

Entry

James I of Aragon (1213–1276)

Marta Serrano-Coll 

Department of History and Art History, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 43003 Tarragona, Spain; marta.serrano@urv.cat

Definition: James I, King of Aragon (1213–1276). He was the third king of the Crown of Aragon, which had come into existence through the union between Queen Petronila of Aragon (1157–1164) and the Count of Barcelona Ramon Berenguer IV (1137–1162). James I represents a milestone in the iconography of the Kings of Aragon, although this is due more to his successors' promotion of him rather than to his own efforts. In order to organise and unify his dominions after the conquests of Mallorca and Valencia, he immersed himself in legal work that consolidated his legislative power whilst still allowing his territories to retain a certain degree of autonomy. He carried out an essential monetary reorganisation in which his coinage retained its obverse but altered its reverse according to the place of issue. He never succeeded in being crowned, although he featured the crown prominently in his stamps and seals and, on some coins, he added the term *rex gratia Dei*. In addition, he revived the sword as a royal insignia, having proclaimed the right of conquest as the basis of his sovereignty.

Keywords: royal images; royal iconography; kings of Aragon; Crown of Aragon; James I of Aragon



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1. Introduction

Due to the absence of a legitimate successor, James I became king of Aragon at the age of five after his father died in Muret in 1213. None of his contemporaries suspected that the child would become a legendary king. During his long minority he remained under the tutelage of the Templars in the castle of Monzón, while his uncle Sancho I of Roussillon, acting as regent at the orders of Queen Maria, and advised by a council of trusted Aragonese and Catalans, put down continuous rebellions by the Aragonese nobility, who even took the king prisoner in 1223.

During the 63 years of his reign, he expanded the Crown throughout the Mediterranean, earning himself the name of Conqueror, and he laid the social, political and economic foundations that stabilised the kingdom, whose finances had been ruined by his father Peter II (1196–1213).

2. Character and Physique of the King

In order to study the portraits of James I in the Middle Ages, it is necessary to follow the methodology of iconographic and iconological studies; that is, to make a corpus of images of the king that is as exhaustive as possible and takes into account all artistic genres, to analyse documentation from the period—both from the chronicles and from the documents found in the abundant existing bibliography (mainly from the royal chancellery)—and to read the historiography on the king. All these sources, both iconographic and textual, allow us to get closer to the figure of the king.

In February 1221, at the age of 13, he married Leonor of Castile, sister of Queen Berenguela and aunt of Fernando III (1217–1252), a marriage that was annulled eight years later on the grounds of kinship, although their son Alfonso retained his status as legitimate heir. After the betrothal, they moved to Tarazona Cathedral, where James was knighted. During this ceremony, held a year after Fernando III had arraigned himself with the military cingulum, James I reproduced the same gesture during his investiture. By putting on the sword that he himself had taken from above the altar, the king prevented

the symbolic act whereby the church conferred upon him the arms that symbolised his capacity and suitability to govern. Through the same act, he also erased the memory of the vassal investiture of his father Peter II in Rome ([1,2]. On the reign of James I, I refer the reader to: [3–6]).

He was skilful and had a strong personality, as is shown in various episodes of the *Llibre dels feyts del rei en Jacme*, a chronicle written in the first person and which confirmed the status of Catalan as a literary language [7]. He was courageous, as he illustrated when, among other things, he tried to remove an arrow that had pierced his skull and seriously wounded him, an injury that was corroborated when his tomb at Poblet was exhumed [8] (p. 193). The large bones that were uncovered during the same exhumation also proved the accuracy of the accounts of his physical size, for example Bernat Desclot's extensive description states that "This King James of Aragon was the most beautiful man in the world; taller than any other by more than a span, and he was very well formed and well-proportioned in all his limbs. He had a great face, ruddy and Flemish, and a long and very straight nose, and a great mouth and well made; and great teeth, beautiful and white as if they were pearls. And green eyes, and beautiful blond hair, like golden thread, and a broad back. And a long and slender body, and thick, well-shaped arms, and beautiful hands, and long fingers, and thick thighs for his height, and long and well-shaped feet. And he was very brave, resolute in arms, and strong, and valiant. And generous and pleasant, and very merciful to all. And he had in all his heart and in all his will the desire to fight against the Saracens" ([9] (chap. 12). Soldevila considers this description to be inspired by the *Vita Caroli Magni*, de Einhard: [9] (p. 601, no. 1)).

