

## Dinner and Diplomacy in the Deeds of the Conqueror

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The *Llibre dels Fets* or *Book of Deeds*, James I of Aragon's autobiographical account of many of the major events of his political and military life, was constructed for more than one audience and for multiple purposes (Cingolani, 31-74; Aurell, 39-54). Set down most probably in its entirety during the final years of James's sixty-three year reign, the *Deeds* reacted to the official histories designed at the court of the king's son-in-law, Alfonso X of Castile, and, more immediately, to waspish criticism of James's own failed attempt to crusade to the Holy Land in 1269 (Cingolani, 75-95). Narrated or performed before his knights and written down by his scribes, the *Deeds* justified the ways of James to men, while also serving as a guidebook to his sons and successors on how to rule (Badia, 55; Smith, 7). Its structure can only be properly understood when it is remembered that it is designed to inform his successors about the political affairs of the past which he considered relevant to the future. It is for this reason that James dwells on his distant (and faulty) memories of the Aragonese conflicts in his youth, the war in Urgell, and the parleys with Sancho VII of Navarre (Smith, 7). It is equally the reason why he does not mention the treaty of Corbeil with Louis IX of France. The former were all matters that still needed resolution. The latter was not. It is also for this reason that James spent a great length of time explaining the series of negotiations through which he captured the kingdoms of Majorca, Valencia and Murcia. This makes it very relevant to our current topic because, whatever else it is, the *Deeds* is certainly a guide on how to conduct negotiations and since those negotiations were for the purpose of bringing a resolution which avoided conflict, even though James is often his own diplomat (and not quite yet the representative of a state), we can consider the *Deeds* in a broad sense as a guide to diplomacy.

One important aspect of medieval diplomacy which has not been dealt with in any great detail in the *Deeds* or indeed elsewhere concerns food and especially dining. The topic of food was of course of great importance to James personally (Burns 1976, 31-2) since he had acute memories of the times when he was hungry and thirsty. Indeed among his earliest memories was that on his arrival at the Templar castle of Monzón, after he had been rescued from Simon de Montfort, there was not even enough food for one day, so wasted and pledged was the land (LF, 11). In the Majorcan campaign, after the battle at Portopí, the king recalled that in the evening he was very hungry and had not eaten all day (Oliver de Termes then provided him with a meal) (LF, 67). When trying to flush out his opponents from the caves of Artana, by the last day before their surrender, the king dined with Nunó Sanxes and a good hundred men on just seven pieces of bread (LF, 102). In the Valencian campaign, during the siege of Borriana, James remembered being so thirsty that, before going to eat, he drank more than anybody else, indeed two whole jugs of watered wine (LF, 161).

The king's concern for his own well-being was matched by his consciousness that an army marches on its stomach. That vital siege at Borriana almost had to be abandoned for lack of provisions (LF, 164-7). The siege at Cullera was abandoned for the same reason under advice from the nobles since there was only five days supply of food (LF, 195). More

famously, in James's account, the whole capture of the city of Valencia itself was thrown into jeopardy because the money which the king had given for Bernat Guillem d'Entença to provision the frontier castle of Puig de Cebolla through the winter of 1237-8, had been recklessly spent on recruiting more knights rather than on food (LF, 213-14). Indeed, the first portion of the king's narration of the capture of the city concerns itself with his exhaustive attempts to recover the perilous situation which Bernat Guillem had left them in by obtaining the necessary provisions at Borriana, Tortosa and Tarragona (LF, 215).

It was also the case that while James was deeply concerned with the provisioning of his own troops, he was equally concerned to stop the Muslims from gaining the food supplies which would help them endure his sieges. Before besieging Borriana, the king was careful to lay waste to the wheat fields, and then ordered his men to make sure that sheep and cattle did not pasture between the army and the town, by which means the animals might be seized by raids from those inside (LF, 156). The basic plan for the capture of Valencia was that it would be so starved of provisions that it would have no choice but to surrender (LF, 241). The fact that James succeeded in besieging the city before the harvest had been collected made that close to inevitable. In 1258, at the end of the first war against al-Azraq, it was through an arrangement with one of his opponent's confidants, whom the king would generously reward for persuading al-Azraq to sell his wheat supplies, that the conflict was brought to a satisfactory close (LF, 373). Sometimes, equally, the king did not destroy the resources, when he did not consider it in his long-term interests to do so, as at Bairén in early 1240, 'because it was not fitting to cut down the wheat and the trees, since the Moors would be our responsibility, and we had it in our heart to do them good' (LF, 244).

