Urban warfare in 15th-century Castile

Guerra urbana en el siglo XV castellano

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Abstract

Urban warfare evokes unequivocally contemporary images. However, the Middle Ages frequently witnessed combats inside cities. These confrontations usually arose in two contexts: factional struggles to achieve local power, and street fighting derived from an enemy army entering the city after a successful assault. The aim of this paper is to analyse urban warfare in 15th-century Castile, examining its tactics and common characteristics.

Keywords

Urban Warfare, Castile, 15th century, Tactics.

Resumen

El combate urbano remite a unos referentes inequívocamente contemporáneos. Sin embargo, la Edad Media también fue escenario de frecuentes combates en el interior de las ciudades. Estos enfrentamientos solían responder a dos realidades: la lucha entre bandos locales enfrentados por el poder y el combate callejero que podía suceder a la expugnación de la muralla por un ejército atacante.

El presente artículo pretende definir las formas que adoptó el combate urbano en los enfrentamientos que tuvieron este escenario en la Castilla del siglo XV, estableciendo sus pautas e intentando discernir las características comunes de esta forma de enfrentamiento.

Palabras clave

Guerra urbana, Castilla, siglo XV, Táctica.

The idea of 'urban warfare' evokes the Battle of Stalingrad, the Fall of Berlin, Huê´ or more recent examples, such as Fallujah. However, Medieval war also took place in urban settings. This kind of fighting was not very far from the modern definition, although it was adapted to the military tactics and weaponry of the time. Medievalists have traditionally neglected such engagements, maybe due to its patently modern connotations or because they have considered them as a part of siege warfare, without discussing their own specificities[1]. However, once the walls had been stormed, the fight inside the city had its own patterns and dynamics. In that regard, it is quite well known how medieval cities were sieged, but what happened once the attacking army crossed the walls of the besieged city is usually omitted. Frequently, chroniclers were merely interested in indicating that a city had been entered, disregarding any further street fighting, perhaps because the outcome had already been decided. Nevertheless, Castilian chronicles do make exceptions on occasion, providing interesting details on the practice of street fighting and shedding some light on what urban warfare was like. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse the tactics employed in these particular operations, using for that purpose chronicle evidence. The study will focus on two distinct conflict scenarios: factional struggles and when a city had been entered by an enemy army[2].

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1   This was not the case in the Classical World. See LEE, "Guerra urbana en el mundo griego clásico". Only very recently have medievalists started working on this particular issue. See: RODRÍGUEZ CASILLAS, *A fuego e sangre*, pp. 171-8; RODRÍGUEZ CASILLAS, "Corrió la sangre por las calles"; MARTÍN, "El combate urbano en la Baja Edad Media"; ETXEBERRIA, "La ciudad medieval como campo de batalla". Additionally, some historians had dealt with the practice of violence during factional struggles inside Castilian cities, although not systematically. Nevertheless, recent studies published on political violence in Late Medieval Castilian cities have started to include technical, practical and tactical aspects among the subjects of analysis. See JARA, "El conflicto en la ciudad", particularly pages 97-103.

2   A PhD thesis recently presented by Carlos Rodríguez Casillas has proposed a categorization for Late Medieval urban warfare in Extremadura: when an occupation army

1. Fighting between two local factions

Street fighting was often caused by social disturbance that led to sudden riots. In these cases, there was no tactical dimension as fighting was usually disorganised, thereby hardly more than a fierce brawl that could barely be called warfare[3]. However, when tumults could not be halted promptly, they tended to escalate and developed into a protracted conflict between local factions[4]. That was the case of Toledo in 1467. What started as a somehow planned fight between *conversos* and *cristianos viejos* –new and old Christians– continued into the following day, after both factions had made further preparations and planned their tactics[5].

The affirmations above can be extended to the factional struggles within Castilian cities. One of the most significant and well documented examples is to be found in Bilbao. In 1446, a fight between two local lineages –the families of Zurbarán and Leguizamón– in the main square of Bilbao began attracting more and more participants and ended up turning into a full-size skirmish. However, in Bilbao the tumults never made the qualitative leap to proper urban combat, since there was a tacit agreement between the factions according to which, when hostilities escalated, each side summoned their allies and met outside the town walls, where real pitched engagements took place[6]. It is evident that this was not the common practice throughout the Crown of Castile. In Valladolid, for example, the *Crónica de Juan II* states that in 1426 the local factions constantly fought in the streets, being helped by men-at-arms from outside the town. The continuous low intensity violence escalated

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tries to control the city; when two armies seek an armed clash inside the town, without necessarily aspiring to control the position; when local factions fight each other; and popular uprisings. RODRÍGUEZ CASILLAS, *La guerra en el marco de la Extremadura del período Trastámara (1369-1504)*, p. 335.

