

# **The Role of Castles and Martial-Style Architecture in Early Tudor Society, 1485-1547**

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## **OUTLINE**

Castles, the iconic medieval buildings, are still poorly understood. Although the popularity of castle studies as a field of research has ensured that a large body of literature exists on the subject of castle architecture, these works rarely situate the role of the building within a wider social and political context. Moreover, the study of English castles, and especially the study of castle architecture, stops abruptly in the fourteenth century. One of the main reasons for this is the notion of the inception of gunpowder in European warfare which according to some historians made castles obsolete. And yet, castles were more than just a building of war, they represented power, authority, noble status, and wealth. The late medieval nobility were eager to display their social status and this was best done through a castellated and imposing residence.

My research aims at a much-needed appraisal of castle architecture during the late Middle Ages. This thesis seeks to expose the intertwined relationship between the social histories of the castle owners with the architectural histories of the castles themselves. By exploring the architectural, archaeological, and written evidence my research breaks away from the narrow methodological approaches of earlier scholarship. Using an interdisciplinary methodology which exploits the fascinating connections – and revealing discrepancies – my research explores the ways in which English noblemen used castle architecture to construct their identities and used it as a manifestation of their power during the late medieval period. In doing so, it argues that while this period is often used by historians as a transitional marker between the medieval and early modern periods, the perception of the castle as a commanding symbol of noble power and status remained a constant. In exploring this ideological tension, my project exposes the obstacles that periodisation poses to a full understanding of noble identity and representations of power. In short, my thesis will provide a coherent and dynamic synthesis of the role that martial-style architecture had in forming aristocratic identities and manifesting power during the late Middle Ages.

My thesis examines specific castles as comparative case studies, thereby enabling a new perspective on the interaction between the building, the landscape, and the owners. I have drawn on a range of different source materials that have not been brought together previously in order to illuminate this subject more holistically. The methodology used incorporates surviving building remains, landscape archaeology, and documentary evidence. Ultimately, this thesis will answer the questions: what role did castle architecture, built in the late Middle Ages, play in the forming of aristocratic identity and power in the British Isles?

Perceptions of castles are often rooted in the presumed military role in contemporary warfare; however, castles have been shown to service a multifaceted number of functions. All castles were built with the intention of a high-status residence, but they were also used as judicial centres, place for the local communities to seek arbitration and patronage, and theatres for ceremonies. They were unequivocally symbols of lordship and authority, manifestations of the powerful nobility whose ethos was founded on chivalry and displays of power. There is no doubt their construction would have reshaped the landscape and local communities, both physically and mentally.

By examining in depth four castles re-built during this period a direct link between building fabric and aristocratic identity begins to emerge. The architecture and landscape was a manifestation of the noble power within the realm. The power which helped forge their identity was centred upon the lineage, wealth and status of the noblemen. Therefore, the identity of a nobleman was built upon their estates. As such, a detailed examination of Hedingham Castle Essex; Carew Castle, Pembrokeshire; Thornbury Castle, Gloucestershire; and Cowdray Castle, West Sussex, will be conducted. My examination of the late medieval nobility from dukes and earls to lower members of the peerage illustrates that on every level of society the owners of castles were attempting to display the same thing: status and authority. This display was fundamentally rooted in the outward presentation of castle architecture.

My interdisciplinary methodology has yet to be used for the later medieval period, it is hoped it will provide a useful lens through which to analyse other and subsequent periods of vernacular architecture. It is hoped this approach will provide insight across several disciplines and encourage further research into the role of architecture in society as a whole.

### **RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Castles built in the later Middle Ages have often been overlooked whilst the period is described as ‘the first great era of country house building’ (Emery 2007, 7). And yet, this period can boast of magnificent martial architecture such as Thornbury Castle, Gloucestershire, Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire, and Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire. Although the late medieval period witnessed changes in ornament, windows, and internal design of accommodation ranges, a fundamental theme runs throughout, the martial-style of the building fabric is paramount. Placing the castle in decline in the fourteenth century has meant little research on domestic martial-style architecture has penetrated the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Instead of seeing this period as an age of decline it should be seen as an age of development and innovation, particularly in privacy, entertainment, and design.

Successively, recent studies by historians have recognised the importance of using an interdisciplinary approach when researching castles as they were multifunctional buildings used for administration, regional power centres, residences to some of the most powerful aristocrats in Europe, and architectural masterpieces. However, the research regarding castles is firmly placed pre-fourteenth century despite Robert Liddiard’s call for a study of English castles post-1300 (Liddiard 2011). My approach builds on the work previously done by historians who explore both the building fabric and landscape history, but also, I examine the social history of the owners of the castles. The vital addition of the social history of castle owners to my methodology will enhance the understanding of *why* these castles were built, and *who* the martial-style architecture was meant to be seen by, as well as *what* the owner was trying to display through the architecture. Therefore, my thesis shall build on past scholarship that examines structures from earlier periods whilst building upon that foundation by considering the social and political history of the late medieval owners. This approach will enable the examination of the role of martial architecture in a more holistic manner than before.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The aim of this project is to use a methodology that incorporates a range of disciplines including history, architecture, and landscape archaeology in order to examine the whole picture of a building and its landscape. The application of this methodology to earlier periods

of history is still in its infancy; nonetheless, it will be a much needed appraisal of castle architecture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The application of the interdisciplinary methodology is a direct result of the shortcomings of past methodological approaches that solely examined the architectural history or landscape history of a site. By analysing both aspects, as well as the social and political history of the owner we can identify the similarities in building schemes, popular fashions, and even social conventions which all link to the architecture and noble identity during this period, providing a better understanding of late medieval buildings and nobility.