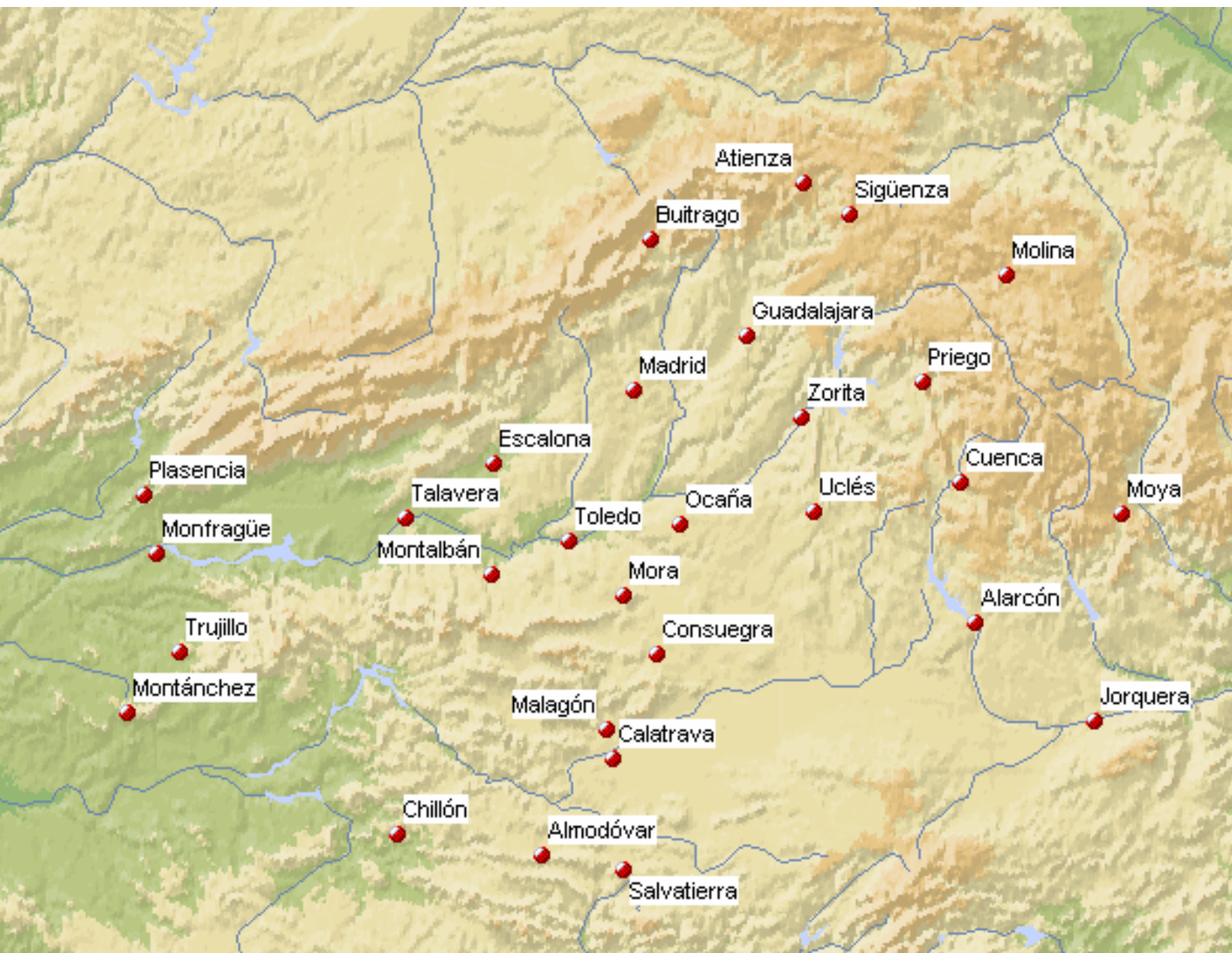
A given geographic space is the appropriate framework for the development of socioeconomic infrastructures. Awareness of that space enables a wider and better understanding of the power structures and socioeconomic activities that develop within it. Here we shall try to understand the geography of the southern frontier of the Kingdom of Castile between 1157 and 1212, specifically that territory bordered by the Almohad Empire. However, this is not intended as an in-depth study of the frontier region, but as a general approximation of the different spaces that can be distinguished in it. Before doing so, it is important to set out the borders of this frontier zone and firstly to reflect upon the characteristics and conceptual meaning of the southern frontier of Castile in the period indicated.

Characteristics of the Southern Frontier of Castile (1157–1212)

This section is not the principal aim of this article, but it is important to introduce it at this point as it will help us to contextualize and create a better understanding of the historical geography of the southern frontier of Castile. For that reason, the content of this segment must be understood exclusively as an introduction, since the questions arising here are sufficiently important to deserve the focus in their own right.¹

To begin with, and as is well-known, the Castilian medieval border does not have an exclusively geopolitical dimension, it is also important to note its cultural, social and economic aspects. The nature of this work

¹ I have dealt with some of these themes in other works. See E. Rodríguez-Picavea Matilla, *Las Órdenes Militares y la frontera: la contribución de las Órdenes a la delimitación de la jurisdicción territorial de Castilla en el siglo XII*. Madrid 1994; "Frontier and Royal Power in Medieval Spain. A Development Hypothesis". *The Medieval History Journal*, 8:2 (2005).



Map 1. The southern frontier of Castile (1157–1212).

basically centres around geopolitical questions, but that does not mean we should ignore other fundamental aspects that one must remember here.

Thus the frontier between Castile and al-Andalus did not only consist of a geographical framework where opposing factions developed and barriers were imposed to keep these elements apart. It also frequently became the means and mechanism for economic, social, cultural, religious and artistic exchange between social groupings, whether they were already linked or in opposition. All of this is reflected in the development of commerce, cross-border migration, book circulation, the interchange of religious ideas and the permeable influence of artistic currents.

