

A King and Game of Thrones

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Introduction:

Mark Twain once said "truth is stranger than fiction," this is because in fiction you expect to find the unexpected and are bound to stick to real possibilities. The truth, however, is strange and actual events often can't even be imagined. The Kingdom of Westeros was brought into existence by George R. R. Martin in his series of novels *Game of Thrones*. The pages of his books and the episodes of the HBO hit are filled with seemingly outrageous and unimaginable plot twists and events. Many are in wonder how Martin envisions the sequence of events that take place in his novels and television show. However, Martin has stated in the past, that many of the craziest scenarios from his creation were inspired by various historical events from across the world. These parallels between fact and fiction can be seen throughout history, and often the truth is even stranger. There is one period in history that so closely parallels the fiction written by Martin; it can be studied as if it was a new edition to his series. Shrouded in controversy and conflict, it would be no surprise if the reign of John I of Aragon was featured in the new season of *Game of Thrones*. Similar to many other monarchies in fiction and real life, the rule of John I, between 1387 to 1396, was dramatic and tense. The purpose of this study was to discover and expose many of the parallels between the reign of John I of Aragon and *Game of Thrones*.

Research Objectives:

Unfortunately, it is a fact that many people aren't admirers of the study and field of history. It takes a particular and devoted person to want to study a manuscript from the fourteenth century. However, anyone who comes across the show or has read the books is completely captivated with the fantasy world *Game of Thrones* immerses them into. The primary objective of this study is to fascinate ordinary people with medieval history by utilizing an element from popular culture. Using *Game of Thrones* to immerse people into the real history of the reign of John I of Aragon allows them to not only study history but learn in an entertaining way. Another objective of this study is to expose as many parallels between fact and fiction as possible. The aim is to twist even the most outlandish storylines from *Game of Thrones* and connect them to real events from Aragon during the late fourteenth century. It is important to study the reign of John I of Aragon because it was kingdoms like his that laid the foundation for many institutional practices we see today. George R. R. Martin used this period in Europe as an outline for his books for this very reason. The medieval period was a turning point for Europe, because it became filled with strong and dominant nations that established governments, laws, and culture.

Method:

In order to uncover as many parallels between *Game of Thrones* and the reign of John I of Aragon, the re-analysis of episodes from the HBO hit was necessary. We focused on specific seasons and plot lines that would assist us in the correlation. After reviewing these episodes, we then procured the original novels written by George R. R. Martin. With the assistance of the books, the collection of more information on the plot was possible. While re-watching the show and reviewing the books, we simultaneously started collecting as much data as we could about John and Aragon during his rule. As we began to research, we immediately realized that this would be a difficult feat. The reason being that John's rule was short-lived, and not many individuals have written about him. After discovering this frustration, we took the initiative and accessed help from both our mentor and the librarians from Milner Library. The librarians were able to locate many of our secondary sources, that without their assistance we probably would not have discovered. These books were essential in finding a considerable portion of our research, and we were able to become more enthralled with everything we read. A particular primary document from the time caught our

attention. *The Dream of Bernat Metge* revealed much, and its author in the time happened to be in the inner circles of John I. Metge's literary source operates not only as a historical record of Aragon at the time but also as a criticism of John's reign as king.

Dr. Adam Franklin-Lyons, our faculty mentor, provided us with John's travel itineraries. These itineraries assisted us because we were able to connect locations of significant events during the period with John's actions and travel.

In addition to those sources, our research led us to the Newberry Library in Chicago. It was at this independent research museum; we had access to a primary document written by John. This text was a collection of different royal decrees issued by John and was preserved by the long-held records in the city of Alicante.

We also found a text written by a 16th-century Spanish jurist, who wrote about the history of Aragon while serving the Spanish crown in Mexico. This document was entitled *Svmmaria investigacion de el origen, y privilegios, delos ricos hombres o nobles, caballeros, infanzones o hijos dalgo, y señores de vassallos de Aragon, y del absolute poder que en ellos tienen. Parte primera, escribiola Don Juan Francisco de Montemaior de Cuenca...* (refer to Figure 1.)

In this point during our research, the parallels between fact and fiction started blending together. We started to identify parallels that other individuals would not recognize.

