

Ramon Muntaner

Constantly conditioned by the wartime conflicts the Crown of Aragon was involved in during the last third of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth, by his constant travels around the Mediterranean, and by his participation in various levels of state administration, the hazardous and agitated life of Ramon Muntaner (1265-1336) decisively dictated that literature was more of a secondary and occasional activity among his principle pursuits. Despite this, thanks to his writings, Muntaner is remembered as a historical personage and succeeded in taking his place among the most genuine and original medieval Catalan writers.

In fact, Muntaner did not write his first work until 1322 (already in full maturity): it is a poem of epic character with 240 lines, titled *Sermó* (Sermon), the aim of which was to encourage King James II of Aragon (1291-1327) in his campaign of conquest of the island of Sardinia, which Pope Boniface VIII had conceded to the Aragonese in exchange for their renunciation of rights to Sicily. Later, Muntaner decided to insert the *Sermó* in his *Crònica* (Chronicle) and in this way the poem became chapter 272 of the book.

Muntaner began to write the *Crònica* in 1325, at his estate of Xilvella, some sixteen years after leaving the Almogavars, and probably finished some three years later, in 1328. The work begins with a customary cliché of medieval literature: the fake commission. The author pretends that in his dreams a higher petition has commissioned him to leave a written testimony of the extraordinary life he has had the fortune to experience firsthand, and to record the great achievements of the Catalan-Aragonese monarchs he has known (chapter 1): James I (chapters 2 to 28), Peter the Great (chapters 29 to 150), Alfonso the Frank (chapters 151-174), James II (chapters 175 to 292), and Alfonso the Benign (chapters 293-298), including the royal branches of Majorca (James II of Majorca, Sancho I, the infante Fernando, James III of Majorca) and Sicily (Frederick III). In the end, it narrates the events connected to the Crown of Aragon from 1265 until the celebrations for the coronation of Alfonso the Benign in 1328, with which the book concludes. The thematic nucleus of the historic narrative is constituted, even so, by two intimately related main strands: that of the war of the Catalans and Sicilians against the Angevines and the later war in Catalan territory against the King of France, during the reign of Peter III the Great (1276-1285), and that of Muntaner's adventures in the company of Almogavars in the east, during the reign of James II of Aragon (chapters 194-244).

Muntaner's *Crònica* is presented as an autobiography (in which the writer from Peralada takes on the role of counselor and political-military strategist) and, at the same time, as an historic memoir of the past of his kings (in order to justify the politics of the Crown of Aragon, the glorious past of the kingdom, and the even better future that must arrive), in which Muntaner appears as a exemplary and proud subject. In this sense, the aim of Ramon Muntaner's *Crònica* is not precisely historic rigorosity nor the exhaustive and objective reconstruction of events, but the description of great

individual acts (those of the great personages such as James I, Peter the Great, or Roger de Flor, among others) and collective acts (such as the Almogavar expedition in which he was one of the main participants) that justify and aggrandize the political actions of the Crown of Aragon. Muntaner's point of view, then, is not that of a modern historian, but that of a faithful and unconditional subject, who makes choices and at certain moments becomes just one more of the story's characters. However, the value of Ramon Muntaner's *Crònica* as historical witness is unquestionable and, in fact, is the only western document about the expedition of the Almogavars in the Byzantine Empire. Thus, like James I's (1213-1276) *Llibre dels fets*, Muntaner's text is written in first person, either as a witness to or a direct participant in the action. At all times, the writer from Peralada intends to make the narrated events realistic and authentic and does not refrain, when necessary, from reflecting on some of the episodes he has experienced, on certain aspects of his society, or on the marvels that caught his attention during his travels.

As for its style, Muntaner's *Crònica* is characterized by the use of a vibrant and popular language, and by an evident linguistic consciousness. Its prose is quite simple and not too rhetorical, although effective. The work had a great impact and was disseminated widely during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and was employed, for example, in various passages of Joanot Martorell's *Tirant lo Blanc*. It was published in the sixteenth century in a moment of great historiographic revival, and again caught the attention of the romantic literati in the nineteenth century, fascinated by the exaltation of the great act and the wanderings of the Almogavars.

Translated by Robin Vogelzang