3   One example, slightly outside the chronological limits proposed by this paper, occurred in 1374, when a brawl began among the troops that Count Sancho was mustering in Burgos. The conflict did not spread, albeit the count himself was killed when trying to stop the fighting. LÓPEZ DE AYALA, *Crónicas*, p. 475.

4   I have eliminated the distinction between orchestrated riots and faction-fighting in the same city, because their tactical performance is virtually the same.

5   MARTÍN, *Historia de la ciudad de Toledo,* pp. 1040-5.

6   In the private war that confronted the lineages of Zurbaran and Leguizamón between late 1445 and probably early 1447, there were three intra-urban skirmishes, while eight minor pitched engagements took place just outside the city walls. ETXEBERRIA, "Guerras privadas y linajes urbanos"; AGUIRRE, *Las dos primeras crónicas de Vizcaya,* pp. 157-60, 164-6; GARCÍA DE SALAZAR, *Libro de las buenas andanças e fortunas,* pp. 209-13.

due to the arrival of those external reinforcements, which led to the conflict taking a qualitative leap into actual urban warfare[7]. In the same way in Seville, in 1471, a street brawl between the men of the marquis of Cádiz and the duke of Medina Sidonia escalated into a three-day battle, where each side controlled a certain streets and neighbourhoods[8]. This sort of conflict, however, was not necessarily triggered by either escalating violence or spontaneous fights. In Cuenca in 1447, the combat was clearly premeditated, as both sides –Lope de Barrientos, bishop of Cuenca and Diego Hurtado de Mendoza– prepared for the fight and adopted well-defined tactics[9].

Whatever the cause, it is possible to appreciate some tactical forethought during these clashes, for instance with the occupation of the main access points to the city. In Toledo, as the fight spread, the *conversos* took over the gates and bridges leading into the city, difficulting the arrival of any enemy reinforcements[10]. Nevertheless, the most common tactic was the occupation of churches, which conferred considerable tactical advantages, because they were sturdy buildings easily turned into defendable positions. Church towers often became points of observation, as well as a substantial vantage point for crossbowmen and *espingarderos* –handgunners-. In Seville, the men of the marquis were being harassed by the duke's men shooting from church of San Marcos. Their solution was to set fire to the temple doors, causing a conflagration that upset the local population, putting them against the marquis, who had to leave the city[11].

Together with the occupation of strongpoints, street fighting had a very important role to play. Barricades and rooftop shooters were deployed across the place, which made moving through narrow streets a dangerous business. To counter this, holes were drilled through house walls in an attempt to advance under cover and flank the enemy's de-

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7   GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II de Castilla", pp. 425-30.

8   VALERA, *Memorial de Diversas Hazañas*, pp. 192-5.; *Crónica Anónima de Enrique IV de Castilla 1454-1474*, pp. 347-9; *Historia de los hechos del Marqués de Cádiz*, pp. 175-7; PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 36-8. For the urban combat developed in Seville, I refer to Manuel Martín Vera's work: MARTÍN, "El combate urbano en la Baja Edad Media", pp. 53-77.

9   CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero de Juan II*, pp. 482-7.

10 Antonio, MARTÍN, *Historia de la ciudad…*, pp. 1040-5.

11 *Historia de los hechos*, pp. 175-7; Alonso de PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, p. 38; MARTÍN, "El combate urbano", pp. 71-2.

fensive positions, even attacking them from the rear, just like in modern urban engagements[12]. This happened in Seville, where the chronicler Alonso de Palencia points out that 'bombards, *espingardas* and other war machines shoot their projectiles from above onto the streets while some people drill the walls and suddenly attack from behind'[13].