Linguistic, cultural, religious, mental and ideological frontiers developed in parallel that did not match the conventional borders between Castile and al-Andalus.

The selected chronological framework for this article is not accidental; it corresponds to a very specific period with a homogenous set of characteristics. The initial date (1157) signifies the division of the kingdoms of Castile and Leon after the death of Alfonso VII (1126–1157), the start of a weakening in the Castilian monarchy with the minority of Alfonso VIII (1158–1214) and the predominance of Almohad rule over al-Andalus. The end date (1212) is identified with the Christian victory of las Navas de Tolosa, that indeed meant the beginning of the crisis in the Almohad empire and the leadership of Castile over the rest of the Christian kingdoms.

From the end of the XI century, the cultural, ideological and mental frontiers between Christians and Muslims intensified owing to the emergence of the Almoravid and Almohad fundamentalist movements. Such intensification was added to by the growth of Christian religious-military ideals that developed into a spirit of crusade.²

As can be seen from the above, the military dimension was the predominant one throughout the whole of this half century. Confrontations of a bellicose nature and the strongholds within the region came to the fore. With the exception of the truces from 1197 to 1210, conditions in the frontier were very hard. During the aforementioned period of truce, combat operations did not even stop. The population that lived in the area, especially to the south of the Tagus, was heavily militarized. We are essentially dealing here with members of the military orders (soldier-monks), municipal militias and soldier-shepherds.

Nevertheless, these circumstances did not prevent the implementation of a particular model of socioeconomic organization, feudalism, whose characteristics were radicalized due to the extreme conditions imposed by frontier life. In such a way, the space itself, the society and economic activity were organised into a triple hierarchical structure. This was reflected in the predominance of the town over the village, the knights over the simple settlers and livestock farming over crop-based agriculture.

The population level was smaller closer to the vanguard frontier. People were attracted by the advantageous social and economic conditions offered by the frontier charters and laws known as *fueros*. The settlers were

² Ron Barkai, *Cristianos y musulmanes en la España medieval. El enemigo en el espejo*, Madrid 1984.

individuals who had little to lose and much to gain. Therefore, they were willing to take on the risks that frontier life implied.

The frontier was a large area organised around fortresses and «repopulated» towns, joined via communication links that clearly represent the connected political space. In this context, the Castilian monarchy was in a process of consolidating its power, which included integrating the kingdom's border territories. A parallel process can be seen that is of no less significance: the growing consolidation of feudal society. It is important to note, though, that feudalism means the increasingly hereditary nature and privatisation of social relationships and of production. In spite of this, the monarchies used mechanisms offered by the feudal system to increasingly strengthen their power.

Within this dynamic, Alfonso VIII preferred to use the military orders as effective instruments for integrating the border territories. The monarch was able to trust these militias that had contributed to the consolidation and the enlargement of the kingdom. Together with them, the roles played by the *realengo* councils (who only owed their allegiance to the king) and also the Church stand out, as they were agents acting solidly on behalf of the monarchy. However, in contrast to Alfonso VII, he did not use the Castilian aristocracy to an excessive degree. The territories yielded to local dignitaries in the frontier zone could have meant a weakening of royal power in the least consolidated area of the kingdom. The risk was elevated by the possibility of independent action or even the establishment of agreements with the Muslims. This did indeed happen in the case of Pedro Fernández de Castro³.

Demarcation of the Frontier Zone

In this section the intention is to set out the borders of the frontier zone and at the same time to seek to clarify the boundaries, establish their reason for being and encourage their proper usage through greater historical accuracy.

In the twelfth century the frontier was not a simple line that separated one territory from another. Rather than a border, in the modern sense of the word, it would be better to speak of a frontier zone. This implies a wide strip of land with common characteristics, which are determined, to a certain

³ J. González, *Repoblación de Castilla la Nueva*, 2 vols. Madrid 1975–1976, I, pp. 133–296.

extent, by its geographical situation with regard to other areas of the kingdom.⁴

Essentially, our task is to demarcate the Kingdom of Castile's frontier zone that bordered the areas ruled by the Muslims of al-Andalus during the second half of the twelfth century. This task is complicated because we are faced with an open frontier, in a state of permanent war, which suggests enormous changes and fluctuations. However, some geographical points of reference can be found. For example, Castile's central mountain range separating the two mesetas clearly marked the start of a large area of land with frontier-like characteristics. The southernmost limits of this frontier zone were established in the Sierra Morena. However, as a consequence of the Almohad counter-offensive, after the Battle of Alarcos (1195) the frontier moved to the Montes de Toledo.

To the east, the sphere of Castilian influence was first located to the west of the river Júcar. After the conquest of Cuenca (1177) it moved forward as far as the mountains of the Sistema Ibérico and the Cabriel basin. To the west, Castilian control reached the extensive lands surrounding Talavera, and further to the south, to the limits of the district of Calatrava. This area included Chillón castle and the mines at Almadén. Subsequently, the borders of Castile advanced towards the west, as the kingdom incorporated the estates of the Castro family near Trujillo and Montánchez. At the same time it established the town of Plasencia and repopulated Béjar.⁵

From an historical and geographical viewpoint, at its widest, the Castilian frontier zone would appear to be a more or less homogeneous unit. Essentially, we are talking about the territory subsequently known as Castilla la Nueva, which includes the present day provinces of Madrid, Guadalajara, Toledo, Cuenca, Ciudad Real, and parts of Albacete and Cáceres. Place names in the area are derived from the differences between New Castile and Old Castile to the north. The Sistema Central range dividing the two mesetas gave the region a certain geographical unity and we can describe the zone as the lower or southern sub-meseta.