3. The Right of Conquest: Consequences and Iconographic Echoes

James I attempted to be crowned, but was unsuccessful. In order to do so, the king needed to request permission from the Pope, in accordance with a bull issued by Innocent III (1198–1216) (on this bull and its consequences see: [1]), recognise his vassalage to Rome, and pay the corresponding tribute. The last of his attempts, for which he had a very precious crown made [10] (p. 32), took place between 1st and 10 May 1274, taking advantage of the fact that Gregory X (1272–1276) was in Lyon to promote a crusade to the Holy Land. The occasion proved unsuccessful: the pope would only agree to crown him if he confirmed his vassalage and paid off the debt he had amassed, some 40,000 *mazmondinas*. James I returned disappointed by the fact that these trifles, *menuderies* in his terms, prevailed over what had been his service to God and the Church. As he explains in his *Llibre dels feyts*: "we told him that we had not come to his court to pay him tribute, but rather for the franchises that he had given us; but he did not want to do it, so we preferred to return without the crown than with the crown" ([7] (par. 538). For recent study on the coronations in the Crown of Aragon and their consequences in the iconography of the king see: [11]).

3.1. Revaluation of the Sword

James I voluntarily chose not to pursue his desire to be crowned. He rejected his father's obligations and commitments by arguing that both he and his predecessors had won their kingdoms from the Muslims through the sword ("since my predecessors conquered them with the sword"), and the strength of his own belief in this position would blaze the trail that his successors were to follow. The idea that the sword of the sovereign gave him supreme dominion over his kingdoms had been aired before by Alfonso I the Battler (1104–1134) who led of a period of tense relations with Rome [1] (p. 49). However, the real turning point only came during the reign of James I (as stated: [12]) and it was to have important iconographic consequences.

The right of primogeniture, without any coronation, was sufficient for the kings of Aragon to exercise their governmental duties, but the right of conquest, which entailed the revaluation of the sword as the royal insignia, owed its power to the affirmation that the land belongs to those who have conquered it and as such it became a means of monarchical legitimisation in the territories recently acquired by the crown [13]. Thus, in contrast to the

new practice established by his father, who, perhaps under the influence of Frederick II, introduced the sceptre to his wax seals, James I restored the sword to prominence in all his stamps and seals, both wax and lead. Its pre-eminence speaks volumes in all his seals (Figure 1), which became increasingly abundant as his conquests progressively rendered the sword obsolete [14–16] (pp. 40–57).



Figure 1. Above: main seals of James I, obverses, 1229. D/11222 @Archives Nationales de France; and 1238–1276, published in: [15] (no. 28). Below: Bulls of James I, obverses. 1231–1238, published in: [15] (no. 25); and 1255, published by Conde, R. Lead seal of James I. In: *Cataluña medieval*. Lunwerg: Barcelona, Spain, 1992, p. 114.

James I was committed to the revaluation of this steel weapon despite the fact that it represented a regression even in England, the place from where this model had been taken in the time of Alfonso II and where the sword had been relegated to equestrian imagery since Henry III (1216–1272) [17] (p. 143). He also used it in other media, as illustrated by some of the miniatures in the *In excelsis Dei thesauris* (facsimile and studies in: [18]) (Figure 2). Although its illuminations date from after his reign, the king is depicted in a manner that very faithfully follows the templates offered by some of his bulls [16] (p. 54), [19] (p. 74).

There is no doubt that the new role of this offensive element, progressively converted into an insignia, was intimately related to legitimation, both in the kingdom of Aragon and in newly conquered territories.

3.2. Links with the Divine

3.2.1. Given the Title of King by the Grace of God

Despite legitimising and justifying his dominion by right of conquest, including his dominion of those lands he inherited, James I wished to make clear his links with the sacred. To this end, he used various resources. On the one hand, it is highly significant that “*Dei gratia regis Aragonum*” encircles his majestic image after he had conquered the kingdoms of Mallorca and Valencia and that this is the first time it appears in the sigillography of the King of Aragon (the seals of his third term state: +*Sigillum Iacobi Dei gracia regis Aragonum et Maioricarum et Valencia comitis Barchinone et Urgelli et domini Montis pessulani*. See: [14]). He used the same title in other documents of a legal nature, such as the *Fueros de*

Aragón promulgated in 1247, of which several copies have survived, also illuminated and reproduced subsequently ([20]. Analysis of the illuminations in: [16] (pp. 89–90)).



Figure 2. King James I of Aragon, illuminations, c. 1276–1290. Malibú, J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XIV, 6, *In Excelsis Dei thesauris*, fols. 91v, 92r, 139r and 229v. Published in: [18].

These words, which proclaim the links with the sacred, are highly significant if we take into account the fact that he wanted to present himself as the victor and the beneficiary of divine help, particularly in the form of assistance from Saint George in the decisive battles to win the kingdoms of Valencia and Mallorca and, therefore, in those territories in which his sovereignty derived from the right of conquest. Underlying this assistance is a complex and profound political message.