On other occasions simpler –and often less efficient– tactics were used. In Cuenca in 1447, the followers of the bishop fortified the streets leading up to the castle –where most of the men of Hurtado de Mendoza were holding up-, establishing barricades guarded by ment-at-ams and crossbowmen. The bishop's aim was to prevent the enemy, deployed both in the castle and some houses of the town square, from joining forces[14]. When the actual fight broke out, the men from the castle tried to set fire to two houses where the bishop's street barricades rested. This attempt to overcome enemy resistance with fire was unsuccessful, as the bishop managed to get there with fresh troops repelling the assault. The initial combat was followed by a six-day truce which both sides used to shore up their defences. The second attack would expectedly be more intense. This time, the men at the castle used gunpowder artillery, which affected defenses and barricades set up by the bishop, as well as houses. Lope de Barrientos, in turn, decided to further reinforce the barricades, presumably re-building them with stone rather than wood, so as to make them 'as sturdy as the city walls'. Once completed, the castle ceased their futile bombardment[15].

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12 In modern military terminology the tactic is called 'mouse-holing', used for advancing under cover through streets and therefore avoid enemy fire.

13 "Abroquelándose en los escudos, unos y otros combaten por conservar o por libertar los respectivos barrios; bombardas, espingardas y otras máquinas de guerra lanzan sus proyectiles desde lo alto sobre las bocacalles; horadan unos las paredes y se acometen repentinamente por la espalda". Alonso de PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 37-8.

14 The *Crónica del Halconero* mentions that the castle defenders gathered flammable materials to set fire to the city from the castle. In the chronicler's own words, they had 'cincuenta fachones de teda confacionados con algunas resinas, para poner fuego a la ciudad por parte del castillo' and 'un cesto lleno de gatos para los echar con fuego por la ciudad'. CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero*, p. 483.

15 During the construction of this fortified barricades, Lope de Barrientos protected the workers with stockades, which absorbed the impacts delivered by enemy projectiles. CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero*, pp. 482-7.

2. Fighting following an assault

A second type of urban combat observed in fifteenth-century Castile is the one that follows an assault. In those cases, it is necessary to distinguish between surprise assaults and expected assaults. When the assault did not come as a surprise, the defenders could prepare for this eventuality, for instance by laying out different defensive lines where they could retreat their forces if the first line was overcome, establishing a sort of tactical defence in depth. Generally, the second line of defence was the city's castle itself. That happened during the Castilian successful assault on the walls of Antequera, in 1410, as the Muslim defenders ran to the *alcázar* as soon as the Christians had overcome the enemy resistance at the walls[16]. Another example is to be found during the Castilian assault on the Navarrese town of San Vicente de la Sonsierra, in 1429. When the walls had been taken and the Castilian forces had entered the town, the defenders positioned themselves in the castle, on a hill overlooking the town[17]. When the city had two walled areas, the inner circuit could work as a second defensive line. That was the case of Atienza, in 1446. The royal army, led by the king Juan II and his constable Álvaro de Luna, laid siege to the town. After they had successfully taken the walled *arrabal* (suburb), the defenders were ready again to defend the inner wall[18].

In surprise assaults, the assailing party usually set up a vanguard that climbed the walls with stealth, killing the sentries and opening the gates for the main attacking force. The defenders could be therefore disorganised, and eventually surrender almost without a fight. That was the case in Medina del Campo in 1441, where the king Juan II of Castile and the constable Álvaro de Luna were positioned with their army. Whether because of treachery or negligence, the defenders' sentries did not see the attack of the troops of Juan II of Navarre that overcame the walls and entered the town. Surprised, both Juan II of Castile and Álvaro de Luna attempted to organize a last-minute defense. For that purpose, the Castilian king deployed his troops at the main square of San Antolín, with the constable fighting along the streets. In the end, after being overwhelmed by the Navarrese king, the Castilian monarch surrendered, and the constable was forced into flight[19].

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16 *Crónica del rey Juan II de Castilla. Minoría y primeros años de reinado*, p. 472
17 GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II de Castilla", vol. C, p. 165-6.
18 *Crónica de don Álvaro de Luna*, p. 191-7.
19 CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero*, pp. 417-9; "Crónica de Juan II", vol. II, p. 586; *Crónica de don Álvaro de Luna*, p. 153.

