

## **931 : el Comte-Marques Borrell II de Barcelona.**

### **Arquitecte involuntari de Catalunya?**

#### Resum

Borrell II ruled half of Catalunya Vella for half a century, during which time the royal dynasty that had installed his family ended, the Muslim caliphate in Spain became a newly serious threat and its gold drove Barcelona's economy into inflation. Borrell's career was a long struggle to cope with these developments and with his chief rivals, his own cousins in Besalú and Cerdanya. Nonetheless, the various attempts that he made to enhance lordship, government and justice, and therefore his own position, in his counties arguably left them ready for a future which he could not have anticipated.

#### Text

Despite Borrell II's long rule of Barcelona (945-93), very little has been written about him. There are obvious reasons for this: there are almost no contemporary historical accounts of him, his reputation is confused by later legend and he was not always a successful ruler. In particular, he has been credited with leading Catalonia into independence in 987 when the Carolingian royal dynasty who had appointed his grandfather, Count Guifré the Hairy, were replaced by the Capetians, but this is mistaken: Borrell sought Capetian aid, and his decisions could not have bound the other counts of Catalunya Vella anyway. Nonetheless, 200 or more documents of his time or soon after mention him, and from their testimony appears a clever and inventive ruler, with some sense of responsibility to his people and a well-developed instinct for politics at a time where the count of Barcelona was as yet far from controlling all of Catalonia.

Borrell became count in 945, alongside his father Sunyer, count of Barcelona, Girona and Osona (r. 911-47). The family seems normally to have raised their children to rank when they reached legal age, which according to the Visigothic Law still used in the area at this time was at 14 years. In that case, Borrell was probably born in 931, and he is first attested in a gift by his father to the cathedral of Girona three years later. Borrell's elder brother Ermengol was already Count of Osona at this time, and it seems that Borrell was here being linked to Girona, leaving Barcelona to the youngest brother, Miró.

By 945, however, Ermengol was dead, and Borrell and Miró took over all Sunyer's territories together when he retired to a monastery in 947. In that year Borrell also inherited the county of Urgell from his uncle Sunifred II. This put Borrell and Miró in charge of almost the whole frontier with Muslim al-Andalus, a great opportunity for expansion but also a perpetual threat, which dominated Borrell's situation even more after the death of Miró in 966.

The other major factors in Borrell's world were the counts of Besalú-Cerdanya, his elder cousins, and of Empúries-Rosselló. His territories were larger than either family's, but his cousins were better protected from Muslim attack and Count Gauzfred of Empúries (r. 930–91) had a stronger relationship with the kings to the north. Borrell's actions seem often to have been meant to improve his positions with respect either to the rulers of al-Andalus or to his fellow counts.

Many of these actions were unsuccessful. For example, in 941 or 942 Sunyer had captured the old metropolitan city of Tarragona, but resurgent Muslim pressure in the 960s meant that Borrell and Miró had to return it to the caliph. The two brothers had encouraged a visionary abbot, Cesari of Montserrat, to seek consecration in neighbouring León as metropolitan bishop of the recovered city, which he apparently did in 956; but the bishops he should have controlled refused to recognise his authority when he returned, and his patrons abandoned the attempt. Borrell seems to have fought a brief war with his cousins of Besalú, perhaps in 957, which we know about only from a gift that one of those cousins subsequently made in return for Saint Stephen's help in the defeat of Borrell which resulted. The same cousin, Miró Bonfill, subsequently became bishop of Girona, despite Borrell having travelled to Rome to persuade the pope to make one of Borrell's bishops, Ató of Osona, a metropolitan so as to control the Girona appointment. Borrell has also been credited with an overhaul of the Barcelona judicial system, appointing trained, legally knowledgeable judges who could decide cases fairly and finally. The new judges have been much praised by historians, and their expertise is undoubted; but close study of their activity shows it starting in Besalú, not Barcelona. We also, almost uniquely for a medieval ruler, have evidence of Borrell losing court cases; not only do records in Urgell make it clear that Bishop Sal·la there swindled land out of the count (although after Borrell had stolen land of his), but a hearing in 977 over rights to Vallformosa, near Manresa, resulted in a victory for the villagers over the count, still preserved in the comital archive.

None of these were Borrell's most notorious failure, however, either in his own times or in subsequent centuries. Instead, he bore the shame of being the ruler of Barcelona under whom the city was sacked by Muslim armies in 985, at the hands of the infamous leader al-Mansur. Admittedly, recent research suggests that damage to the city was not very serious, and it was not the first time that Muslim armies had breached Barcelona's walls, but 985 seems to have been different: documents of the time call it 'the day Barcelona died', and French historian Michel Zimmermann has seen in it the catalyst of a Catalan national consciousness, caused by a new sense of collective vulnerability.

Certainly, it seems to have made Borrell reach out to the Frankish kings whom he had hitherto preferred to ignore; in 986, while refortifying the border town of Cardona, he referred to royal orders, and in 988 Hugh Capet, the new king of France, who reportedly had a request for help from Borrell, sent a letter to Borrell promising aid if, "you prefer to obey us rather than the Ishmaelites [Muslims]". Hugh's offer of help was empty; he would never lead an army southwards, and whatever hopes Borrell and Catalonia had of him died on the vine. For the few years

remaining until Borrell's death in 993, the count had to arrange matters without outside help.