⁴ A number of publications about the medieval frontier have appeared in the last years, two collectives works are cited here with abundant bibliographical references. See C. Ayala Martínez, P. Buresi and Ph. Josserand (eds.), *Identidad y representación de la frontera en la España medieval*, Casa de Velázquez – Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Madrid, 2001); D. Abulafia and N. Berend (eds.), 2002. *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, Aldershot. In addition, M.I. Pérez de Tudela y Velasco, "El concepto de frontera en la historiografía medieval hispana", *Castellum*, 2 (1996), pp. 131–140; N. Berend, "Medievalists and the notion of the frontier". *The Medieval History Journal*, 2:1 (1999), pp. 55–72; E. Peters, "Omnia permixta sunt. Where's the Border?". *The Medieval History Journal*, 4:1 (2001), pp. 109–127.

⁵ B. Palacios Martín, "Alfonso VIII y su política de frontera en Extremadura". *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 19 (1989), pp. 155–167.

This large tract of land, which is crossed by the Tagus and Guadiana basins and divided by the Montes de Toledo, in fact extends westwards towards the eroded plain of the Extremaduran meseta. The area is more distinguishable on the basis of historical, economic and social aspects than merely by geographical ones; in spite of the fact that the upward curve of the Paleozoic tableland under alpine pressure and a system of faults differentiates it from the Campo de Calatrava, which is at a higher altitude.⁶

The climate of the frontier zone must have been similar to that experienced today: arid and extreme. The indigenous vegetation was holm oak woodland, which has now almost been destroyed by the action of humans and degraded to scrub, or converted into cultivated countryside. The climax vegetation of woodland would only have been prevented in places where the soils had a high concentration of salt or gypsum. The holm oak, in its original state, is still found today in areas of Extremadura, the Montes de Toledo and the Sierra Morena. In contrast, pine dominates in the ranges of Cuenca and Guadalajara.⁷

The border between Castile and al-Andalus was known by other names in the twelfth century. After the conquest of Toledo, the Castilian-Leonese monarchs appropriated the title of "King of Toledo", taking the city as their capital in order to demonstrate their command over the territories controlled by the Andalusí *taifa*, the opposing Muslim city-state. Clearly, for the Castilian kings the limits of the new kingdom were in the Sierra Morena. To the south of this mountain range Alfonso VIII declared control over strongholds of relative importance, like Santa Eufemia or Pedroche, but they were considered to be a different part of the Kingdom of Toledo.⁸ However, it is possible that this Christian perception of the kingdom's borders did not correspond that exactly with the Muslim administrative divisions. In certain areas the latter enjoyed an undoubted autonomy with regard to Toledo - a problem highlighted by the *cora* (Muslim district) of Calatrava, or they were

⁶ M. Terán and L. Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*. Barcelona 1978, p. 159.

⁷ Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*, pp. 160–162.

⁸ Alfonso VIII's control over Santa Eufemia or Pedroche, together with other parts of the Castile-Leon Kingdom, starts to figure in royal documentation from 1155 onwards. See, for example, J.L. Martín, *Orígenes de la Orden Militar de Santiago (1170–1195)*. Madrid 1974, doc. 24, 26 and 27. Before this point, strongholds of greater importance that are located further to the south also figure, e.g. Baeza and Almería (Martín, *Orígenes de la Orden Militar de Santiago (1170–1195)*, doc 14–19 and 22–23).

influenced more strongly by the Levantine kingdoms, as was the case for the fortresses situated in the Júcar basin.⁹

On the other hand, other terms that came to refer to this frontier zone originated from different viewpoints. For example, the term *extremadura* seems to designate, at first, all those frontier or outer lying areas. Usually this expression has been associated with the "*Extremos del Duero*", referring to the outlying regions of the Duero river basin, although it was only first used in this context at the time of Jiménez de Rada¹⁰, thus differentiating it from Castile. However, at the same time, another expression, *transierra*, distinguished the lands to the north of the Sistema Central from those situated to the south of its foothills. The term *transierra* more aptly describes the frontier zone of New Castile, perhaps due to its excessive generality. From a historiographical point of view it is better to reserve the term *extremadura* for those regions situated between the Duero and the Sistema Central that share common characteristics and are well differentiated from the areas located in the *transierra*.

