In his *The Making of Europe* Robert Bartlett reflected in depth on the fact that “Between 950 and 1350 Latin Christendom roughly doubled in area and, while this religious expansion did not always involve either conquest or immigration, it often did.”¹ If this is clearly a characteristic of the formation of Europe in the Middle Ages, the Iberian Peninsula and its constituent kingdoms are a particularly suitable laboratory to analyse a process of expansion of similar extent but conducted over a remarkably short period of time. In July 1212 the Castilian armies led by King Alfonso VIII defeated the Almohads of the Caliph al-Nasir in the pitched battle of Las Navas, a victory that for the Christians effectively meant the opening of access to the territories of present-day Andalusia, which had been in Muslim hands for five centuries. In December 1248 the triumphant armies of Ferdinand III, grandson of Alfonso VIII, entered the emblematic Muslim city of Seville. In the course of barely 36 years, the territory of the kingdom of Castile had increased in size by nearly half; in fact, it had almost doubled if we take into account that in 1230 the king of Castile had inherited the kingdom of León on the death of his father Alfonso IX, as well as the Leónese conquests from the Muslims on the western border with Portugal.²

There is no doubt that the consequences of conquests had already been felt in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries. The exploitation of new areas took various forms, depending on the chronology, the type of grant by royal authority, and the pre-existing demographic and economic structure. After the conquest of Toledo by Alfonso VI in 1085 the basic problem facing the Castilian monarchs was occupying great tracts of land very close to the major Muslim cities; to these it was not easy to attract Christian settlers. The territorial gains became more and more concentrated in the hands of new beneficiaries, such as the Military Orders, particularly those of Santiago, Calatrava, and Alcántara, which had firmly established themselves on Spanish soil thanks to decisive

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² *Grosso modo*, the territory of Castile occupied about 162,000 km² of the surface of the Peninsula, and that of León, 109,000 km². Territory conquered between 1212 and 1248 amounted to about 80,000 km².
royal support, and which had devoted the greater part of their efforts to the conquest of Al-Andalus. This led to a model of settlement in which the inhabited areas were few and far between, with large areas of land given over to pasture, used by migratory flocks that came down from the northern kingdom in the winter months.  

The impact of the conquests was greater from the final decades of the twelfth century, when the momentum of conquest increased and was led almost exclusively by the Christian kings. This momentum, from 1212 onwards, put into Christian hands great areas capable of being settled, colonized and exploited economically. Since the conquest had been on the orders of the kings, the kings handed out the territories to their armies and subjects, occasionally allowing defeated Muslims to remain as cultivators in rural holdings once they had lost their lands. The beneficiaries of this great expansion were again the Military Orders, some of the most powerful noble houses, and the major frontier bishoprics, keen to incorporate new lands and rents into their dioceses. In addition, some municipal councils that had taken an active part – providing money and men, according to the regulations laid out in the fueros – received land in the territories won from Al-Andalus. A new system was then put into practice by the monarchs, and the so-called repartimientos, or distributions of land, became a more common and efficient way of translating Christian military achievements into the incorporation and organization of conquered territory. As will be illustrated with the case of Seville, the purpose was to encourage the massive settlement of colonists in the new territories – colonists coming in the main from the victorious kingdoms themselves – as well as to reward those who had shouldered the burden of the campaigns. The process involved a re-ordering of space which, as the term repartimiento implies, was distributed among a complex social group, whose members ranged from peasants to great lords. Various circumstances caused the distribution operations to multiply over the years, and their results were far from stable and definitely not final.  

The process of expansion in the transition from the twelfth to the thirteenth centuries was distinguished by the increasing power of the monarchy in the territorial organization and political construction of the Christian kingdoms of

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3 An excellent synthesis in Hilario Casado, “La economía de las Españas medievales (c. 1000–c. 1450),” in Francisco Comín et al. (eds.) Historia económica de España, siglos X–XX (Barcelona, 2002), pp.14–22.