Audrey M. Thorstad

The Dynamic Middle Ages II – Detailed Project Overview

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

By: Audrey M. Thorstad (University of Leeds)

My PhD project, initiated in 2011, explores the period after the Battle of Bosworth and the accession of Henry VII to the English throne in 1485, which has traditionally been viewed as the heralding of a new age: the early modern period. As such, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century is seen as a time in which castles were ruled obsolete, primarily due to the increased use of gunpowder in European warfare.[1] The idea that the period after the fourteenth century represented a retreat from the characteristics of a previous age is ultimately based on the military ideal of the castle. As a result of the argument that castles were a tool of warfare, the later Middle Ages *must* have witnessed important structural changes to cope with the introduction of gunpowder; and therefore, by the fifteenth century, most scholars have assumed that castle building had ceased completely.[2] Thus, the late medieval period has been described as 'the first great era of country house building'.[3] Due to the continued notion that in the later Middle Ages little to no castle building was taking place, little work has been done on these castles. And yet, this period can boast of martial architecture at places such as Thornbury Castle, Gloucestershire; Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire; and Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire. Although the later Middle Ages 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, symbolic or otherwise. Instead of seeing it as an age of decline the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries should be seen as an age of development and innovation particular in privacy, display, and ornament.

The field of castle studies has come through a transformation over the course of the last forty years. A broadening in methods of research has resulted in the understanding of the castle that is far removed from the military view of the beginning of the twentieth century.[4] This

---

[1] M. Thompson, *The Decline of the Castle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[2] R. Liddiard, 'English Castle-Building' in *Princely Rank in Late Medieval Europe: Trodden Paths and Promising Avenues,* ed. by T. Huthwelker, J. Peltzer, and M. Wemhöner (Ostifildern: Jan Thorbeck, 2011), 199-226 (p. 201); Thompson, *Decline,* p. 110.
[3] A. Emery, *Discovering Medieval Housing* (Risborough: Shire, 2007), p. 7.
[4] P. Marshall, 'Improving the Image: the Transformation of Bailey into Courtyard at the Twelfth-Century Bishops' Castle at Newark Nottinghamshire', *Château Gaillard,* 21 (2002), 203-14, 'The Great Towers as Residence in the Territories of the Norman and Angevin Kings of England' in *The Seigneurial Residence in*

Audrey M. Thorstad

transformation began with the debate on the symbolism versus military dichotomy, which did not get underway until the 'battle for Bodiam', as it has been coined by Robert Liddiard, in the early 1990s.[5] Charles Coulson put forward the idea of symbolism in castles.[6] The notion of the castle as a symbol of lordship, power, and wealth has flourished after Coulson's initial publication. However, as more recent publications have shown, the problem with breaking down the defensive view of the castle was that scholars then replaced the military function with the symbolic function, which caused concern amongst researchers that one interpretation was simply going to be replaced with another.[7] And to a certain extent, this has happened.

Indeed, the 'battle for Bodiam' revolutionised castle studies, resulting in ground-breaking research on the ceremonial role of the Norman great tower, or *donjon*, and the idea of castles as buildings meant to impress the observer.[8] The research set about deconstructing the idea of the keep as a refuge during wartime and highlighted how the architecture of the entire castle site was orientated towards creating awe in the eye of the visitor, or as Philip Dixon has termed this idea: 'the castle as theatre'.[9]

Yet, perceptions of castles are still rooted in the presumed military role in medieval warfare; however, castles have been shown to service numerous other functions. All castles were built with the intention of a high-status residence, but they were also used as judicial centres, places for the local communities to seek arbitration and patronage alike, and theatres for ceremonies and entertainment. They were unequivocally symbols of lordship and authority,

---

Western Europe AD c 800-1600, ed. by G. Meirion-Jones, E. Impey, and M.C.E. Jones (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2002), 27-44.