Nonetheless, on most occasions some degree of organised resistance could be met throughout the stormed town's streets. The defenders would try to launch counter-attacks aimed at recovering lost strategic points in order to regain the control of the town while stopping the enemy from receiving reinforcements. These points could be either the city gates or wall towers. In 1430, the Castilians entered the Navarrese town of Laguardia by surprise, climbing the walls at night, opening the gates, and taking control of a strongly fortified church close to one of the town's gates. When the alarm sounded, the defenders tried in vain to take control of the city gate in order to stop more Castilians from entering[20]. The defenders could also lay out barricades –as it also happened during factional struggles between local lineages– to use them as tactical strongpoints from where attacks could be launched and street fight could be organised and performed. An example of this practice is attested in a letter written by Rodrigo Manrique to Juan II, describing the conquest of the Granadan town of Huéscar in 1434. The surprised Muslim defenders managed to set up a line of barricades, forcing the Christians to house-by-house combat, drilling holes through house walls to advance under cover and thereby avoiding the streets. In addition, the Muslims used the height of the *alcázar* (castle) and the wall towers to harass the attackers. Controlling those towers proved to be vital, especially when the Muslim reinforcements coming from Baza appeared. As the town gates were under Christian control, the newly arrived Muslims put ladders to climb the wall sections still under Granadan control and therefore entered the town. In the end, the position was kept in Christian hands thanks to the various Castilian counterattacks and the eventual arrival of the relief army led by the future count of Alba, which came in support of Manrique[21].

The improvised defence based on the setting up of barricades and street fighting could be very effective, at least until the assailants could come up with the right countermeasure. In 1482, during the operation that started the War of Granada (1482-1492), the Castilians took the *alcázar* of the Granadan town of Alhama by night escalade. The surprise attack prompted the Muslim defenders to set up barricades defended by crossbowmen and *espingarderos* in the streets around the castle, blocking the manoeuvres of the Christians and cornering them inside

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20 GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 182-5.
21 CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero*, pp. 164-6; Letter: 166-74.

the fortification. The fortress could only be left using the castle gate that led to the streets, which were continuously harassed by Muslim shooters deployed both at the barricades and on the rooftops. Some Castilian knights and squires tried to overcome this formidable encirclement by launching an assault from the gates of the *alcázar*, but they soon found their death in those narrow streets at the hands of Muslims bolts and bullets. In that desperate situation, the Castilian tactical choice was to perform simultaneous attacks, charging at the same time from the castle gate, the rooftops, the castle wall which led from the fortress to the city and from a hole that Castilians bored at the fortress wall that led to the streets. The Muslims were thus forced into flight, seeking refuge in the mosque. When the Christians set fire to the doors of the mosque, the defenders finally surrendered, the town passed to Castilian hands and the War of Granada started[22].

Occasionally defenders were able to recover the initiative, thereby turning from static defenders into attackers. This happened at Atienza. Álvaro de Luna's troops were repeatedly attacked in order to thwart their attempt to take control of strategic positions of the *arrabal*, which would have enabled an easier assault to the town walls. Most of the fighting, in fact, took place around the church which the constable intended to turn into a strong place with stockades and barricades[23]. A more innovative counterattack took place in Laguardia, where the besieged Navarrese defenders cornered at the town's castle took advantage of a truce to excavate a mine from the fortress itself onto the main square, where the Castilian besiegers where deployed. The Navarrese established a predetermined time for a simultaneous sally from both the castle and the mine, in order to take back the gates and the towers. Nevertheless, the manoeuvre was a failure, as Castilians manage to repel the attacks and even organise a counter-attack. In the end, the Navarrese had to abandon the position and left the town for the Castilians[24]. Despite the recent example of Laguardia, having the initiative in street fighting had some advantages, more so if the defenders had a fortified position that dominated the town. This disposition enabled the defenders to control enemy movement, and reveal vulnerabilities that could be attacked. At San Vicente de la Sonsierra, the victorious Castilians, once they had tak-

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22 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, pp. 5-13.

23 *Crónica de don Álvaro de Luna,* pp. 190-7

24 GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 211-3.

en the walls, focused on the pillaging of the town in complete disorder. The Navarrese garrison that was cooped up in the castle saw a window of opportunity and attacked one of the Castilians parties, led by Gómez González de Butrón. Butrón's father, Gonzalo Gómez de Butrón –a prominent Basque *hidalgo*-, tried to rescue his son, but the attempt ended with the father dead and the son being captured by the men from the garrison. When additional Castilian reinforcements arrived to the place, the Navarrese ran back to the safety of the keep. That precise exploit led the Navarrese to victory as the assailant party had to leave the siege[25].