The decision made at Bairén takes us to the major theme of this paper. Food had a great significance not only in the military but also in the political side of warfare. We find this first of all in a curious and quite unexpected way during the conflicts of the minority with the Aragonese. At Huesca, in 1227, James had received a hostile reception and indeed he recalled that the townspeople had not welcomed him in anyway and had evidently not prepared any meal for him on his arrival (LF, 30). Afterwards, while the townspeople were conducting negotiations with James, they secretly sent for James's uncle, Ferdinand of Monragón and the men of Zaragoza, in order that they would come to Huesca and help in the capture of the king. James likewise planned a deceit and ordered mutton to be bought from the butcher's so that he could give the impression that he was preparing to dine, while in reality he was planning (successfully) his escape from the town (LF, 32). This was the ordinariness of dining used as a political ruse and for us serves a reminder that the king learnt much of his politics in his early encounters. It had been during the conflicts of his nobles in 1223 that James first understood the great difficulty of victory when a castle could not be starved of food and drink, as was the case at Montcada (LF, 21).

But more pertinent to the present discussion it had been dining which had played an important part in the initial stages of the conquest of Majorca and, to a more limited extent, Valencia. In the case of Majorca, it was a networking dinner which played a significant part in the ritual processes leading to war. At Tarragona, in November, 1228, the king and the nobles were invited to dine at the house of the merchant Pere Martell and also at that time master of the galleys. James indicates that while they were all eating he brought up the subject of Majorca 'and we asked what land was Majorca and how great its kingdom' (LF, 47; Salvat, 26-8, 44). This was a not especially subtle way of bringing the conversation to the king's prearranged purpose. The island of Majorca and its capture were a long-term

goal of the comital dynasty, had been on the agenda at points during the previous century, and on the king's mind when he was still bringing the war in Urgell to a close in 1227 (Doxey; Soldevila, 298-300). Pere Martell then gives a detailed account of the lie of the land, and the nobles, when James has finished eating, suggest to the king its possible conquest. James then congratulates them on an idea which he leaves little doubt was his own (LF, 47). This was recruitment dining, which was part of a practice which stretched back certainly to the Homeric heroes and as far afield as the Incas (Hayden, 300-12). At Pere Martell's feast, the nobles and the merchants demonstrate that they will bond together to undertake the king's enterprise. And it is right there and then, at Pere Martell's house, that James agreed and planned to celebrate the *Cort* at Barcelona where they would all seal the contract for Majorca's conquest (LF, 47).

The initial stages of the conquest of Valencia are notoriously confused in the king's account (Ubieto Arteta; López Elum, 21-61; Guichard, 531-68). But at some point early on, probably in early 1232, at the time when James was making his decisions about how his conquest should proceed, Pedro Fernández de Azagra invited James to hunt boar and dine with him in the village of Gea de Albarracín (LF, 131). This time it was the noble rather than the king who was initially in control of the situation. After James had finished eating, a messenger arrived from Teruel to say that the frontier town of Ares had been taken and that the king should go there. Another of the Aragonese nobles, Atorella, then argues that it is through the taking of Ares that the king should proceed to the conquest of Valencia (LF, 132-3). This was almost certainly as stage-managed as Pere Martell's feast, though this time it is the king who is being manipulated. The reasons are less clear. Possibly the plan was that James should proceed to the conquest from Ares rather than Morella, which Blasco de Alagón had taken (Arroyo, 71-99; García Edo), and that the Aragonese nobles would have a greater influence in the conquest through holding Morella. If that was indeed the plan, then it failed since James insisted on rejecting their advice and gaining control of Morella first (LF, 133-7).

The area in which dinner and diplomacy mattered the most was certainly in James's relations with Muslims. James's attitude towards the Muslims as portrayed in the *Deeds* is complicated. At times, the king admired them in war: 'These Saracens know their weapons and are very skilful'; 'The Moors could defend a castle as well as any men in the world.' (LF, 155, 430) With negotiated surrenders, as at Peñíscola in 1233, James, 'conceded to them the use of their law and those liberties they had been accustomed to enjoy in the time of the Saracens.' (LF, 184) When Christians harried Muslims departing a town in accordance with treaties, as at Valencia in 1238, James had the Christians in question executed (LF, 283). Generally, James was angered when his knights broke his promises to the Muslims and set out to attack them, as with Pedro Ahones in 1226 and Guillem d'Aguiló in 1239 (LF, 25, 306). Yet where no agreements existed between Christians and Muslims, James was ruthless in his conduct of war. The king's stated aim for attacking the Muslims of Majorca was 'to convert them or destroy them' (LF, 56). At the siege of Cullera, James planned to position the *fenevòls*, so that if a stone missed the castle it would strike where the women and children had taken refuge (LF, 194). At Murcia, the king reneged on his promise to allow the Muslims to keep their main mosque, thinking it unfitting 'that from there "Alàlosabba" should be cried near to my head when I am sleeping' (LF, 445). While economic reality meant that James tended to believe that the Muslims generally, as those at the siege of the tower of Musneros, 'were worth more alive

than dead', he would advise his son, Prince Peter, 'that he should expel all the Moors from the kingdom of Valencia as they were all traitors and they had proved it to us many times for though we had done good to them they always looked to do us harm and to trick us if they could.' (LF, 203, 564)