Over the course of our partnership together, both of us stayed well connected and met up routinely to keep up and organize our research. With every scheduled consultation, we slowly designed the structure of our project.

Figure 1. The text written by the 16th-century Spanish Jurist. It was presented on a softened cushion to prevent wear on the document.

Eventually, the decision to shift away from a standard research project became inevitable. The reason behind this decision was because we wanted ordinary people to find this topic interesting as well. By incorporating more imaginative concepts with real history, we hope it would help peak the interests of almost everyone.

This study will utilize the assistance of text mining through manuscripts and documents online. Text mining allows us to examine the text and locate specific relevant information. John I's digital itineraries and accounts from the period will be invaluable and will be easier to dissect. Text mining will also be used to investigate essential segments from digital copies of Martin's over seven hundred page novels.

Figure 6. This is a piece of art depicting Rhaegar Targaryen. As a result of his love for art, many people create depictions of him in the art medium he preferred. In this piece, he is kidnapping Lyanna Stark.



Figures 2 and 3. Art work from the 14th century showing the art genre Danse Macabre. This depiction of death, show a reanimation of corpses after death. These skeletons would exist on the same plain as the living, and would remind them of their imminent mortality. Below the art work is a picture of White Walkers from in the show

Another character from *Game of Thrones* that share similarities with John I of Aragon is Rhaegar Targaryen. The first parallel between these two men is their love of music, culture, and the arts. Both men left the same legacy of the promotion of culture throughout their kingdoms. Lovers of literature and music, they would spend a considerable portion of their day surrounding themselves in it. John turned Zaragoza into a resort of musical and artistic expression, employing many musicians to fill the halls with music, so much so that he eventually got in trouble with the Aragonese nobles. Rhaegar, unfortunately, was not able to expand culture to the extent of John as a result of his untimely death. However, through research, it can be concluded if, given the opportunity to become king, he would have become a king similar to John (refer to Figure 6).



John I of Aragon's second wife was Queen Violant of Bar, and it was a controversial marriage in the kingdom. King Peter IV and his fourth wife Sibila did not support the union and wished for him to marry a princess from Sicily. However, John fell in love and wanted an alliance with France. As Queen, Violent was often acting as regent for John as a result of a chronic illness. As a woman participating in politics, she was often viewed as manipulative and cunning. Her control over John and the kingdom can be compared to Cersei Lannister's control of Westeros. Cersei and Violent both influenced and exploited their husbands. They also at one point or another had complete control of the kingdom they resided in. Of course Violent never blew up a church with hundreds of people in it, and most likely was not involved in an incestuous relationship. However, both of these women are very comparable because they were able to have an opinion in politics. During these eras, many women's opinions were suppressed and disregarded. For Violent and Cersei to have a legacy involving their control of power is remarkable, and shows how strong these women were (refer to Figures 7 and 8). Not to mention, many of these documents that stated Violent was manipulative were written by men before this era. So, there is a possibility that these men were afraid of a strong, assertive woman.

After the unexpected death of John I, many nobles started looking at people to blame for his demise. Similar to how Tyrion Lannister was made the scapegoat after the death of King Joffrey in *Game of Thrones*, fingers began being pointed at Bernat Metge. This is a fascinating turn of events because many people witnessed an accident when John died. It is believed that Bernat's public guilt was most likely politically motivated. This comparison between Tyrion and Bernat does not end there. Both men before and after their arrests for the murder of a king were publicly critical of the king on the throne. After their release from prison, Tyrion and Bernat would go on to

