Joan I to the Governor of Aragon: Rebuke and Threat of Suspension over the Fortià Confiscations

Document Summary

A royal letter from Joan I of Aragon to Sancho Martines de Biota, Governor of Aragon, dated 10 March 1387, from Barcelona. The king expresses anger and astonishment that the governor has not carried out a prior order to seize the properties and places of mossèn Pero de Fortià and his sister — almost certainly Sibilla de Fortià, the widow of Pere III — in Borja and Magallón. Joan rebukes the governor for treating the mandate as subject to his own judgment, insisting that only the execution, not the adjudication, was delegated to him. The letter threatens immediate suspension from office and total revocation of the governor's authority if compliance is not forthcoming, warning that the king will make an example of him. Issued under the secret seal; mandated through Pere de Benviure.

The document is a significant witness to the speed and intensity of the anti-Fortià reprisals in the early months of Joan I's reign, and to the resistance or foot-dragging that royal agents in Aragon offered to the crown's confiscation orders.

Reconciled Transcription

f23v:

El Rey

Governador. A cierto somos maravellados ende estamos con [?] indignacio contra vos porque no compliestes lo que vos hemos embiado mandar sobre la occupacion delos lugares de Borja et Magallon et otros bienes de mossen Pero de Fortian et de su hermana [?] la qual occupacion mandamos seer feyta razonablement et por dreyto del qual no hemos a vos la conscientia ni determinatio cometida mas la executio porque reputantes vos fuessedes dela inobediencia et menospreto que en esto cometestes vos dezimos et mandamos espressament et de cierta sciencia que luego vista la present sea cumplido el dito nuestro mandamiento

f24r:

et tornedes a nuestra mano los ditos lugares et bienes realment et de feyto executando las prouisions [?] que d'aquesto havedes como dito es. En otra manera agora por la hora vos suspendemos del officio dela governatio et vos tiramos integrament toda auctoridat et exercitio d'aquella et no es menos sed cierto que faremos de vos tal escarmiento que a los presentes [?] et a los otros sea terror et exemplo. Dada en Barchelona dius [?] nuestro siello secreto a .x. dias de Março del anyo M.CCC.LXXXVII. Rex Johannes.

Dirigitur Sancho Martines de Biota, Gubernatori Aragonia.

d[omi]n[u]s Rex ma[ndavit] m[ih]i P[etro] de Benviure. p.

English Translation

The King.

Governor.[1] We are certainly astonished, and we stand with indignation[2] against you, because you did not carry out what we sent to command you regarding the seizure of the places of Borja and Magallón[3] and other properties of mossèn Pero de Fortià[4] and of his sister,[5] which seizure we ordered to be done reasonably and by law — regarding which we entrusted to you neither the judgment nor the determination, but only the execution.[6] Because, considering that you would be [held guilty] of the disobedience and contempt that in this you committed, we tell you and command you expressly and with certain knowledge[7] that immediately upon sight of the present [letter], our said command be fulfilled

and that you restore to our hand[8] the said places and properties, really and in fact, executing the orders[9] that you have concerning this, as has been said. Otherwise,[10] forthwith we suspend you from the office of the governorship[11] and we strip from you entirely all authority and exercise thereof. And no less, be certain that we shall make of you such an example that to those present and to all others it shall be a terror and a warning. Given in Barcelona under our secret seal,[12] on the 10th day of March in the year of our Lord 1387. King Joan.

Directed to Sancho Martines de Biota,[13] Governor of Aragon.

The lord King commanded [this letter] to me, Pere de Benviure.[14]

Footnotes

Unresolved Ambiguities

1. **"con [?] indignacio" (f23v, line 1):** The word before "indignacio" remains paleographically uncertain. Three readings are defensible: "con indignacio" (= with indignation), "fort indignatos" (= very indignant), or "so indignatio" (= under indignation). None is fully satisfying grammatically or paleographically. The reconciled transcription adopts "con indignacio" as the least problematic option.
2. **"hermana" vs. "germana" (f23v, line 4):** Both forms are linguistically plausible — "hermana" is standard Aragonese, "germana" is Catalan. The scribe was working in Barcelona, so Catalan interference is possible, but the rest of the document is consistently Aragonese. "Hermana" is tentatively preferred.
3. **"prouisions" vs. "prissons" (f24r, line 2):** The object of "executando" could be either "provisions" (= orders/mandates) or "prissons" (= arrests/seizures). Both make sense contextually. "Provisions" is adopted because the letter's argument centers on the governor's failure to execute royal commands, but "prissons" would not be impossible if the original mandate included orders to arrest specific individuals.
4. **"dius" vs. "su" (f24r, line 7):** The preposition before "nuestro siello secreto" is difficult to read. "Dius" (= under, from Latin *deorsum/subtus*) is the standard Aragonese chancery formula; "su" (= under, from

Latin *sub*) is a possible variant. "Dius" is tentatively preferred on formulaic grounds.