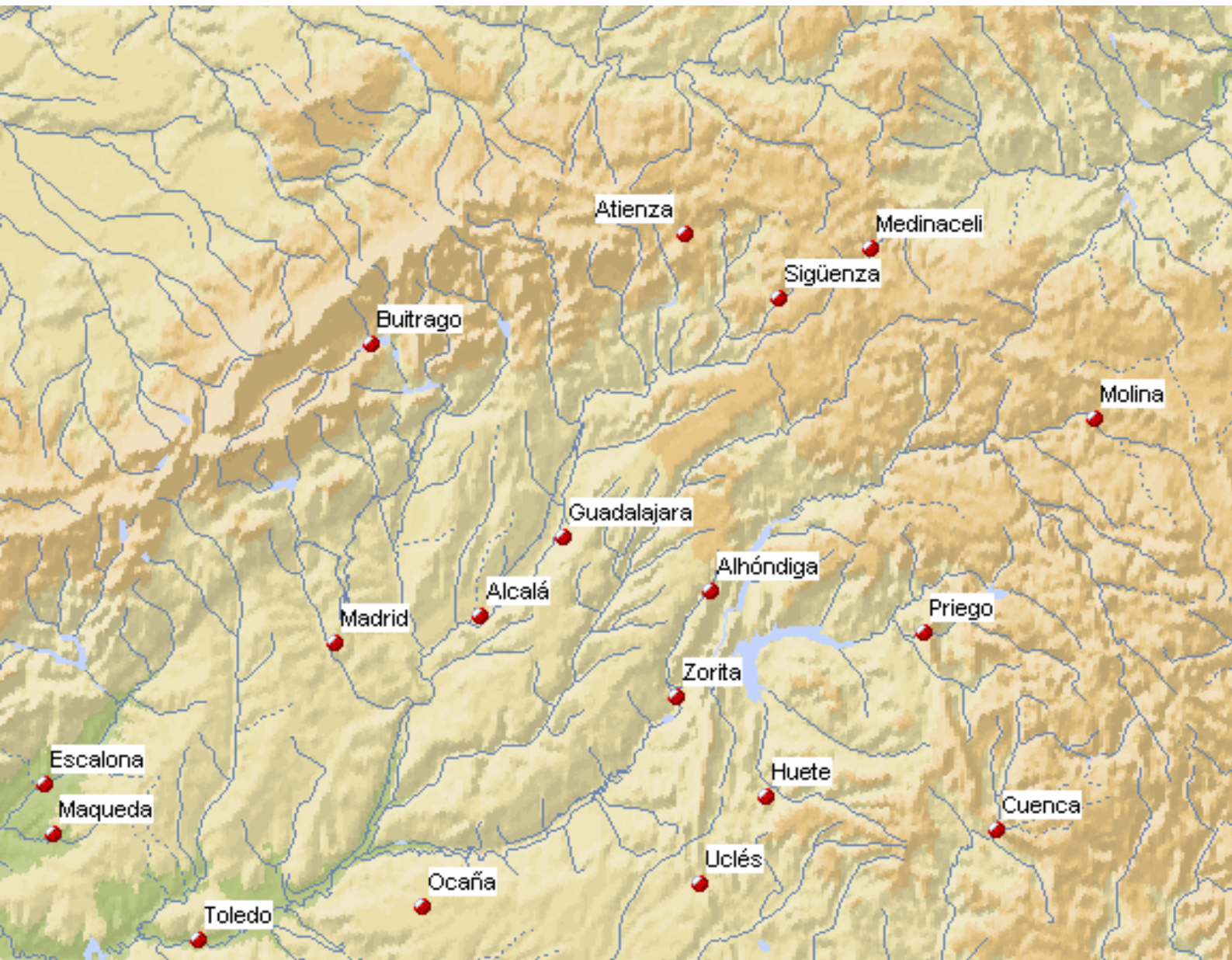
Certain areas inside the considerable territory of the frontier zone can be distinguished by their lesser or greater proximity to al-Andalus. In this way we can divide the zone into 4 different parts: the rearguard, the vanguard, the eastern flank and the western flank. Nevertheless, it should be noted that during the period analyzed everyone lived under the hard conditions imposed by frontier life. However, a closer look enables us to be more specific.

The Rearguard Frontier

The area south of the Sistema Central can be considered as the rearguard frontier, and as such it was subjected to frontier conditions. It was very far from the most advanced vanguard positions and, furthermore, was protected by the Tagus basin and the network of fortresses that strengthened

⁹ With regard to this problem see, J. Vallvé, *La división administrativa de la España musulmana*. Madrid 1986.

¹⁰ This idea has been emphasized by G. Martínez Diez, *Las comunidades de Villa y tierra de la Extremadura Castellana*. Madrid 1983, p. 23; and by E. Mitre Fernández, "Reflexiones sobre noción de frontera tras la conquista de Toledo (1085): Fronteras reales y fronteras mentales". *Cuadernos de Historia de España*, 69 (1987), pp. 202–204. With regard to this question also see B. Palacios Martín, "La frontera del Duero. Puntos de vista sobre el origen de la Extremadura leonesa". *Castillos medievales del Reino de León*. Madrid 1989, pp. 47–60.



Map 2. The rearguard frontier (1157–1212).

Toledo. These were factors that enabled greater population development and socioeconomic activity. In comparison with other parts of the frontier, the area was less influenced by the military orders. However, some centers to the north of the Tagus, like Madrid or Alcalá, contributed militias that fought against the Muslims alongside troops from the larger municipalities of Extremadura.¹¹

¹¹ With regard to all questions concerning conflicts, see the publication by F. García Fitz, *Castilla y León frente al islam. Estrategias de expansión y tácticas militares (siglos XI–XIII)*. Sevilla 1998.

The southernmost limits of this rearguard frontier were located along the Tagus. Exposure to the problems and dangers experienced by other frontier regions was at its greatest in the westernmost part of the rearguard, decreasing as one moved to the east. Indeed, the settlements close to the middle reaches of the Alberche River – Santa Olalla, Escalona¹² and Maqueda¹³, fell easy prey to the Muslim attacks which came from the river basins and plains surrounding Talavera.

Further to the west, and to the north of Toledo, you would come across the dry flatland region of Sagra. It was linked with the Toledan *alfoz* (municipal district) and was dependent upon that city's fortunes. Therefore, it must have suffered much devastation before and after the failed sieges of Toledo.

Also located in the rearguard was the flatland of Madrid, which extends from the eroded foothills of the Sistema Central as far as the Alcarrian plateau and the basins of the Tagus and Henares.¹⁴ In the sierras surrounding Madrid the only settlement of note was Buitrago, while in the plain, Madrid itself stood out as an important market and fortress. Its walls were strong enough to repel the prolonged Almohad siege of 1196.¹⁵

In Guadalajara, the Sierra, the Campiña and the Alcarria form three very distinct zones.¹⁶ These regions were the least affected by the Almohad raids of the second half of the twelfth century. The Campiña stretches to Madrid, where it becomes the fertile plain surrounding Alcalá de Henares and into the north of Toledo Province. It is divided into the High Campiña, at the foot of the Sierra, and the Low Campiña, in the Henares plain.¹⁷

The Henares forms the border between the Alcarria and the Guadalajaran Campiña. To the north, the high plains of the Alcarria, sliced by the Tagus and Tajuña, reach as far as the elevated Triassic mesetas of Sigüenza and Molina. To the east, they meet the Mesozoic high plateau of the Sistema Ibérico. Southwards, they stretch down to the regions of Huete and Priego.¹⁸ The southernmost part of the Alcarria was in contact with

¹² A. Malalana Ureña, *Escalona medieval (1083–1400)*. Madrid 1987.

