

# Medieval Castles - An Essay

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Castles remind us of a time that was full of adventure and romance. Castles remind us of a time in history in which there was a lack of government and order. Although there was not mass confusion and anarchy, there was less order. Castles were the basis of feudalism. Castles can be seen as a manifestation of feudal society. Feudalism started with the rise of castles and ended with their end. The castle set the tone as the only homestead that nobility would live in during this time. Castles were influenced by and influenced many medieval cathedrals in Europe. Although castles served many purposes, their primary purpose was military. At that time, people were not protected by merely shutting and locking a regular wooden door. They needed the protection of castles and their knights. The lords and constables of castles needed serfs to work the land to make revenue in order to pay rent to the more important nobles. Given the following evidence, it is relatively obvious why castles and castle building played an instrumental role in the development of Western Europe.

Castles are unique to a time in history known as medieval times. The word medieval in our times is an insult to anything as is the word feudal. Through the haze and ruins, one can imagine dungeons, chivalrous knights, and mighty Lords who ruled the land and protected the common peasant from barbarians and other invaders. The rise of castles marked the rise of feudalism. This was all started by the crusades. The majority of the knights and nobles went to liberate the holy land from the Muslims. The Crusades influenced castle builders back in Europe. Ideas were gathered from Muslim and Byzantine fortifications. Because of the lack of protection in Europe, a castle's strength needed to be increased because of the ever-present threat of a Muslim invasion. The end of Feudalism also marked the end of the middle ages and hence the end of the great castle era.

Castles integrated the combination of residence and fortress. The first castle dates back to King Sargon II of Khorsabad in ancient Egypt. He erected a grand palace for himself to protect him and his subjects. The first recorded references to castles was the Edict of Pistes by Charles the Bald, king of the West Franks. "We will and expressly command that whoever at this time has made castles and fortifications and enclosures without our out permission shall have them demolished by the First of August" (Brown Architecture of Castles 13). Other castle laws were the Norman Institutions handed down by William the Conqueror after he took over England. One law says that no one shall raise castles in Normandy without the Duke's license.

An ideal castle site was one that had natural obstacles for defense such as steep hillsides and water. Castles that were built on rocks or islands were especially effective. An example of this is Bodiam in Sussex which was the home of Sir Edward Dalyngrigge in 1385. A moat offered good protection, but building on a lake or river offered better protection. The site should not be too remote. It should have water and building material readily available nearby. A site should have a good climate, good pasture, and ample fertile land. If a castle had all these things, it would increase its chances of surviving a siege.

A large majority of early castles followed the motte and bailey design. These designs utilized earth and timber. A motte and bailey design is a design where the keep is on a hill or motte behind the bailey which is the open area of the castle similar to a town square. A bridge usually connected the motte to the bailey. The motte was a great mound of earth or rock. Sometimes it was artificial, but the majority of the time it was authentic. At its base there was a deep trench that resembled a moat. This was used as defense. Surrounding the motte was a wall of timber. The motte also contained the keep which is where the lord of the manor and his family lived. The keep was the innermost part of the castle. It was the last defense against attack. The keep has also been referred to as the donjon. This is where the French got the word dungeon meaning the jail or place to hold prisoners. Surrounding the entire premises was a wooden fence that was at least ten feet in height. These wooden stakes were then implanted in the ground for support. The fence sometimes stood upon posts to allow men to get through. During a siege, the perimeter would be covered with wet animal skins to curb the threat of arson. Most motte and bailey castles were built before William the Conqueror's conquest in 1066.

Walter the Archdeacon wrote a biography of John, bishop of Therouanne about 1130. In it he describes Merchem Castle near Dixmude: "There was, near the porch of the church, a fortress which we may call a castle... exceedingly high, built after the custom of that land by the lord of the town many years before. For it is the habit of the magnates and nobles of those parts... to raise a mound of earth as high as they can and surround it with a ditch as broad as possible. The top of this mound they completely enclose with a palisade of hewn logs bound close together like a wall, with towers set in its circuit so far as the site permits. In the middle of the space within the palisade they build a residence, or, dominating everything, keep" (Brown Architecture of Castles 21).

Castle designers saw a need for improvement because wood and earth were not strong and were not effective protection against fire. There was also a need for bigger, grander castles because noble visitors did not travel alone so a castle would have to have enough room for the occasional visitor and his or her group. The architects who designed castles were known as master masons. They saw that stone would be a more effective building material. Although it was cold and hard to work with, it provided the much needed protection against fire. These newer castles are called enclosure castles. Like motte and dailey designs, enclosures castles had a wall protecting the perimeter of the manor. However

these castles were not built upon hills or mottes. The keep of the castle was incorporated into the wall surrounding the property. These castles still had a bailey. With this new style of castles came a new construction material. Stone became the only material to build one's castle out of because it made castles much stronger against attack. The tower of London is an example of a masonry castle. The ideal stone for castles was the fine limestone of Caen in Normandy. This limestone was soft when first quarried, but gradually became hard as it was exposed to air. To insulate against the cold stone walls of castles, the women made tapestries for the walls. The tapestries almost always contained a story relating to the castle. One of the most famous tapestries is the Bayeux Tapestry. It depicts the Norman knights before Hastings in 1066. Since they were now using stone, castle builders were able to integrate defenses into the castles.