[5] R. Liddiard, *Castles in Context: Power, Symbolism and Landscape, 1066-1500* (Bollington: Windgather Press, 2005), p. 7; C. Coulson, 'Bodiam Castle: Truth and Tradition', *Fortress: the Castles and Fortifications Quarterly,* 10 (1991), 3-16; P. Everson, 'Bodiam Castle, East Sussex: the Castle and its Designed Landscape', *Château Gaillard,* 17 (1996), 79-84; D.J. Turner, 'Bodiam, Sussex: True Castle or Old Soldier's Dream House?', in *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1985 Harlaxton Symposium,* ed. by M.W. Ormrod (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1986), 267-77.

[6] C. Coulson, *Castles in Medieval Society: Fortresses in England, France and Ireland in the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 'Fourteenth-Century Castles in Context: Apotheosis or Decline', in *Fourteenth-Century England I,* ed. by N. Saul (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 'Peaceable Power in English Castles', *Anglo-Norman Studies,* 23 (2000), 69-95, 'Some Analysis of the Castle of Bodiam, East Sussex', in *Medieval Knighthood, 4: Papers from the fifth Strawberry Hill Conference, 1990,* ed. by C. Harper-Bill and R. Harvey (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), 51-107, 'Bodiam Castle: Truth and Tradition', *Fortress: The Castles and Fortifications Quarterly,* 10 (1991), 3-15.

[7] Turner, 'Bodiam, Sussex', pp. 267-8.

[8] P. Dixon and P. Marshall, 'The Great Tower at Hedingham Castle: A Reassessment', in *Anglo-Norman Castles,* ed. by R. Liddiard (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 297-306, 'Norwich Castle and its Analogues', in *The Seigneurial Residence in Western Europe AD c 800-1600* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2002), 235-43; P. Dixon, 'The Donjon of Knaresborough: the Castle as Theatre', *Château Gaillard,* 14 (1990), 121-39.

[9] Dixon, 'Castle as Theatre', p. 121.

Audrey M. Thorstad

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. As castles did not function in a vacuum – isolated from their surroundings – the landscape, including parks, gardens and orchards, are essential to the study of these buildings. The landscape features around the castle were designed to have a number of different roles. Parks, for example, had certain aesthetically pleasing qualities as well as being stages for noble entertainment and a means of economic exploitation, and it seems in many cases a way to provide privacy to the residence which was usually situated in the midst of a woodland view. The relationship between the landscape and the castle architecture is just one of the intertwining connections this thesis explores.

However, despite the new methodology and interpretation of castles by both architectural historians and archaeologists, the castle is still identified as a building of the High Middle Ages, rarely incorporated into studies past the fourteenth century.[10] Although Robert Liddiard has called for an evaluation of castles in the later Middle Ages, nothing has been produced.[11] It is the intention of this research to extend the image of the castle into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The transitional period between the Middle Ages and the early modern period was a gradual one and, it is therefore, difficult to determine when the castle went into decline. This thesis, however, demonstrates that castles were still being built, renovated, and lived in well into the sixteenth century.

The functions of the castle have become the focus in castle studies over the last few decades: how are we supposed to understand these structures? And how are we supposed to study them? My research is a much-needed analysis of castle architecture during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. This thesis exposes the intertwined relationship between the social history of the castle owners, the architectural history of the castles themselves, and the landscape in which castles were often engulfed. It puts forth a new approach to castle studies. By examining the castle in a very short period of time (1485-*c.* 1540), my research breaks away from the narrow methodological approaches of earlier scholarship, which tend to focus on the castle throughout the Middle Ages and thus, not taking into consideration small changes over time. My methodology also incorporates the architectural, archaeological, and

---

[10] For some notable exceptions, see J. Goodall, *The English Castle, 1066-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); G. Eadie, *A New Approach to Identifying Functions in Castles: A Study of Tower Houses in Ireland,* unpublished PhD thesis (Belfast: Queen's University, 2009).
[11] Liddiard, 'English Castle Building', pp. 199-226.

