Castles Essay, Research Paper

Castles

Seen By The Light Of A Thousand Candles

By

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“Feudal society was defined by the castle, and was reflected in its development from a wooden defense structure to a stone architectural complex, with room for many houses within its walls.” Castles emerged as part of Europe’s feudalisation, perhaps as early as the 9th century. Frequently situated at key locations, castles were strongholds that provided bases from which squadrons of knights could ride out to attack an enemy but were also “a ceter for administering justice and dispensing hospitality.” The castle was not just a fortress but also a residence and home, a different concept from the Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian communal fortified burhs and purely military Tudor palaces. Many towns, seeking the shelter of a castles’ walls, sprung up very near already-established castles, as evidenced by towns with Chateau, chatel, and chastel in their names (Chateau-Thierry, Castel sarrasin, Coucy-le-chateau, Hattonchatel). The earliest castles still extant in any manner are Coue-la-Fontaine (c. 900) and Langeais, built by Foulques Nerra by 994.

Methods of Construction

The very earliest castles were made of timber- quick, easy, and(realatively) inexpensive. Unfortunately, they were vulnerable to boring, battering, and (most dangerous of all) burning, so the benefits of stone and timber together, but many had their castles built completely of stone (except for the interior floors and the roof).

Castles could consist of a tower set atop a hill or mottee(15to 30ft. high) surronded by a wall at the edge of the top of the motte and a wet or dry ditch at the bottom. Natural hills were favored for theis as artificaial mounds tended not to suport the intense weight of the stone buildings and walls. The wall was a timber palisade or a stone shell wasll or outer curtain wall (often with a wallwalk), and the entire tower, wall, and motte structure was a shell keep in the motte-and-bailey style.

Defense and Offense

When one desired to attack the enemy’s castle, there was a variety of ways one could go about the process. If the structure was only made of timber, the job was (relatively) easy. It could be battered, burnt, or bored thryough with a terebrus or teretrus. If, however, the lord had had the foresight to use stone construction, the walls of the curtains and towers were generally impervious to most assault tactics (until the advent of artillery warfare).

The heel of the Achilles that was the stone castle was the use of mining. Although useless against castles built on a foundation of rock or an island, mining was especially effective by using the weight of the stones against the enemy. A tunnel would bee bouilt under the wall, and foundation stones would be removed. The castle was shored up by timber beams so as not to collapse immediately. Then the timber supports would be fired, and when they collapsed so did the wall (or even better, a corner turret), leaving a wide gash through which the enemy could descend. Such a thing happened when England’s King John besieged Tochester Castle in 1215, and when Hubert de Burgh besieged bedford in 1224.

The 11th and the 12th centuries were the classic age of the keep. In England and France, most castles started as motte and bailey types, with shell walls added later to replace wooden palisades, and ranging from 40-150′ long. In Germany, the Bergfreid equivalent was a stone watchtower, less bulky than a keep, often built on the summit of a mountain.

As for the shape of castles, after 1150 there was a shift to round or polygonal towers from the previously-employed square and rectangular ones. The superior defendability of a curved tower was due to the lack of sharp corners(weak spots) at which a sapper could pick, as well as eliminating blind spots with a greater field of fire.

After 1125, the tower-keep became more attractive to those building castles. With three or more stories to them, they would genrally consist of a single floor on each story: a storage area on the ground floor, as with the hall-keep; the hall on the first floor; and the private chamber/solar above on the second. The kitchen could be either next to or above the hall.

It is thought that Byzantine defense practices influenced the increased emphasis on curain walls. The number of perimeter towers in the curtain wall increased as did the number of curain walls themselves. Tather popular was the concentric plan, which was basically a keep at the center of several rings of curtains, with the height of the wall increasing inwardly. The concentric plan was seen throughout england, France, Wales, and Spain, and was very popular with Edward I of England. German castles, on the other hand, had been more strongly influenced by Carolingian defense models and, located as they were on high crags, had less need and desire for such measures. The Low Countries relied on large moats for extra defense.

The 14th and 15th centuries brought an increase in emphasis on confort, and a decrease upon defense. In spite of occasional recourse to square or rectangular towers, the living abode itself was no longer considered a fortress, but a home. More sprawling plans and larger window openings were employed, and gateways increased in importance. By the 15th century, machicolations and turrets were constructed more for show than for any military practicality.

By mid-14th century the gatehouse had almost completly supplanted the concentric plan and the keep as the primary stronghold. The gate had always been considered the most vulnerable aspect of a castle. It was usually protected by a timber, or ideally stone, tower called the barbican, a projected and protected approach to the gate. Stone barbicans were known as early as the 12th century. The original mode of a passage through a single tower evolved into the use of two perimeter towers in the curtain wall, very close together with the gate in between. Innovations in doors, drawbridges, and portcullises abetted by meurtieses made the gatehouse a daunting prospect to breach. The King’s Gate at caernarvonn had two drawbridges, six portcullises, and five doors in addition to a multitude of loopholes and a right angled turn.

Luxury

Early castles were anything but luxurious; in fact, they were downright user-unfriendly. The perpetual dampness of their walls was dealt with by hanging huge tapestries. To minimize the risk of fire the fireplace was located in the center of the room, with smoke rising to escape through the louvre, a hole in the timber roof for that purpose. As for convinience, especially with tower keeps, which commonly had butt a single room on each floor, ascending or descending stairs took up much of the day. It was uncommon to have many, if any, windows on the lower floors except for arrow slits so lighting was minimal. It was, in general, a dank and gloomy place to live.

It is ironic that today most people hold a misty and fantastical perception of castles, with enormous feasts illuminated by the light from a thousand candles, damsels in distress, dashing horses and equally dashing knights at jousts. The immense practicality of the great majority of castles would doubtless disappoint those who imagine Neuschwanstein when they think of castles. Flat, squat, dark keeps, more like bomb shelters in their attempts at impermeability hardly coincide with the idea of the lofty, elegant, ethreal Cinderella lookalikes with banners flying from every pinnical. Romanticized history has done a disservice to the castle, making it seem to be something it is not. However, even a study of the most utilitarian castle cannot banish a little pang of longing- the wish to emproider at a window in the solar while overlooking the rolling fields, the desire to rub elows amongst one’s friends while dining to the music of minstrels and the light of a thousand candles.