3.2.2. Divine Intercession: Saint George and Providentialism

Although a previous king, Peter I (1094–1104), had already benefited from this illustrious favour in one of his offensives against the then Muslim city of Wasqa (Huesca), the first textual reference to this assistance is in the *Crónica de San Juan de la Peña*, composed between 1369 and 1372 at the behest of Peter IV, a fervent admirer of James I [21] (chap. 18, pp. 59–61). In fact, James I only refers to the help of Saint George in his *Llibre dels feyts* at the moment of his entry into *Mayurqa*: “and according to what the Saracens told us, they first saw a white knight with white weapons enter on horseback, and we believe it was Saint George” [7] (par. 84). In contrast, his participation in the attack on El Puig, thanks to which Valencia was conquered, is only referred to in the chronicle of Peter IV, which indicates that the saint not only helped the king, but also his armies, so that in the great battle “Saint George appeared to them with many knights who helped them to win the battle, thanks to which no Christian died” [21] (chap. 35). This presence must be understood in the context of the king’s mythification and undoubtedly has intense political significance because by confirming the will and support of God, it replaced the ecclesiastical recognition which the coronation ceremony was intended to confer upon the monarch.

In waging just battles against the infidels, the king’s war was also God’s war, and it is therefore not surprising that, as far as many of his medieval contemporaries were concerned, the sovereign enjoyed this divine assistance. James I stated that, as head of the *militia Christi*, he had divine approval: “since we go in his name, we have confidence that he will guide us” [7] (par. 56). In other passages he presents himself with a messianic aura, showing that he is God’s chosen instrument for persecuting the enemies of the faith, hence the protection he enjoyed for the first few months of his life. When he entered St. Mary’s in Montpellier to be baptised, the clergy sang *Te Deum Laudamus*, a hymn of thanksgiving to God, and when he was led into the church of St. Sernin, he was greeted by the prophetic song of Zechariah *Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel* and its passage announcing the coming of a messianic and redemptive figure [22] (pp. 11–64).

It seems plausible that the introduction of the star to all his wax stamps (Figure 3), preceding the image of him as a horseman, is precisely the result of the providential support that the king wished to manifest, and this in turn stems from sacred texts such as the prophecies of Isaiah, the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, the latter referring to the star on the right and stating that “to he who overcomes and keeps my works until the end, I will give him authority over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron [. . .] and I will give him the “morning star” (Ap. 2,2 and 25–28. Isaiah compared the king of Babylon to “a bright star, the son of the dawn”; the Book of Daniel explains that those who have made the multitude righteous will shine like the stars forever. I will elaborate on this issue in a future paper). This star, introduced by James I, continued to feature, invariably preceding the horseman, in all the seals of the kings of Aragon until the Trastámara and the change of dynasty after the Compromise of Caspe (the only surviving imprint of Martin I with his equestrian effigy has damage to the part where the star would have been located: [15] (no. 83)).



Figure 3. Seal with the star guiding the king of Aragon James I as horsemen, reverse, 1220 and 1226. Published in: [15] (no. 19).

This providentialism continued to be attributed to him later on; indeed Muntaner states: “no king was ever born to whom God gave so many graces in his life as he did to this lord king Don James” [23] (chap. VI), and as Peter IV would also emphasise in his campaign to bathe the institution of the monarchy in glory [24].

4. Other Distinctive Images of the King

4.1. Legal Instruments: Coins and Cartularies

The need to organise his dominions immersed the king in activities that confirmed his status as a legislator. Monetary reorganisation was essential: he maintained the obverse but altered the reverse according to the place of issue [16] (pp. 33–40), [25]. In addition, his legal reform was visible in the books of *furs*, privileges and usages which, inserted in the *furor legalis* of Christendom after his conquests, were copied and illuminated after his reign. There are many examples that present him as author, such as the first folio of the aforementioned *In excelsis Dei thesauris*, written by the Bishop of Huesca, Vidal de Canellas, in 1247, of which a splendidly illuminated version from the end of the century has survived. During his reign, the traditional *Usatges* were disseminated whilst at the same time the *fueros* were being drawn up in Valencia, as mentioned above. Underlying these texts was the Roman legal doctrine re-vitalised by Bologna, which affirmed the supremacy of the prince, a hegemony that was reinforced in the miniatures in those cartularies where he appears as the author. Although historians differ in their opinions, it seems he promoted the drafting of the *Llibre del Consolat de Mar*, a compendium of Valencian maritime law that would become, in the view of some authors, the basis for today’s international maritime legislation (for some historians, connections between the king and this *Llibre* are weaker than has been said: [26]).