Chivalric ideals, cynicism and pragmatism likewise played their part where negotiations concerned dining. In early 1238, two important dignitaries of Almenara indicated to James that the castle was prepared to surrender (LF, 243). This was important for James because once Almenara had surrendered then it would be likely that other castles around it on the path to Valencia would follow suit. Both of the dignitaries asked for land both for themselves and their families, as well 200 cows and a 1000 sheep and goats and gifts of scarlet cloth for them and their relatives to wear. James was keen to fall in with this plan and while the negotiations were going on, in full view of the castle his falcons captured a crane 'just as we would wish it to be captured, up high and cleanly'. James and his men took the crane from the falcons (who were fed chicken meat) and sent the live crane to the two men with whom the agreement had been made. James commented that he knew their custom (of not eating carrion) and that they would not wish it dead. According to the king's own account, this awareness and acknowledgement that the Muslims would eat the crane, which is halal, but would want to kill it in halal fashion (pronouncing the basmallah while cutting its throat), delighted the Muslims with whom he had been negotiating who then whispered to his messenger, 'Tell the king to be of good heart, since what he desires of Almenara, he will soon see.' After James brought a portion of the gifts he had promised them, the Muslims of the town surrendered and the Qā'id and his small band of men, who had been excluded from the initial negotiations, did so soon after (LF 243-7; Burns 1973, 171; Freidenreich, 132-45).

As James had planned the taking of Almenara, other castles of the region decided that it was time to negotiate a surrender. This was immediately the case for Uixó, Nules and Castro (LF, 249). Although in one sense James treated them all in the same way by having the best and most powerful of the sheikhs of each *aljama* come to draw up treaties with him, in other respects they were treated a little differently. At Castro, he gave the five sheikhs who negotiated a quantity of sheep and goats, robed them and gave two mounts. James then recognized their laws and liberties and gave them 5 mounted squires and ten footmen to protect them (LF, 249). But events at Uixó were of greater relevance here. Similar to what had happened at Almenara, James kept back two live sheep and five chickens so that the Muslims could dine there with him. On this occasion, James indicated that he did not wish to talk with them until everybody had dined, 'so that we would be happier from having eaten and from the wine we had drunk' (LF, 250). This then appears to be a recognition of religious strictures, as at Almenara, but combined with a consciousness of the political usefulness of local social custom (the drinking of wine) which conflicted with them. Here again, the king follows up with the promise of gifts of 1500 sheep and goats and 60 cows and robes for 30 people, and 3 rouncies, before drawing up the charters (LF, 250). Then James went to Nules. On this occasion he does not indicate he showed regard for religious custom at all: 'We took our dinner with us, and the Saracens ate with us, as we did not wish to speak with them until they were warmed up by food and wine'. Again he drew up the treaties, giving them 1000 sheep and goats, 50 cows, robes for 20 people and two horses. (LF, 252).

The king wishes to make clear that dining, along with gift-giving, plays a vital role in gaining his political ends. This was also clearly the case in the capture of Valencia itself. James, as one would expect, spends a great amount of time explaining how Valencia is taken. It was vital for the king that the city was taken through negotiation and that those negotiations were on his terms and negotiated by him. In essence, the final stage of the struggle to gain Valencia was as much against the Aragonese nobles as it was against the Muslims. If James could not negotiate surrender terms, then this would give the nobles the opportunity to sack the city, diminish monarchic authority and allow them a far greater say in the city's development in the long-term (Guichard, 536).

Valencia had failed to secure the harvest and James's own besieging army was remarkably well-provisioned. When Zayyān realized that he was unlikely to be able to hold out much longer he sent his nephew the Rais Abū l'Hamlāt to conduct negotiations with James, negotiations which James wished to have conducted as secretly as possible. The initial encounter between James and Abū l'Hamlāt were very cordial and James invited him to eat. But the Rais indicated that Zayyān had forbidden him to eat outside the town (LF, 274). The two men were using the matter of eating together to establish where they were in the process of the surrender negotiations. Abū l'Hamlāt then says to James that even though he cannot accept, he considered himself very fortunate to be invited and honoured by the king. James then tries his second gambit. If the Rais would not eat there, then James would send food to the town for him. Abū l'Hamlāt declines again, thanking the king but saying he could not accept, 'but another occasion would come when he could receive it better than he could now' (LF, 274). At that point James orders everybody out of the room (except the interpreter, of course) so that the two of them can speak alone. The quite lengthy negotiations between the two men were then underway (with Queen Yolanda joining them later on) which concluded with James suggesting the surrender of the town with the Muslims being allowed to depart under his protection. Abū l'Hamlāt then indicated that he would have to consult before offering a response which James accepted but before he left James again invited him to eat and the Rais again declined the offer and returned to the town (LF, 277).