Whatever the case, after the assault and the street fight, if the attackers emerged victorious, they still could be confronted with a final obstacle in the city's castle. Laying siege to urban fortifications was the natural evolution of street fights derived from assaults, regardless of whether they were by surprise or not. For example, the urban combats of Antequera in 1410 and Laguardia in 1430 had the siege of their castles as a culmination[26]. Chronicles unfortunately provide sparse details regarding how these intra-urban sieges were carried out. This prompts me to extrapolate some examples from the War of the Castilian Succession (1475-1479), a civil strife for the throne that confronted the supporters of Isabel the Catholic –and his husband Fernando– and those of Juana "la Beltraneja", the latter receiving Portuguese military support[27]. This conflict is garnished with far greater detail regarding this issue due to the importance that urban combat in the form of siege of intra-urban fortifications had in the outcome of the conflict[28].

In this final phase of medieval urban combat, fighting was guided by patterns that respond to the dynamics of what we would call positional warfare. Both sides focused on securing key strategic buildings which ensured control of the town. These essential constructions were normally easily defendable solid stone structures, of which the *alcázar* was the most important[29]. The castle was not only the best fortified place within the city walls, but also the logical last place of defence, the ultimate bas-

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25 GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 165-6

26 *Crónica del rey Juan II*, p. 472; GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 211-3.

27 See SUÁREZ, *Los Reyes Católicos. La conquista del Trono*.

28 A more extensive analysis of urban warfare during the War of the Castilian Succession can be found in ETXEBERRIA, "La ciudad medieval", pp. 277-88.

29 Rodríguez Casillas has usefully pointed out the importance of these buildings, with abundant examples from wars and violence in which they had become key strongholds. RODRÍGUEZ CASILLAS, *A fuego e sangre*, pp. 171-8.

tion where the defenders would retire after the rest of the positions had fallen. For that reason, during the War of the Castilian Succession, urban combat at Burgos, Zamora, Madrid, Uclés, Toro or Castronuño, among many other cities and towns, involved the siege of their respective castles.

For the defenders, relying only on the castle's resistance capabilities was nothing but a vain hope. There was an evident necessity to hold additional positions surrounding the fortress, in order to prevent the attackers to effectively lay siege to the *alcázar*. For that reason, once the enemy host had entered the city, resistance gravitated around strong points within the walls –usually churches or, less often, houses–. Churches were, in fact, excellent defensive positions because of their sheer masonry. Those that were near the fortresses were preferred options, for they could hinder the siege of the castle as both buildings could support each other. In 1475, during the Isabellan attempt to recover the city's castle of Burgos from Juana's supporters, the chapel of Santa María la Blanca proved to be vital to both sides. The *Crónica Incompleta de los Reyes Católicos* describes how the chapel was very strong and 'fully supplied, had good men and a large moat around' and 'prevented the siege positions to come closer to the fortress'. In other words: the temple and the castle were supporting each other, so taking Santa María la Blanca was necessary in order to reach the castle, as Fernando the Catholic failed attempt to take both positions at the same time proved[30].

The aforementioned example illustrates the effectiveness of a defense based on the combination and mutual support between the main fortress and lesser nearby defendable positions. There were occasions, however, when this support could be a double-edged sword. If one of these positions fell, it would promptly become a platform from where the assailants would launch new attacks to the main fortress with far greater danger, which is what ultimately happened in Burgos. Once the supporting chapel had been taken, the siege on the fortress became much easier, allowing the besiegers to perform mines and bombard the castle walls from closer range, which maximized the impact[31]. A similar situation happened in Zamora also in 1475, where the city was under

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30 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, tomo I, pp. 150-1; PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 229-30; *Crónica incompleta de los Reyes Católicos*, pp. 256-7.
31 VALERA, *Crónica de los Reyes Católicos*, p. 39; PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, p. 230.