¹³ E. Rodríguez-Picavea Matilla, *La villa y la tierra de Maqueda en la Edad Media. Evolución de un concejo toledano desde el realengo hasta el final del señorío calatravo (siglos XI–XV)*. Toledo 1996.

¹⁴ Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*, p. 187.

¹⁵ J. González, *Repoblación de Castilla la Nueva*, I, p. 238.

¹⁶ J. Datín Cereceda, *Regiones naturales de España*. Madrid 1922, p. 15.

¹⁷ Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*, p. 270.

¹⁸ J. Datín Cereceda, *Ensayo acerca de las regiones de España*. Madrid 1916, p. 259. The borders of a natural region are always difficult to determine and, in any case, they should not be

Muslim territories, especially before the conquest of Cuenca (1177). It is no surprise, therefore, that the military orders created estates in the area which subsequently became part of the rearguard zone. The Order of Calatrava established one with its headquarters in Zorita, while the Order of St John located itself in Alhóndiga.¹⁹

To the north of the Alcarria you would have found the powerful centers of Atienza and Medinaceli, whose district extended to the Tagus and the bishopric of Sigüenza. East of the Alcarrian plateaux, the estate and district of Molina was the easternmost region of the rearguard frontier which, when centered around its original core, formed a political unit of clear geographical expression and notable economic uniformity²⁰.

The Vanguard Frontier

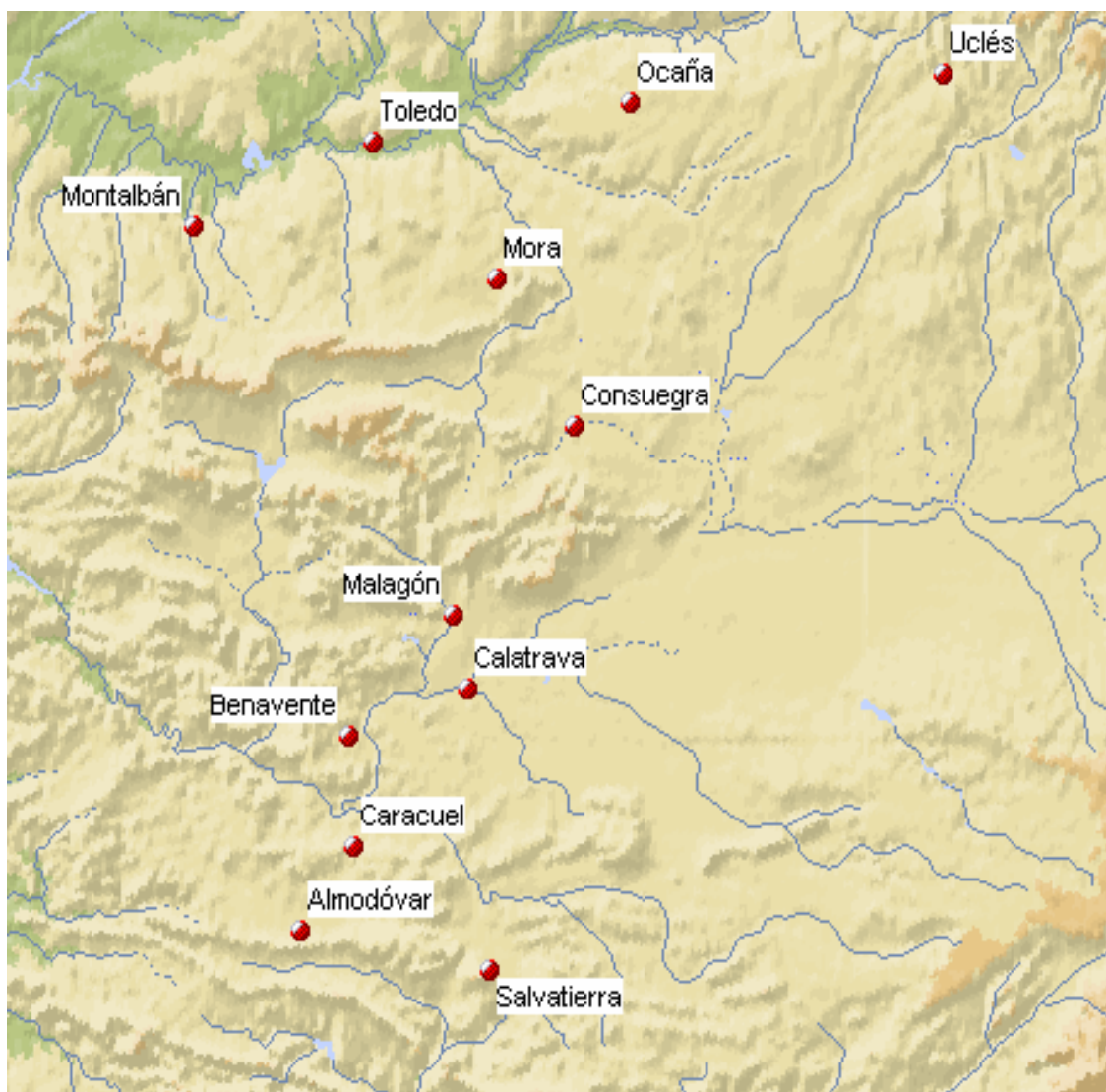
The course of the Tagus was the obligatory focus point for the frontier during the twelfth century. To the south of the river the wide territory of the vanguard frontier stretched out. The evident danger, incipient territorial advance and scant population meant that this natural boundary was just waiting to be crossed. Therefore, the vanguard of the frontier zone was situated between the Tagus and Sierra Morena. It is still possible to distinguish two zones in this territory; to the north and south of the Montes de Toledo – that great geographic accident dividing the southern meseta from east to west.