Abū l'Hamlāt returned three days later with Zayyān's decision, which was to agree to the surrender of the city on the terms which James had suggested. Although James treats him with great respect, he does not say that he invited the *Rais* to eat. On this occasion James appears to indicate that he ate and drank and slept after the negotiations were completed (the use of the royal plural slightly complicates things here but it appears Abū l'Hamlāt has departed) (LF, 281). Perhaps at this stage it no longer mattered or perhaps James does not mention it because he has already laboured the point on how negotiations are best conducted. For the king to have initially failed to offer food would probably have indicated hostility and a lack of respect for the Rais's status, which would have harmed the talks. For Abū l'Hamlāt to have accepted, especially with the people of the town half-starving, would have been impolitic and would have established a social bond which would have been difficult to break. But the slight indication from Abū l'Hamlāt that there could be a point when he would accept such an invitation gave James the indication that he needed to get the talks started. Those talks would give James personal control over the conquest.

There are parallels to be drawn with the siege of Murcia in 1265-66, which James undertook on behalf of Alfonso X of Castile, after the Muslims revolt (Torres Fontes; Garrido). There negotiations were begun when James had the governor, Abū Bakr and one

other Muslim dignitary escorted to his camp. James made a special effort for Abū Bakr and draped his lodgings with cloths and prepared fine couches. And then James ordered live fowl, sheep and goats to be prepared, so that when they arrived these might be slaughtered (LF, 436). It seems here the intention was to have the Christians slaughter the animals in the Muslims' presence. The negotiations again were conducted in private by the king himself, who offered to preserve the lives of the Muslims of Murcia and to uphold the initial charters which they had agreed with Alfonso. They responded that they could not agree without consulting with those of the town. While these decisions were taking place, the goats and chickens were slaughtered but Abū Bakr and his companion indicated that they did not want to eat there. James then indicated that he would have new cooking pots brought to them in which they could cook the meat themselves (taking away all danger of contamination) and that they could eat there. They pleaded that the king would let them go because the minds of those in the town might misgive but agreed that they would dine with him there on another day (LF, 438).

There was the an almost liturgical precision in the way in which the king described the conduct of these different negotiations. Three days later Abū Bakr and the other Muslim (whose name James could not remember) returned to James under safe-conduct and with some sort of retinue. The first thing James mentions about this next stage of negotiation is that he had a meal prepared for them with goats and chickens, and that on arrival 'they immediately set about preparing the meal for their company' (LF, 439) This established a bond between the king and the Muslim negotiators, and those on whose behalf they were negotiating, but it also implicitly excluded the Granadan commander who was in control of the fortress on behalf of Ibn al-Aḥmar. Dinner therefore acts both to include and exclude (Hayden, 326; Freidenriech, 174). At this stage, the Murcian Muslims, according to the king's own account, were mainly preoccupied that they would be able to preserve their religion and their mosques, something to which James agreed, while on this occasion promising not to ravage the lands around Murcia (LF, 440). Given James's careful efforts in showing his respect for religious customs during the negotiations, then the Muslim negotiators may have felt reasonably confident that the king would indeed abide by the agreements which he had made when he entered the city. That was to be very far from the case (LF, 445-7; Torres Fontes, 164-6).

This should leave us in little doubt that while James was in part influenced in his actions by chivalric ideals, and may have wished to portray himself as a benevolent opponent, the major driving force behind his actions was the desire to do what he needed to do to get what he needed to have. In his *Deeds*, James indicated to his sons and successors the importance of dining in the conduct of diplomacy. For current purposes the extent to which James's narrative is an accurate reflection of what happened is in large measure immaterial. This is how James thought it should be done. However much he liked to depict himself as the swashbuckling soldier, he was well aware that his success relied upon his careful negotiating skills. Dinner could be used for recruitment and planning on the Christian side. But it was also used to gauge the point at which negotiations had reached with the Muslims, demonstrate the king's regard for Muslim religious precepts, establish cordial social relations which would be hard to break, and exclude those who were not invited to the feast and divide them from those who were. It was thus a useful weapon in the diplomatic armoury of a ruler who early on recognized that 'cleverness is worth more than force.' (LF, 43).

**Obres citades**

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