Juana's supporters control and had a Portuguese garrison. Fernando the Catholic knew that the keeper of the fortified bridge leading to the main gate of the city would let him in, so he hurried to exploit the situation. Once the Isabellan assailants took over the gates, the defending Portuguese sought shelter in the fortress, the Cathedral and a house nearby. It seems that the choice was not arbitrary, as the house served to protect the temple, which, in turn, protected the castle. The attackers were systematic: they went first for the house until it was knocked down, which made the attack on the cathedral easier. Its last defenders held the tower until they fled to the castle –the last surviving Portuguese position– through a wicket[32]. Immediately, the temple was used by the Isabellan party to harass the fortress, deploying crossbowmen and *espingarderos* at the cathedral's tower[33].

Generally, defenders tended to systematically retreat to the next defensive position. This, as Rodríguez Casillas has pointed out, was an application of the 'obsidional reflex' to urban combat[34]. However, this strategy was far from static. Just like when a stronghold was being besieged, defending implied carrying out sallies aimed at improving their defensive position and wearing down the morale and resources of the besieger army. This is well exemplified at Burgos, or at the siege of Laguardia's castle in 1430, mentioned above[35].

So far, I have been focusing on defensive strategies, with little attention to the offensive ones; the tactics used by attackers to offset the 'obsidional reflex' of their opponents. The truth is that when defenders closed themselves into formidable defensive positions, attackers could do little else but to patiently lay them siege, using conventional mechanisms. If possible or necessary, advanced enemy positions could be assaulted, thereby attempting to reduce the strength of the defensive network and facilitate the siege of further positions.

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32 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo I, pp. 168-9; VALERA, *Crónica de los Reyes*, pp. 49-50; PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 248-9, 267-8. According to Fernando del Pulgar, the defenders sued for mercy, giving up the fight. PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo I, pp. 169-72.

33 PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 267-8.

34 RODRÍGUEZ CASILLAS, "Corrió la sangre", p. 47.

35 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo I, pp. 150-1, 165-6.

At Burgos, as mentioned before, there was an initial attempt to lay siege both to the church and the castle at the same time, but this proved inefficient. Hence, all efforts were placed on taking the chapel until it fell. In general, laying siege to an intra-urban castle could last an indeterminate amount of time, and besiegers often focused on the progressive erosion of enemy defences and isolating the defenders from food and water provisions. Often, this required extra-mural encirclements of fortresses and the establishment of siege positions within the city to ensure that defenders could not communicate with the outside and/or receive reinforcements. In the Isabellan sieges of Uclés (1476) and Castronuño's (1477) city castles –held by Portuguese and Juana's supporters-, barricades were set up between the fortress and the city itself[36]. Sometimes, however, more durable constructions were employed, as occurred at Zamora and at Madrid –the latter was under the control of the Juanist marquis of Villena and in 1476 was attacked by the duke of the Infantado. In both occasions actual walls were erected in the streets that led to the castles as a sort of contravallation. Regarding the fortification work made in Madrid, the chronicler Fernando del Pulgar states that the wall 'was so large and wide that the people in the fortress, if assisted by outside armies, could still not enter the town, or vice-versa, unless they went through the gates which the duke had garrisoned'[37].

3. Common characteristics of urban warfare in 15th-century Castile

The two categories described above contain some common features which help to present a more precise picture of the nature of urban warfare in 15th century Castile. The most evident characteristic is the limitations that a built and inhabited environment imposed on tactics. For one, houses constituted important barriers which often protected the flanks and thus reduced combat space. On the other hand, unlike pitched engagements, urban warfare was potentially three-dimensional, as dangers could come not only from the front but also from above and even from below, as the mentioned example of the mine in Laguardia exemplifies. Windows and rooftops provided excellent platforms for shooting and throwing objects to the enemy. In 1485, during the War of Granada,

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36 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo I, pp. 255-6, 298.

37 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo I, pp. 172-3, 229.

the Castilians performed a failed assault attempt to the town of Coín and the Muslim defenders withdrew until they had reached a square. Meanwhile, the Castilian attackers advanced under a rain of stones and tiles from the windows and rooftops[38].