The first of these zones, situated between the Tagus and the Montes de Toledo, was basically flat and included the land around Montalbán, la Sisle and the Mesa de Ocaña, in addition to the western sector of la Mancha. The whole area went on to become the tip of the vanguard when the Muslim frontier moved to the Montes de Toledo after the Battle of Alarcos (1195). However, it was saved from Almohad attacks due to the truces signed in 1197.

considered as eternal. For example, Juan Catalina García (*La Alcarria en los dos primeros siglos de su reconquista*, Madrid 1914, pp. 8–9) considers the southernmost limits given by Datín to be clearly exaggerated. It is no accident that a natural region is characterized by five elements: relief, climate, vegetation/agriculture, fauna and human interaction with the environment (cf. Datín, *Regiones naturales*, p. 12).

¹⁹ E. Rodríguez-Picavea Matilla, *Las Órdenes Militares y la frontera*.

²⁰ A. Mateo Sagasta, *Origen y extensión territorial del señorío de Molina*, unpublished paper, presented in the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in 1986.



Map 3. The vanguard frontier (1157–1212).

In reality, since the time of Alfonso VII, the entirety of this area of the frontier was seen as a fortress belt defending Toledo. Indeed, due to its characteristics and strategic importance, Toledo itself can be included inside this intermediate zone of the vanguard frontier.

The flat platform of the Mesa de Ocaña begins to the south of Aranjuez and spreads out extensively towards the Sierra Morena. It is considered to be the genuine threshold of la Mancha.²¹ A system of fortresses was situated in this immense flat area. They had been ceded to the nobility in the era of Alfonso VII and controlled the access to Toledo from la Mancha. The rising fortunes of the military orders under the reign of Alfonso VIII led to the control of the region by the Order of Santiago, following the framework set

²¹ Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*, p. 191.

out by Oreja, Ocaña, Carabanchel and Mora²². In the southernmost part, the Orders of St John and Calatrava held sway over Consuegra and Guadalerza respectively.²³

La Sisle was the central region to the south of Toledo. Due to its location it must have suffered Muslim raids more often than la Sagra. To the west its borders exceeded the river courses of the Alpuébraga and the Torcón, touching the borders of Montalbán and Talavera. To the east they go beyond el Algodor, whilst skirting the Tagus to the north and the Montes de Toledo to the south.²⁴ The territory had many unpopulated areas. The Toledan Archbishop and Council undertook its repopulation together with the military orders and important locals.

The lands of Montalbán are situated in the westernmost part of this intermediate zone of the frontier. They were sparsely populated during the twelfth century, with their repopulation starting at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Under the guidance of the local dignitary Alfonso Téllez, advantage was taken of the treaties with the Almohads.²⁵

The most advanced zone of the Kingdom of Castile facing the Muslims was the area between the Montes de Toledo and the Sierra Morena, crossed by the Guadiana basin and its tributary the Jabalón. The region of la Mancha, in its widest sense, incorporated the entirety of the vanguard, and it constituted the real spearhead of the Christian offensive.²⁶

However, from a geomorphological point of view, Greater la Mancha is divided into three parts: the Paleozoic massif of the Campo de Calatrava, the eastern Mesozoic edge of the Campo de Montiel, and the great infilled tertiary basin of la Mancha proper.²⁷

Even in its most limited form, la Mancha fully exceeds the advanced vanguard of the frontier. To the north, its boundaries mingle with the Mesa de Ocaña and the high plateau of the Alcarria, although it does not go beyond the line through Villacañas, Belmonte and Alarcón. To the east, it is limited by the sierras of Cuenca and Albacete, forming in the latter province the so-called Mancha de Montearagón²⁸. To the south, it stands out from the

²² Martín, *Orígenes de la Orden Militar de Santiago*, pp. 107–109.

²³ Rodríguez-Picavea, *Las Órdenes militares y la frontera*.

²⁴ González, *Repoblación*, I, p. 209.

²⁵ González, *Repoblación*, I, pp. 288–289.

²⁶ Regarding the start of the Christian occupation in this region see R. Izquierdo Benito, “El poblamiento de La Mancha en el siglo XII”, in *Alarcos. El fiel de la balanza*, (edition edited by Juan Zozaya). Toledo 1995, pp. 99–112

²⁷ Otto Jessen, “La Mancha”. *Estudios Geográficos* (1946), p. 275.

²⁸ Jessen, “La Mancha”, pp. 274–275.

Campo de Montiel²⁹, a sparsely populated zone that was under Muslim control and would not be conquered until after the Navas de Tolosa campaign (1212).

Essentially, the advanced vanguard was formed by Lower la Mancha (the eastern part of the present-day province of Ciudad Real), although it also included some areas from Higher la Mancha (situated between the provinces of Toledo and Cuenca) such as Campo de Criptana and Uclés. The Order of St John took an interest in the former, whilst the latter was the headquarters of the Order of Santiago and, due to its influential southerly position, aspired to control land in Lower la Mancha and the Campo de Montiel.