Borrell's people remembered him badly for 985: charters of the time allege that he had ordered everyone nearby to take their movables and property documents into the city for safety, where of course they were lost, and that he led a vain military expedition against al-Mansur while leaving two viscounts in charge at the city, one of whom then had to be ransomed from Córdoba. We have the will from a man who died on the expedition, so it clearly took place. Borrell cannot have hoped to defeat al-Mansur's considerably larger army, however; study of military service in Borrell's Catalonia suggests that it was minimal. Yet he went to meet the Muslims, leaving his subordinates and people behind the walls he must have hoped would be safe. Foolish this may have been, but it was not cowardly. The count's job was to protect his people, and now that his decades of diplomacy had failed, he tried to protect them with his person.

Borrell survived 985, in any case, and was able to plan for recovery and the future. Some of his plans were already set: his first son, Ramon, had been born in 971/72 and would become Count of Osona, like his uncle Ermengol whom he never knew, in 990. A second son, named after that same Ermengol, would inherit Urgell. These two, and probably all Borrell's known daughters, Adelaide, Abbess of Sant Pere de les Puelles in Barcelona, Ermengarda and Riquilda, Viscountess of Barcelona, were probably all children of Borrell's first wife, Ledgarda, whom Borrell had toured the Languedoc to find. On the same trip he was persuaded to bring the young intellectual Gerbert of Aurillac back to Catalonia with him. He took Gerbert on the 970 embassy to the pope, thus launching him on the career that would see him become pope himself as Sylvester II (r. 999-1002). This kind of extra-regional presence was new for the counts: Borrell's activities were slowly placing Barcelona on a wider stage where kings, popes, caliphs and emperors knew of him, even if the connections were not yet always useful. Borrell's second wife, Eimeruda, may also have been from outside Catalonia, but we know very little of her and despite provisions in Borrell's will, she does not seem to have remained in the country once he died.

Borrell's foreign relations were not the only spheres in which he attempted to improve and strengthen his government. The recruitment of trained judges has already been mentioned; Borrell may not have begun that particular change, but many such judges gravitated to wealthy Barcelona and became part of the comital administration. One document of 990 shows Borrell in a dispute with the bishop of Barcelona over the punishment of a man of the bishops' who had been passing bad coinage; Borrell recognised the bishop's right to administer punishment, as long as he got on and did it. Money was something about which Borrell seems to have cared: a reform to the silver coinage of Barcelona, putting it onto a more reliable footing, has been placed around 982 (though the actual coins are yet to be identified), and the bad coin of 990 had been detected by a comital agent. Borrell also built up local church structures, although this sometimes caused disagreements, especially with the bishops of Urgell. At the end of the contentions, however, more people had churches to go to.

One can also see Borrell trying to extend the network of fortresses at the edges of his territory—'in the far ultimate ends of the Marches', as one charter puts it—making it safer for new occupation of land to proceed—though he preferred to get others to pay. This process of turning frontier land to cultivation, very slowly expanding his rule into the no-man's land between it and Islam, was crucial to Borrell's power. As long as the caliphate or local Muslim rulers could be kept away, he had almost inexhaustible land to give to his followers, if they were prepared to look after themselves. His 986 concessions to the town of Cardona are illustrative: the citizens had exceptional privileges to redress any injustice against them, but they had to enforce them without help.

Borrell's justification of rights over such land, even where his agents had not cleared and occupied it, is revealing. The Visigothic kings claimed all waste land as part of the fisc, but that only applied to Borrell if he somehow held royal rights. Two or three documents accordingly make reference to such a concession, but from the Carolingians: Borrell claimed that an ancestor of his had been given all the fiscof the area by a king Charles. This has been linked to King Charles the Simple (r. 899-923) and Borrell's uncle Guifré II Borrell (r. 897-911), but thus or otherwise, it shows us how Borrell justified his power: as a hereditary concession of royal rights by a king long ago. That did not make him a king himself, but the kings could no longer remove him.

We can locate a great many aspects of Borrell's career and office in such halfway positions. Much of what he did in office was new, but he strove to make it seem traditional. He was not in charge of Catalonia, but he appointed all its bishops and represented it to the caliphs. He was not a client of the caliphs as such—for example, he was not required to send them troops—but he could not govern safely without their approval. He adopted political ideas and projects that were not his own, but found ways to make them so. In all of this, in the fragmentary glimpses the record allows us, he displayed ingenuity, energy and determination, and despite the negative outcomes we have mentioned above, by the time he died Borrell's counties were richer, safer, better organised and more fairly judged than they had been when he succeeded. His sons would build upon this position; but if, as Catalonia emerged into something like sovereignty, it did so with Barcelona at its head, that had been Borrell's work, and unlike some of his achievements, this was something he had set out to do.

When Borrell made his will in 993, in Castellciutat above Urgell, he had not finished his work. The document contains provisions in case any of those who were to carry it out should die first; he clearly expected to live longer than them. In fact, his death followed probably within days; but it is typical of the man we see in his documents that even at death's door, he was making further plans.

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### **Breu curriculum**

Jonathan Jarrett és Lecturer in Early Medieval History a l'Universitat de Leeds i Fellow de la Reial Societat Historica de Londres. El treballa sobre el poder i l'autoritat, especialment en Catalunya del segle 10. La seva gran publicació és el llibre *Rulers and Ruled in Frontier Catalonia 880–1010*.