Castles needed to have defenses. They were not made impregnable. They were made so that it would take an enormous amount of artillery and money to take the castle. They were made so that it would take a large amount of time to take a castle. The castle of Newcastle at Tyne was far from impregnable in 1173, but it was strong enough to make an ill-prepared Scottish King William think twice about a siege: "Well sees the king of Scotland that he will never complete the conquest of Newcastle on Tyne without military engines" (Ibid 80). Some defenses used by castles were machicolations. Machicolations were projecting battlements to protect against arrows and other weapons. They were at the top of the wall surrounding the castle. Arrowslits or arrow loops were slits that were cut into stone to allow sharpshooters a place to shoot. They were angled so that the sharpshooter was protected from oncoming projectiles. Another defense used was Greek fire. This was an incendiary device that was used against wooden attack machines. The ingredients of Greek fire are a mystery. It is thought that it contained some of the following components: crude oil, refined oil, naphtha, pitch, resin, sulfur, quicklime, and bitumen. This deadly mixture was put on an arrow and then shot onto one of the attacking machines and it gave explosive results. Greek fire was probably developed in the seventh century by the Byzantines for naval warfare. Greek fire was a morale builder for the defenders during a siege. The Lord of Joinville described Greek fire as "This Greek fire was such that seen from the front as it darted towards us it appeared as large as a vessel of verjuice, and the tail of the fire that streamed behind it was as long as the shaft of a great lance. The noise it made in coming was like that of a thunderbolt falling from the skies; it seemed like a dragon flying through the air. The light this huge, flaming mass shed all around it was so bright that you could see right through the camp as clearly as if it were day. Three times that night the enemy slung Greek fire at us from their petraries, and three times they shot it from their arbalestres a tour" (Ibid 88).

Weapons used against castles during a siege included the trebuchet, mangonel, belfry, ballista, ram, and bore. The trebuchet was a big machine that flung artillery like a catapult. The mangonel was similar to the trebuchet but smaller and more maneuverable. Its strength was based on the tautness of the hemp, rope, or tightly twisted animal sinew. Artillery used by these weapons include rocks, fireballs, and dead animals to spread disease. The belfry was a mobile tower which was built higher than the castle walls in order to scale them during siege. The ballista was essentially a large crossbow that hurled rocks and other large boulders. The ram was a device that did what its name says. It was used to knock the portcullis or gate down. The bore was a device used by the attackers during a tactic known as mining. They mined from their camps to the castle walls. They would set up a support then start a fire to break down the castle walls. The defenders of the castle also used this tactic to counter the attackers siege. They would watch the moat to see the vibrations caused by the attackers shovels. Then they would start a counter mine. This was the most effective tactic used in a siege but it was the most dangerous. It was dark, had contaminated or little air and there was always a threat that the tunnel would cave in or be caved in by the castle's garrison.

Castles were not just fortresses but also residences of the nobility. It is this balance of military and residential qualities which make a castle so different from other fortifications. Castles had all the best furnishings and colors. They had chapels because Europe was a Christian continent. They occasionally had more than one. On the castle property were things like gardens, parks, vineyards, dovecotes, fishponds, mills, and stables. Castles were not as primitive as we think them to be. They had some of the conveniences that we have today. They had a form of a toilet. It was a toilet made of stone. People who wished to use it had to bring some material to protect themselves from the cold stone. The waste would eventually drain to a river by way of an underground pool. These cesspits would often have to be cleaned out by dung farmers.

Not all castles were extravagant fortresses that housed kings and all his subjects. Many castles were just built for the lord, his family and a few servants. Other castles that were not well protected or had no threat of attack were called fortified manors. The design of a castle was taken very seriously by the lords. There is reference to Aubree, wife of the Count of Bayeux, executing on the spot, Lanfred, her master mason after he completed her castle. She did this because she was so pleased with it that she didn't want him to build one like it for anyone else.

Castles were the basis of feudalism. They controlled the land and all within it. A castle was a lord's response to a mounted cavalry charge. Castles were effective centers of military power and territorial lordship whether or not the king or prince was there. Castles are an important part to history. They are phenomenal structures that still influence modern houses today.

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