work in courts of other royals. Tyrion became 'the Hand' of Daenerys Targaryen and Bernat became a close ally of Martin I of Aragon, John's brother. Both of these men, even though they were innocent, had to deal with their supposed public guilt for the rest of their lives. Bernat was never able to return to the public status he held prior to the arrest, and Martin was his only hope to regain a portion of his prestige. For Tyrion, Daenerys was the person to save his reputation after he escaped the death penalty. The last primary parallel of *Game of Thrones* and the reign of John I, are the real Wildlings that lived in Aragon. In *Game of Thrones* Wildlings were looked at as uncivilized and believed in a false Gods. Throughout history, Jews and Muslims have often been victims of violence by the dominant Christian religion in Europe. In both fantasy and the historical past, these groups of people were ostracized for their beliefs and look down to as inferiors to their superior counterparts. Laws designed to oppress all three communities were put into effect in both *Game of Thrones* and the Kingdom of Aragon. Massacres of these cultures were frequent, and many were forced to convert their beliefs to correspond with the supposed right way of living. Like the Wildlings, Jews and Muslims were expelled from Aragon on many occasions to make more room for Christians. The parallel between them can be demonstrated furthered with the accusations of them causing the Black Death and White Walker invasion (refer to Figures 9 and 10). The Jews and Muslims were often blamed and attacked for their supposed connection to the spread of the disease. John I forced all Jews to wear yellow circles on the clothing so everyone could identify them. In *Game of Thrones* Wildlings were not allowed over the wall as a result of many of the White Walkers coming from their communities. Even after being allowed to go south, they were distinguishable from their southern counterpart.

Figures 9 and 10.

The top picture depicts Jews being murdered and burn by an angry mob who blames them for the Black Death. The bottom photo depicts what is left after a Wildling tribe was savagely murdered. Both of these groups of people were murdered for who they were.



Results:

After concluding a vast majority of research, the parallels between fact and fiction have become intertwined. Even the most unrealistic events from the *Game of Thrones* were able to be twisted and reformulated to have historical counterparts.

For seven seasons viewers of the HBO show *Game of Thrones* have been impatiently waiting for winter to fall over the kingdom of Westeros. However, starting in the year of John's birth, winter had already fallen over the Kingdom of Aragon. Both of these winters caused destruction and disorder throughout their kingdoms. An astronomical death toll followed, and infected white walkers were quarantined away in walled-off communities. In Aragon, however, this winter was not frigidly cold and did not bare the same name. When this storm fell over the kingdom in 1350, it became known as the Black Death. The parallels between the plague and the coming winter are vast. However, the new art genre that was popularized in this period can ultimately make this agreement alone. The fatalistic world gave birth to the Danse Macabre genre, and often showed wailing skeletons, resembling white walkers, consuming every component of society. This personification of plague victims gives the impression that their bodies are reanimated after death. Paintings show the undead on the same plain as the living and are meant to be a constant reminder to the alive of their upcoming death (refer to Figures 2 and 3.). John I succeeded to the throne of Aragon following the death of his father, Peter IV. After being crowned king of Aragon in 1387, John ruled very similarly to Robert Baratheon from *Game of Thrones*. Like Robert, John began his reign by purging and removing his enemies from the court. This was a result of his father and stepmother, Sibila of Fortia, not supporting his marriage to Violant of Bar, John used his opportunity to take revenge on Sibila. John accused his stepmother of witchcraft and imprisoned her for many years. However, he did not stop here, John than executed twenty-nine of her closest allies and exiled even more. John's fictional counterpart, Robert Baratheon, massacred many of his enemies after gaining support for his rule on the Iron Throne. The parallels between the two kings do not stop there, however. After both kings successfully purged their courts, their attention was focused more on amusement and spending their kingdom's wealth. John and Robert often spent money irresponsibly on art, music, alcohol, and cuisine. John would often travel to Zaragoza for long periods of time to get away from his political duties. Both men have been portrayed in texts as lovers of pleasure than war or fraction. Hunting was both John's and Robert's favorite hobby, and it was also where they met their demise. While on hunting trips, both men died due to very suspicious circumstances. John's death may have been caused by a giant wolf spooking his horse. The horse reportedly threw the king off its back, and the wolf then disappeared. There are some conflicting reports about this event, but due to the significance of the dire wolf in *Game of Thrones*, we took a liking to this speculation (refer to Figures 4 and 5.).

Figure 4 and 5. Depictions of John I of Aragon above a younger picture of King Robert Baratheon from the show



Figure 7 and 8. Depictions of Queen Violant of Bar, above a picture of Queen Cersei Lannister from the show.