Audrey M. Thorstad

written evidence which exploits the fascinating connections – and revealing discrepancies – by exploring where Tudor noblemen used castle architecture to construct their identities, as well as used it as a manifestation of their power during this period. In doing so, it argues that while this period is often used by historians as a transition 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 periodization 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 sources that have not been brought together previously to illuminate this subject more holistically. The methodology used incorporates surviving building remains, landscape archaeology, and documentary evidence. Ultimately, this thesis will answer the question: what role did castle architecture, built in the early Tudor period, play in society and in the forming of aristocratic identity and power in the British Isles?

To answer this question in the most comprehensive and holistic way, I have, as mentioned above, adopted a new methodology and approach to the study of castles. This methodology forms the core of my thesis and it is worth explaining in some detail. In order to overcome the problems of an assumed knowledge about castles and what they were used for, historians and archaeologists alike must engage in an explicit theoretical and methodological discussion. The consideration of what roles a castle played during this time ultimately leads to a discussion of the people who built and inhabited these buildings and the activities that took place within them.[12] Therefore, my research investigates the people and activities that took place within and around the castle and placing them spatially within the building, as well as the relationship between the architecture and landscape. The use of space by certain individuals including the lord of the residence, the household, and guests has helped in determining movement and access throughout the castle and grounds. The relatively recent popularity of the application of spatial analysis testifies to the fact that space is an important quality and the way in which spaces are configured inside buildings can have important

---

[12] Eadie, *A New Approach*, p. 5.

Audrey M. Thorstad

implications on how we view the activities that link spaces together. By using architectural features and space together, it should be possible to compare the building against a larger set of differing functions, such as living arrangements, dining, and hospitality. The patterns that emerge in terms of the suitability of the building to perform, or accommodate, those functions can then be used as an indication of the priorities or agenda behind the castles' construction.

Because my thesis undertakes a rather new methodological approach as well as a rarely studied period of time – in relation to castles – the use of case studies was thought to be the most comprehensive and logical approach. By examining in depth four castles re-built during this period a direct link between the building fabric and aristocratic identity begins to emerge. The architecture and landscape was a manifestation of the noble authority. This authority was centred upon their lineage, wealth, and status; and therefore, it 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, has been conducted. My examination of the Tudor nobility from dukes and earls to lower members of the peerage illustrates that on every level of society the owners of castles were essentially attempting to display the same thing: status and authority. This display was fundamentally rooted in the outward presentation in everyday activities such as serving and dining. Each activity also demonstrates the multiple identities found within castle walls, from the individual when seeking solitude to the lordly when conducting administrative.

In order to illustrate the role of castles in early Tudor society, I will explore in more detail one such aspect here: the act of hospitality. Late seventeenth-century writers attempted defining the act of hospitality in past generations. One such writer was George Wheler who offered this definition, 'Hospitality is a liberal entertainment of all sorts of men, at ones house, whether neighbours or strangers, with kindness, especially with meat, drink and lodgings'.[13] Other writers of this time rarely provided such a concise definition, but all the essential elements embedded within were widely accepted as necessary for a complete understanding of the idea of good hospitality.[14] Hospitality was the idea of the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill from the host.[15] Because of the nature of hospitality – to provide food, drink, and lodgings – it was ultimately

---

[13] G. Wheler, *The Protestant Monastery: or, Christian Oecommicks* (London, 1698), p. 175.
[14] F. Heal, 'The Idea of Hospitality in Early Modern England', *Past and Present,* 102 (1984), 66-93 (p. 66).
[15] Adapted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Audrey M. Thorstad

a household task. The household itself was an expression of wealth and status. The members of the household were the players who performed and conducted their duties on the stage or backdrop of the castle; all of which was a proclamation of a noble lifestyle.[16] Late medieval society was one in which display, wealth, and social competition were all important and one 'which such distinctions came to be carefully weighed, nuances closely regarded and the overwhelming detail of ceremony recorded for posterity'.[17] Although hospitality was to provide necessities to guests, it also affirmed the role of the host as a generous man while at the same time promoting his wealth and status through agents such as his residence and his household.