To the west, la Mancha differed from the Campo de Calatrava, which is a difficult region to demarcate as a geographic entity due to its combination of varied elements. To the south, the Campo reaches the collection of mountainous foothills that form the Sierra Morena, which in reality is an upward deformation of the land surface that on occasion turns into a fault.³⁰

The demarcation of the Campo de Calatrava is wider from an historic viewpoint and included the central valley of the Guadiana as far as the Montes de Toledo. In fact it is the territory that formed the district belonging to the town of Calatrava la Vieja ruled over by the Order of Calatrava. The boundaries were probably the same as those handed over in 1147 by Alfonso VII when he conferred the special rights and privileges of the *fuero* to the town, which alluded to those under Muslim control.³¹ These borders were fully detailed by Alfonso VIII in 1189, from las Navas de la Condesa as far as the Yébenes mountain range. They basically followed the line of the Sierra Morena and the Montes de Toledo as follows: Navas de la Condesa, puerto del Muradal to *Burialame*, Jándula and *Peña del Barco*, *Cabeza del Pinar*, castillo de Murgaval, arroyo Guadamora, *Cabeza de Almadenejos*, *Cabeza del Guijo* in el Villar de Santa María, the environs of el castillo de Santa Eufemia, the confluences of the rivers Alcudia, Gargantiel and Guadalmez, el almadén de Chillón, the *Hoz de Esteras*, *Cabeza de Agudo*, el

²⁹ The geographic study of this region can be found in Gregorio Planchuelo Portales, *Estudios del Alto Guadiana y de la Altiplanicie del Campo de Montiel*. Madrid 1954.

³⁰ Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*, p. 180. See also J. L. García Rayego, *El medio natural en los montes de Ciudad Real y el Campo de Calatrava*. Ciudad Real 1995.

³¹ Archivo Histórico Nacional (Madrid), Órdenes Militares, sign. 1341c, *Registro de Escrituras de la Orden de Calatrava*, I, f. 4.

vado de Extremillas and the route that goes through el puerto del Espinazo del Can, el puerto del Milagro and the Sierra de Orgaz.³²

With support in other strongholds like Almodóvar, Caracuel, Banavente, Malagón, Chillón, Dueñas and Salvatierra, the Order of Calatrava tried to defend the entire area³³. After the defeat at Alarcos, the Order lost control beyond the Montes de Toledo frontier, but held on to some isolated positions, the most significant of which was Salvatierra. This illustrates the lack of stable frontier lines³⁴.

The Eastern Flank

The prominent tip of the vanguard frontier left the southernmost flanks of the Kingdom of Castile uncovered and it was, therefore, necessary to protect them.

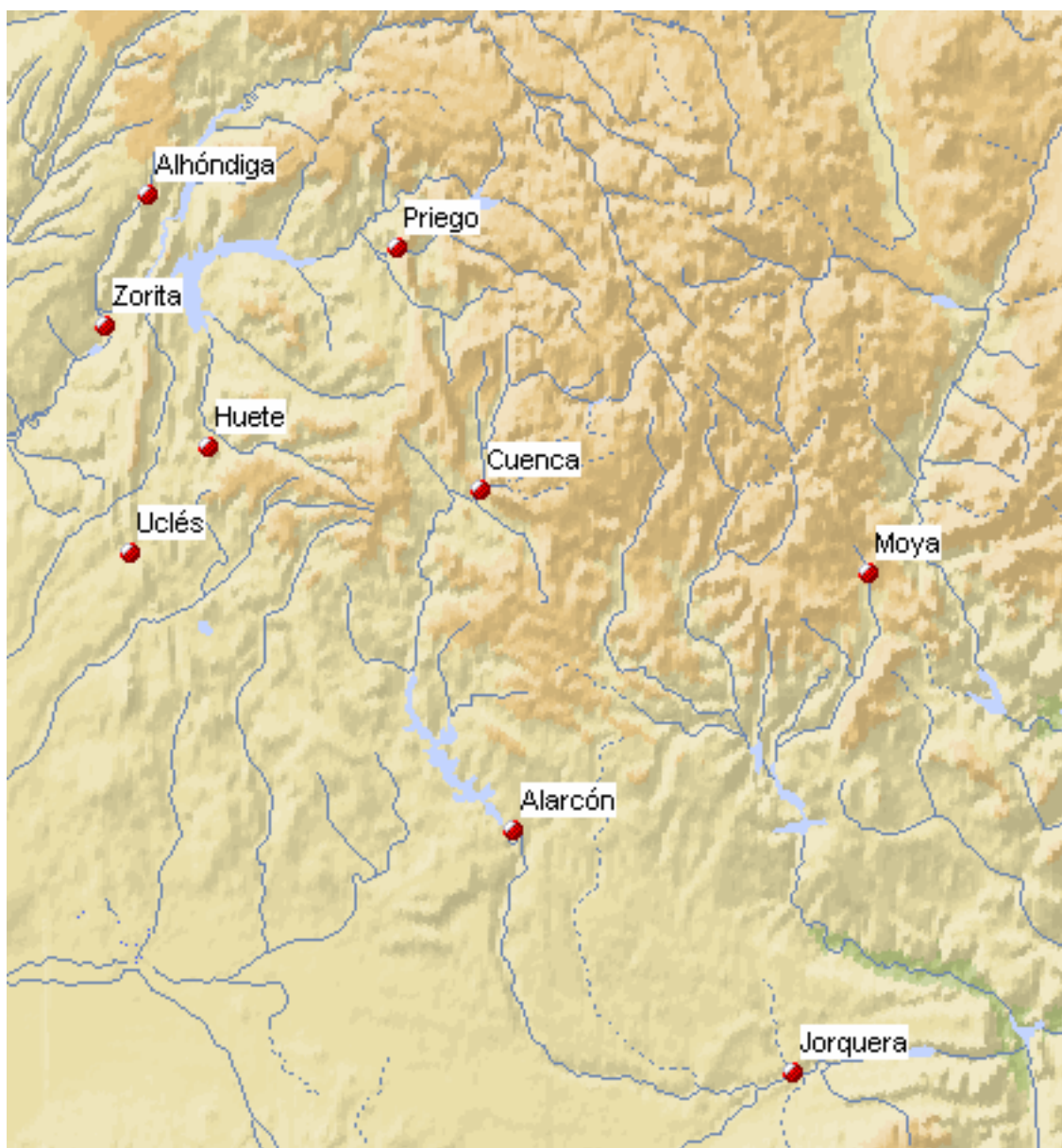
The eastern flank was threatened by its proximity to the Muslims of Cuenca, as had been shown by the siege of Huete (1172). The Muslim lands were surrounded by the Christian presence in Higher la Mancha and the south of the Alcarria. The Christian controlled plain contrasted with the more craggy terrain to the east of Cuenca. A defensive triangle against Cuenca was established exactly halfway between la Mancha and the Alcarria. The base was formed by the Orders of Santiago and Calatrava in Uclés and Zorita respectively, with the municipality of Huete at the apex.