Conclusion:

After completing our research project, we were pleased with everything we were able to discover about John I of Aragon's reign. We, unfortunately, were unable to finish all of our projected parallels. However, we do expect to continue our research in the future and attempt to discover more primary sources from the era. The primary and secondary objective for this project was successful; the hope is this research project will expose more people to medieval history entertainingly and educationally. John I of Aragon was a unique kind of leader for his time; by utilizing elements from popular culture, the ability to compare him with a twenty-first century fantasy was made possible. Prior to this project, neither of us knew very much about the monarchy in Aragon preceding the union of a few countries in the Iberian Peninsula. We have both become overwhelmed with everything we were able to learn. Moreover, the ability to mix an element we both love with information new to both of us gave us the opportunity to want to dig deeper into the history of both aspects. When George R. R. Martin created the fantasy land of Westeros, he most likely did not anticipate the overwhelming success the show and books have had. Martin was successfully able to mix real events and people in with fire-breathing dragons and white walking zombies. He made the average viewer of his show become immersed in history without even knowing it. There is no doubt in our minds that Martin did not use John I of Aragon's reign to inspire any of his plot lines. However, because Martin did put history into his books, we found credible elements featured in John I's reign to parallel it with *Game of Thrones*. Our findings lead us to believe that it would be no surprise to us if this period in Aragon's history inspired many characters featured on the last season of *Game of Thrones*.

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Abstract:

The fantasy world that George R. R. Martin has brought to life, both in books and in the television show has been captivating its audience for two decades. Martin has successfully immersed his audience in the fictitious kingdom of Westeros and other kingdoms beyond the Narrow Sea. The pages of his novels and episodes of the HBO hit are filled with unimaginable plot twists and 'love to hate' villains. With every page turn and scene, viewers and readers alike, are kept at the edge of their seat wondering what will happen next. However, many Game of Thrones fans may not be aware that real historical figures and events inspired many of their favorite characters and plot lines from the series. These parallels between fact and fiction can be seen throughout history, and often the truth is even stranger. There is one period in history that so closely parallels the fiction written by Martin; it can be studied as if it was a new edition to his series. Shrouded in controversy and conflict, it would be no surprise if the reign of John I of Aragon was featured in the new season of Game of Thrones. The purpose of this research study to fascinate ordinary people with medieval history by utilizing an element from popular culture. Using Game of Thrones to immerse people into the real history of the reign of John I of Aragon allows them to not only study history but learn in an entertaining way.

The study and research of the reign of John I of Aragon is crucial because it was kingdoms like his that laid the foundation for many institutional practices we see today. George R. R. Martin used this period in Europe as an outline for his books for this very reason. The medieval period was a turning point for Europe because it became filled with strong and dominant nations that established governments, laws, and culture.

By using primary sources from the period and numerous secondary sources, our project was successfully able to create many parallels between fact and fiction. We also utilized text mining to locate specific relevant information in John I's digital itineraries and accounts, and this process also assisted in the successful outcome.

The parallels range from personality and biography connections to outlandish event correlations. By creating these parallels, this study gave a new life to many historical figures who were rarely acknowledged and written about. It also gave us the opportunity to research a new topic and mix it with an element we both love.

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Citations:

Figure 1:

An Image of *Svmmaria investigacion de el origen, y privilegios, delos ricos hombres o nobles, caballeros, infanzones o hijos dalgo, y señores de vassallos de Aragon, y del absolute poder que en ellos tienen. Parte primera, escribiola Don Juan Francisco de Montemaior de Cuenca...*, Newberry Library, Chicago. Personal photograph by Artur Da Silva. November 19, 2018.

Figure 2:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danse_Macabre

Figure 3:

<https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/What-White-Walkers-Wights-Game-Thrones-37614286>

Figure 4:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_I_of_Aragon

Figure 5:

https://www.reddit.com/r/freepfolk/comments/77lnec/a_young_robert_baratheon_at_the_start_of_the/

Figure 6:

<http://crypticimages.com/rhaegar-targaryen/>

Figure 7:

https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/95304860/violant-of_aragon

Figure 8:

<https://www.hbo.com/game-of-thrones/cast-and-crew/cersei-lannister>

Figure 9:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death_Jewish_persecutions

Figure 10:

https://www.reddit.com/r/gameofthrones/comments/q99rb/is_there_any_significance_behind_the_shape_the/