Historians have recognised the role of hospitality in the late medieval and early modern periods as one in displaying and articulating the authority and power of the elite.[18] The hospitality of guests was also a Christian duty which was an obligation of every man.[19] The act of hospitality was bound to honour and reputation, and therefore, it was wise of a nobleman 'to use his establishment [his residence and household] as a stage on which his virtues were displayed'.[20] According to William Vaughan at the end of the sixteenth century, '[m]agnificence is a virtue that consisteth in sumptuous and great expenses […] so that […] it is peculiar to Noblemen'.[21] Magnificence marked out the king and his leading subjects and was something both parties were conscience of displaying and establishing to the outside world, and the best way to do that was through the visual reinforcement of superiority through the act of hospitality.

Meals were the perfect opportunity for visual displays and reinforcements of the social hierarchy that dominant society at this time. An Italian visitor to England during this period

---

[16] This is in reference to the 'castle as a theatre': Dixon, 'Castle as a Theatre', pp. 121-39

[17] C. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 1; D. Starkey, 'The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts *c.* 1350-*c.* 1550', in *The Later Middle Ages,* ed. by S. Medcalf (London: Methuen, 1981), 225-90.

[18] Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); L. Stone and J.C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 203-14; F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)*,* pp. 282-9; I. K. Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)*,* ch. 7.

[19] Matthew 10:42 has been cited by writer of the early seventeenth-century, 'a cup of cold water given in His name, shal…be left unrewarded'. See R. Curteys, *The Care of a Christian Conscience* (London, 1600); S. Garey, *A Newe Yeares Gift for the Suole* (London, 1615).

[20] Heal, *Hospitality in Early Modern England,* p. 23. It can also be seen in literature from the fourteenth century such as *The Book of Chyvalry* through literature on the seventeenth century such as the *Institucion of a Gentleman.*

[21] W. Vaughan, *The Golden Grove, Moralized in Three Books* (London, 1600), bk. I, ch. 53.

Audrey M. Thorstad

commented, 'they take great pleasure in having a quantity of excellent victuals, and also in remaining a long time at the table […] they think no greater love can be conferred, or received, than to invite others to eat with them, or to be invited themselves'.[22] Mealtimes provided the lord an opportunity to display his wealth by presenting not only lavish entertainment as seen in the section above, but also fine food. The host of a feast was able to showcase his residence and great hall, but also the food and drink he could afford. Seating was based on social status with the most highest status guests and household staff being seated closest to the lord. The most important diners sat at the high table at one end of the hall facing down towards the other guests.[23] A mid-fifteenth century 'manual' was written by John Russell which gives instruction about precedence on where certain people were supposed to be seated.[24] The seating arrangements also determined what a guest was given to eat. The higher that guests were on the table the more expensive the dishes would be.[25] In Edward Stafford, third duke of Buckingham's household, tables were set up in both the great hall and the great chamber; this was not uncommon for nobility with large households and residences during this period. Stafford, his family, and any high ranking guest would eat in the great chamber.[26]

The household book of Edward Stafford gives a glimpse into the consumption of food by Stafford and his household. On an average day, Stafford, his family, his guests, and his servants consumed 220 loaves of bread, nine quarts of Gascon wine, eighty-one flagons of beer, twelve rounds of beef, four sheep, half a deer, half a pig, two geese, two suckling pigs, three capons, seven rabbits, three woodcocks, one mallard, six swans, eight lambs, sixty eggs, and four dishes of butter.[27] The entertainment provided for his family, household, and guests consisted of both music and performers. Not only did he have minstrels on his account books, but also a bear and an idiot and welcomed new performers to Thornbury on a regular basis. In