The situation of the eastern Castilian flank changed radically after the conquest of Cuenca (1177). The frontier was moved to the Júcar basin, with the subsequent incorporation of Alarcón, Jorquera and Alcalá. A little later, the Castilians reached the Cabriel basin. They passed over the mountainous terrain and superseded the old Muslim borders with the repopulation of Moya.

³² C. Ayala et al, "Delimitación de la frontera meridional del Campo de Calatrava en el siglo XII". *Boletín de Arqueología Medieval*, 5 (1991), pp. 61–92; and E. Rodríguez-Picavea Matilla, "Delimitación de la frontera occidental y septentrional del Campo de Calatrava en el siglo XII". *Boletín de Arqueología Medieval*, 7 (1993), pp. 269–282.

³³ Regarding the role played by the fortresses in the Campo de Calatrava see the thought-provoking study by Carlos de Ayala Martínez, "Las fortalezas castellanas de la Orden de Calatrava en el siglo XII". *En la España Medieval*, 16 (1993), pp. 9–35.

³⁴ Carlos de Ayala Martínez, "Las Órdenes militares y la ocupación del territorio manchego (siglos XII-XIII)", in R. Izquierdo Benito and F. Ruiz Gómez (eds), *Alarcos 1195. Actas del Congreso Internacional conmemorativo del VIII centenario de la batalla de Alarcos*. Cuenca 1996, pp. 47–104, especially pp. 67–69.



Map 4. The eastern flank (1157–1212).

The northernmost part of the reconfigured eastern flank came into contact with the Kingdom of Aragón and the independent territory of Abarracín. At the same time, the strategic situation of the Alcarria and Upper la Mancha was reinforced, thus enabling an increase in population.

Once more, the situation changed after the Battle of Alarcos. The Almohad raid of 1197 affected Huete, Uclés, Cuenca and Alarcón.³⁵ Shortly afterwards, truces were signed and the danger to the eastern flank receded.

³⁵ Regarding the route of the Almohad incursion see the map included by García Fitz in *Castilla y León frente al Islam*, p. 449.

The Western Flank

The western flank of Castile basically consisted of the lands of Talavera. Although, before the incorporation of the Castro estate in Trujillo, the regions in the middle reaches of the Alberche (Santa Olalla, Maqueda and Escalona) could also be included, along with the outerlying areas of Montalbán. The entire region suffered at the hands of the Almoravids. However, the Almohad raids cut an even greater swathe of terror and devastation through the countryside.

The Talaveran *alfoz* was pressurized in the north by the region of Ávila; therefore, this led to expansion in the south. Nevertheless, the large amount of poor land, the climate and malaria, together with the open frontier facing the Muslims, left the territory of la Jara Toledana and the southern border of Talavera depopulated. The population didn't prosper until the thirteenth century.³⁶

The situation was eased for the western flank when, in 1185, Pedro Fernández de Castro recognized the sovereignty of Alfonso VIII over the lands and castles of Montánchez, Santa Cruz, Trujillo and Monfragüe. With this, Castile advanced into the eroded plain of the Extremaduran meseta. The area contains some isolated examples of mountainous terrain, such as the granite massif of Trujillo.³⁷ However, it differs from the Castilian meseta more in economic, social and historical terms than in geographical ones, given that the area pushes towards the Montes de Toledo and Sierra Morena.³⁸

The Orders of Santiago, Monfragüe and Trujillo were put into power on the Castro estate by Alfonso VIII, who was aware of its strategic importance. The area's restructuring plan was completed with the founding of Plasencia³⁹ in the Jerte valley, which would become the head of the western flank.

³⁶ E. Rodríguez-Picavea Matilla, *La villa y la tierra de Talavera en la plena Edad Media. Orígenes, consolidación y desarrollo de un concejo de realengo (siglos XI-XIII)*. Talavera de la Reina 1996.

³⁷ M. Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía general de España*. Barcelona 1978, p. 57.

³⁸ Terán and Solé Sabaris, *Geografía regional de España*, p. 172 and foll.

³⁹ Regarding this area see the study by Elisa Carolina de Santos Canalejo, *La Historia medieval de Plasencia y su entorno geo-histórico. La Sierra de Béjar y la Sierra de Gredos*. Cáceres 1986.



Map 5. The western flank (1157–1212).

The large Almohad expeditionary force of 1196 devastated the western flank, causing the significant loss of Trujillo, Santa Cruz and Montánchez.⁴⁰ Plasencia, along with Talavera, was able to recuperate from the tragedy. As in other places, the truces at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth saved the situation. Plasencia's growth accelerated due to a Cuenca family *fuero*⁴¹ and through the consolidation of its diocese.⁴² Even so, the Castilian western flank was permanently threatened until the fall of Trujillo (1232).

⁴⁰ Regarding the route of the 1196 expedition see the map included by García Fitz in *Castilla y León frente al Islam*, p. 448.

⁴¹ E. Ramírez Vaquero, *El fuero de Plasencia. Estudio y edición crítica del texto*. Mérida 1987.

⁴² González, *Repoblación*, I, p. 295.

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