5. **"a los presentes [?] et a los otros" (f24r, line 6):** The initial transcription read "a vos sera pena e a los otros"; the HTR read "a los presents et a los otros." The HTR's reading — which eliminates the distinct punishment for the governor ("a vos sera pena") and instead makes the entire clause about the exemplary function of the punishment — is adopted tentatively, but the passage remains uncertain.
6. **Identity of Pero de Fortià:** The abbreviated personal name is difficult. The HTR's "Pero" is paleographically more convincing than the initial reading "Bernat," but independent confirmation of which Fortià family member held properties in Borja and Magallón would resolve the question definitively.
7. **Identity of Sancho Martines de Biota:** The governor's name was poorly legible in the original. The HTR's reading is adopted in full but would benefit from prosopographical confirmation.

1. The addressee is identified in the direction at the foot of the letter as Sancho Martines de Biota, Governor of Aragon. The governorship of Aragon (*gubernatio Aragonum*) was a powerful office with jurisdiction over the kingdom of Aragon proper, subordinate only to the king and the *Justicia de Aragón* in certain matters. The governor's remit included enforcement of royal mandates, which makes the king's complaint here — that the governor has failed to execute a direct order — particularly pointed. ↩
2. The phrase "ende estamos con [?] indignacio" is paleographically uncertain. The word before "indignacio" may be "con" (= with), "fort" (= very), or "so" (= under). The reading "con indignacio" (= with indignation) is adopted here as the most grammatically natural, but all three readings are defensible. See *Unresolved Ambiguities* below. ↩
3. Borja and Magallón are towns in the Aragonese comarca of Campo de Borja, west of Zaragoza. Both had seigneurial connections to the Fortià family through grants made during the reign of Pere III, when Sibilla de Fortià's influence was at its height. ↩
4. "Mossen Pero de Fortian" — i.e., mossèn Pere de Fortià. The reading "Pero" (the Aragonese form of Pere) is preferred over the alternative "Bernat" on paleographic grounds, though the abbreviated name is difficult. Multiple members of the Fortià family held properties in the region, and the identification of precisely which Fortià is intended has implications for understanding the scope of Joan I's confiscation program. On the Fortià family and the confiscations, the *su hermana* reference (see note 5) confirms the connection to Sibilla. ↩
5. "Su hermana" — his sister. This almost certainly refers to Sibilla de Fortià, third wife of Pere III (r. 1336–1387), whose family accumulated substantial seigneurial grants and properties during the last years of Pere's reign. Joan I moved against the Fortià family immediately upon his accession in January 1387; Sibilla herself was arrested and her properties confiscated. The reading "hermana" (Aragonese/Castilian) is preferred over the HTR's "germana" (Catalan), though the latter is not impossible in a chancery document produced in Barcelona. ↩

6. This is the legal crux of the letter. Joan is telling the governor that the crown entrusted to him only the *executio* — the physical enforcement of the seizure order — not the *conscientia* (legal judgment) or *determinatio* (adjudication) of whether the seizure was justified. The implication is that the governor had been dragging his feet, perhaps claiming he needed to evaluate the legality of the order before carrying it out. Joan's response is that this evaluation was not his to make. ↩
7. "De cierta sciencia" — a standard chancery formula indicating that the king acts with full knowledge and deliberation, implying that the order cannot be resisted on the grounds that the king was misinformed or acting on bad advice. The Aragonese equivalent of the Latin *de certa scientia*. ↩
8. "A nuestra mano" — to our hand, i.e., to royal possession and control. A standard formula for reversion of property to the crown. ↩
9. The original reads "las prouisions [?]" — the reading "provisions" (= orders, mandates) is tentatively preferred over the HTR's "prissons" (= arrests, seizures). See *Unresolved Ambiguities*. ↩
10. "En otra manera" — otherwise. A standard Aragonese chancery formula introducing a threat or sanction clause. ↩
11. The threat is remarkable in its directness: immediate suspension from the governorship, total revocation of authority, and a promise that the governor will be made an example (*escarmiento*) to others. This level of royal anger suggests that the governor's failure to act was not mere bureaucratic delay but may have reflected local political sympathies with the Fortià faction or reluctance to carry out what was widely perceived as a vindictive confiscation. ↩
12. "Dius nuestro siello secreto" — under our secret seal. The secret seal (*segell secret*) was used for letters of a more personal or politically sensitive nature, as distinct from the great seal (*segell major/comú*) used for solemn public instruments. The use of the secret seal here is consistent with the threatening and politically charged nature of the letter. ↩
13. Sancho Martines de Biota. Biota is a town in the Cinco Villas district of Aragon. The precise identity and career of this governor would benefit from further prosopographical research; confirmation that he held the governorship in March 1387 would help validate the transcription of the name, which was difficult to read in the original. ↩
14. Pere de Benviure. The iussio formula — "dominus Rex mandavit mihi Petro de Benviure" — indicates that the letter was dictated or ordered by the king through this chancery official. Pere de Benviure appears as a scribe and secretary in Joan I's early chancery. ↩