These dangers made advancing under cover an indispensable pre-requisite for moving through streets, something which was illustrated in the combats at Seville and Huéscar. Commanders had another tactical toolkit at their disposal: fire. Flames burned everything in their path in cities, where most buildings were made of wood. They could be used to open routes through the city or to destroy enemy defensive positions, as shown by Hurtado de Mendoza's men's the failed attemp to burn down the houses in Cuenca located adjacent to Lope de Barrientos barricades. Fire was unavoidable when sieging urban fortifications, once the defenders had retreated to the castle. The first tactic used by the defending garrison was the burning of the houses adjacent to the fortress. This was done by the local Muslims during their retreat into the *alcázar* at Antequera, in 1410[39]. Another example can be found in Madrid, in 1476. The duke of the Infantado, after fighting at the gate of Guadalajara and entering the city, managed to force the marquis of Villena's men back to the *alcázar*, but 'the castellan [*alcaide*] set fire to all the houses near the fortress'[40]. In the aforementioned 1475 attack on Burgos a similar action took place. The defenders who held the castle made sallies to burn down several houses –the chronicler Fernando del Pulgar counted 300 burned houses– in the *calle de las Armas*, a street close to the access path of the strategic church of Santa María la Blanca[41].

Indeed, burning the houses and buildings located near fortresses was commonplace, primarily for three reasons: to destroy indefensible positions; to deny the assailant the possibility of cover; and because of the tactical need to create a clear shooting range for the defenders. If this destruction was not fulfilled in advance, the enemy could make use of the buildings to facilitate the approach, which happened in Atienza in 1446. There, the defenders only set fire to houses adjacent to the walls, but the rest of the suburb was left standing. Nevertheless, in this particu-

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38 PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo II, p. 158.

39 *Crónica del rey Juan II*, pp. 467-72.

40 VALERA, *Crónica de los Reyes*, p. 80.

41 PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 229-31; PULGAR, *Crónica de los Reyes*, tomo I, p. 150.

lar occasion, according to the chronicle of Álvaro de Luna, the defenders followed a plan. When the army of Juan II of Castile and Álvaro de Luna arrived they would comfortably settle in the emptied neighbourhood. The defensive plan was then to proceed to bombard the unsuspecting royal army with trebuchets set up at the hilltop, the highest part of the town. In a flagrant display of optimistic miscalculation, the master engineer had guaranteed that eight days of bombardment would level the suburb. The houses, however, stubbornly maintained their verticality, enabling the forces of Luna to approach the wall using the residences to maintain cover, while shooting to the defenders with darts shot from makeshift arrowslits drilled into the houses' walls[42].

Large-scale combats, such as those in the War of the Castilian Succession, often led to intra-urban sieges. Fighting did not resemble street-combat, and mainly revolved around the control of key strong points. Yet, actual manoeuvres and tactics employed when laying siege to urban fortifications were similar to those employed in almost every other intra-urban assault of the period, as the average objective was to control and secure a densely inhabited and constructed area. In that regard, churches were, by definition, architectural strongholds. Their stout masonry and tall towers provided vertical control and a vantage point over surrounding streets. Examples of this were the church of San Marcos in Seville and also the church of San Pedro at Cuenca, which Hurtado de Mendoza's castle garrison had attempted in vain to take using ladders[43]. Even when genuine street-fighting happened, combat revolved around barricades, which operated as a sort of temporary strong points. Therefore, it can be said that positional warfare was a common feature of urban combat in both of the categories presented.

The outcome of urban warfare was commonly affected by factors, such as the size of opposing forces and the arrival of reinforcements. This latter factor was closely conditioned by the control of the access to the city. Whoever held the gates could effectively prevent the enemy from receiving reinforcements while facilitating the arrival of allies. Such a constrained battlefield the medieval city was, that this could be the difference between victory and defeat[44].

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42 *Crónica de don Álvaro de Luna,* pp. 186-90.

43 CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero,* pp. 513-6; "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 662-3.

44 RODRÍGUEZ CASILLAS, "Corrió la sangre", pp. 40-1; ETXEBERRIA, "La ciudad medieval", p. 280.

Naturally, the presence of buildings entailed enormous coordination challenges, far beyond what could be found within an open battlefield. Narrow and sometimes labyrinthine medieval streets forced the constable Miguel Lucas de Iranzo Iranzo to divide his forces –which his own chronicle number at 3,300 men– between six streets during an urban combat at Jaén, in 1467[45]. The downside is that this partition made it difficult to assist the forces in other streets. I have already mentioned that at San Vicente de Sonsierra, once the defenders had retreated to the castle, they sallied upon one of the groups, returning behind the safety of the keep before the attackers could pounce on them in greater numbers[46].