His *dignitas* is evident in his majestic images, his clothing and insignia and the spatial hierarchy, for example the use of a dais to raise him to an exalted position, magnificent architecture that frames him, or precious backdrops exclusively for him. Attention was often drawn to the members of the lay and ecclesiastical hierarchies that, around the monarch, deliberated on important matters; clear examples are the miniature on fol. 21r of the *Tercer Llibre Verd* at the Arxiu Històric of Barcelona (whose illuminations were studied by Joaquín Yarza: [27]) or the illustrations in the versions of the *Usatges i constitucions de Catalunya* [19] (esp. chap. 2.1), [28].

4.2. Devotional Images

The works that depict him praying are less numerous and of doubtful identification, as can be seen in the keystone of the vault of the Trinity Chapel in Mallorca Cathedral, in the altarpiece of Santes Creus where the Conqueror was intended to be seen as one of the Magi, or in the Virgin of Mercy by Francesc Comes (analysis and bibliography in: [19] (pp. 340–341; 352–353; 503–504)). Some works contain a profound meaning that goes beyond the pious, such as the miniature of the *Liber Instrumentorum*, whose image is intended to defend the interests of the Valencia cathedral by choosing the effigy of the king who legitimised the documents compiled there (Arxiu Capitular, Valencia, Ms. 162. About this see: [29] (p. 424), [30,31]), or the *Llibre dels feyts*, whose first initial illustrates the sovereign imploring *in aeternum* to the Virgin, for whom he felt such devotion, to intercede for him before her Son.

5. Iconographic Milestone

According to the works compiled and the studies carried out to date, the reign of James I represents a milestone in figurative terms. Rather than for his patronage, his importance comes from the use that was made of his image after his reign. No institution, be it secular, ecclesiastical or monarchical, could resist showing off and reaffirming their links with the glorious Conqueror for the purposes of legitimation, justification or propaganda. The high regard and gratitude felt towards him in the newly conquered kingdoms soon led to artistic commissions intended to disseminate his exploits and the honour he embodied.

Institutional solidarity between promoters and monarchy generated a number of extraordinary commissions, including the 15th-century dynastic series for the *Cambra Daurada* in the city of Valencia, perhaps painted by Gonçal Peris, Joan Moreno and Jaume Mateu (only 4 tables are preserved in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya. Updated study in: [32] (p. 146)). Leaving aside the fact that James I may not be represented in the effigy traditionally attributed to him in historiography ([16] (pp. 239–247)), many historians have dealt with these paintings and their authors. Among others, see: [33]), these panels are the only surviving example of medieval portrait galleries dedicated to the kings of Aragon.

Moreover, there were also genealogic images in which James I was depicted in effigy, these being intended to glorify his lineage, and there was concern for the future of the saga on the part of the kings, the *Rotlle genealògic de Poblet*, from around 1409 ([34]. Date from [35] (p. 192), [36]), being an illustrative example of this.

One particular physical trait stands out as a constant in his iconography: the king is usually depicted with abundant white hair and a grizzled appearance that is often accentuated by a long, split beard. This trait is undoubtedly related to the monarch's longevity, which was known to all and which, as mentioned above, the king boasted about shortly before his death [7] (par. 562).

6. Conclusions

James I represents a milestone in the figurative images of the King of Aragon, not so much because he promoted himself, although he undoubtedly did, but because his successors did. Driven by the need to organise and unify his vast dominions (which he had enlarged as a result of his conquests), but giving them a certain degree of autonomy, the king immersed himself in intense work that reaffirmed his legislative power in the eyes of

his subjects. In this sense, the reorganisation of the coinage, in which he kept the obverse but altered the reverse according to the place of issue, and the legal reform, visible, in addition to other contemporary works, in the famous *In excelsis Dei thesauris*, a compilation whose precious narrative miniatures show the king as a principle of righteousness who delegates his judicial powers or administers justice to those who come before him. His obsession with being crowned by the pope, a ceremony he never undertook as he refused to renew his vassalage to the Holy See, was echoed in his contemporary iconography, although not as regards the crown; the one that can be seen on the horseman's head in his seals should only be understood as the result of a desire to keep abreast of the artistic trends of the time. A different case is that of the sword, an insignia that was reinforced as a natural symbol of the right of conquest, the basis of the king's sovereignty over certain territories as a consequence of the longed-for, although never achieved, coronation. This contradiction may also explain why he was the first to appear with the title "rex gratia Dei" on some of his coinage. On the other hand, the crest that can be seen so often on his head was never used by the king: it can only be seen in portrayals of him produced in the 14th century, from the reign of Peter IV the Ceremonious onwards.

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