This made the use of reserve forces vital, as the bishop Lope de Barrientos understood and applied in Cuenca's second urban combat, in 1449. He located thirty men in the main square for rapid deployment against wherever this was needed[47]. In addition to reserve units, given the propensity of urban warfare to splinter into small fronts, it was the subordinate command structure which carried most of the tactical brunt. During the second day of riots at Toledo, in 1467, a dyer led a group to drill a hole in a house wall, from which a bombard could be fired against the *conversos* that were attacking the cathedral[48]. This artisan did not hold a particularly respectable social position, but he did have initiative in a situation of chaos and movement. His idea was heard, and then carried out, dispersing the attacking *conversos*.

The characteristics of urban warfare described rendered it extraordinarily dangerous. According to the chroniclers Alonso de Palencia and Diego de Valera, the veteran knight Luis de Pernía always tried to avoid fighting inside cities, where 'even the most miserable coward could, with a crossbow or an *espingarda*, easily slay the greatest warrior'. Ironically, Pernía died during an urban combat at Carmona, in 1472, at the hands of a mere barber armed with an *espingarda*[49].

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45 *Hechos del Condestable Don Miguel Lucas de Iranzo,* pp. 330-3.
46 GARCÍA DE SANTA MARÍA, "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 165-6.
47 CARRILLO DE HUETE, *Crónica del Halconero,* pp. 513-6; "Crónica de Juan II", pp. 662-3.
48 MARTÍN, *Historia de la ciudad,* pp. 1040-5.
49 "E luego Luys de Pernía, como fuse cavallero muy esforçado, e quisiese a gran priesa socorrer a su valía, e como él fuese el primero que yba, hordenando su gente, fue herido de vn espingarda, de tal manera que de súpito murió. El qual en muchas batallas contra los moros, con poca gente, muchas vezes de gran muchedumbre se halló vençedor, con cuyo nonbre los enemigos algunas vezes se espantavan. El qual sienpre aborresçió las batallas dentro de lugares, e mucho contra su voluntad fue esta venida suya en Carmona. Así fué muerto este virtuoso y esforçado caballero, por la mano de

Although it is quite probable that the chroniclers endowed the death of the knight with a providentialist dimension, the example described proves how, in urban combat, even the most experienced warrior could die at the hands of a fresh recruit[50]. In this role, shooters were especially empowered, as urban morphology favoured greatly projectile weapons. The *espingardas*, even the artillery, saw their general lack of precision greatly compensated in urban warfare, where men-at-arms fought packed in a cramped space. Pernía was not the only victim to their fire: during the assault to Santa María la Blanca in Burgos, in 1475, two of Fernando the Catholics' most loyal knights were shot down by *espingarda* bullets which pierced their armour[51]. The mortality of this weapons, used in those narrow quarters , was also proved in the aforementioned example of Alhama in 1482, where gunfire caused significant casualties among the Castilian ranks. It was, after all, John France who claimed that 'street-fighting was just as costly in the Middle Ages as at Stalingrad'[52].

In conclusion, urban warfare was not altogether that different from standard medieval military praxis, because the key objective was spatial or territorial control. In the case of cities, this meant holding strong points like gates, churches or castles. Nonetheless, in 15th-century Castile, urban warfare did have its own peculiarities as tactics had to adapt to the narrow and deadly battlefields. Coordination was difficult and advancing under cover imperative. Likewise, barricades were laid out in the streets and advanced outposts were established, while house-to-house combat was usual. These specific features of modern urban warfare were there already in pre-industrial conflicts. As happens in the contemporary world, blood also ran through medieval streets, turning cities into battlefields.

un barbero mançebo, en el mes de abril del año del nasçimiento de Nuestro Redentor de mil e quatroçientos e setenta y dos años". PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 57-8; VALERA, *Memorial,* p. 211.

50 Malcolm Vale wrote that in the 15th-century, "the risk of death at the hands of a 'cowardly', plebeian crossbowman was merely augmented by that of death by gunfire". VALE, "New Techniques and Old Ideas", p. 64.

51 PALENCIA, *Crónica de Enrique IV*, tomo II, pp. 229-30.

52 FRANCE, *Western warfare in the age of crusaders*, p. 109.

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