---

[22] *A Relation, or Rather a True Account of the Island of England…About the year 1500,* ed. by C.A. Sneyd, Camden Society, 37 (1968), pp. 21-2.
[23] A. Sim, *Food and Feast in Tudor England* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), p. 4.
[24] J. Russell, *Early English Meals and Manners: The Book of Nurture,* ed. by Furnivall (London: Humphrey Milford, 1868), pp. 69-73.
[25] Regulations were passed 31 May 1517 pertaining to the sumptuary laws covering food. The regulation stated that a cardinal may have nine dishes served at one meal; a duke, archbishop, marquis, earl of bishop could have seven; lords 'under the degree of an earl', mayors of the city of London, knights of the Garter and abbots could have six; and so on down the hierarchy until those with an income of between £40 and £100 a year could have three dishes. *Statutes of the Realm* (Record Commission, 1820-8).
[26] Staffordshire Record Office, D1721/1/5, some excerpts of the household book in *Archaeologia,* 25 (1834), 318-41. Stafford also had a private dining room, but there is no evidence indicating when he ate there instead of the great chamber.
[27] SRO, D1721/1/5, f. 6. The date is 13 November 1507.

Audrey M. Thorstad

1520, the account recorded the presence of a female tumbler, 'certain Egyptians', and 'certain Frenchmen and two Frenchwomen playing the passion'.[28]

Mealtimes and entertainment within a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century residence was one of visual opulence and stimulation. The backdrop of mealtime, whether it was the great hall or the great chamber, was one intended the impress the observer and use outward cues in order to demonstrate social status. The dining room a person sat in, the table where they sat, and even the food they ate were all visual representations of where a person's place was within the social hierarchy of Tudor England and Wales. It seems clear from the accounts of Edward Stafford that the amount of money spent on food, entertainment, and everyday spectacle was a vast quantity, but it was a very important aspect of a nobleman's life. The nobility in Tudor England and Wales wanted to demonstrate their sophistication and place on the social hierarchy at all times and the best way to do this was through visual representations, particularly in everyday events such as dining.

The short examination of just one activity which took place within late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century castles, has demonstrated the complex nature of the role architecture and visual displays played during this time. Each of my chapters examines activities that took place in or around castles, such as meal times. Each activity is, in turn, placed spatially within the castle layout and analysed based on access control, who was performing the activity, and what they might have seen, in terms of architecture and landscape, while performing the activity. For example, in my second chapter, I explore the local administration, court, and political activities that took place within the castle walls. It asks who visited the castle to seek the lord's arbitration, patronage, or favour, where did they go while at the castle, what did they see, and what route did they take through the landscape as they approached the gatehouse. To answer such questions, my chapter examines landscape archaeology, in order to assess features such as fish ponds, lakes, and gardens; building remains, in order to evaluate the architecture that was on display for the guests; and documentary evidence such as letters, and patent rolls to determine who travelled to the castle to visit the lord and why.

Intrinsically, the chapter on hospitality is connected to my chapter on the functions and spatial arrangement of the household staff and offices. This chapter argues that the layout of

---

[28] The National Archives, E36/220/4 and 12.

Audrey M. Thorstad

early Tudor castles followed that of earlier castles of the thirteenth century, which arranged the kitchen and related service buildings linked to the hall that led to the great chamber. This arrangement placed the great hall as a sort of 'buffer zone' between the workings of the household and the preparation of the food and the lord's more 'private' area of the great chamber where he consumed the food. Moreover, I examine the 'private' versus 'public' nature of each chamber within a castle, demonstrating a hierarchy of privacy was built into the layout.

My thesis, therefore, allows a deeper and more holistic understanding to not only the everyday activities performed in a domestic setting, but also to the complex nature of martial-style architecture of the early Tudor period. Moreover, it enhances the historian's awareness of problems with having 'transitional markers' between periods of time such as the Middle Ages and the early modern period. My thesis does this by showcasing an essentially 'medieval building' – the castle – in a period marked as the era of the country house. It is hoped that my methodology will provide a useful lens through which to analyse other and subsequent periods of secular architecture. This approach will provide insight across several disciplines and encourage further research into the role of architecture in society as a whole. Throughout the thesis, I argue that it is only in this way, by exploring architecture through interdisciplinary methods and through the activities performed within the buildings themselves, that can we begin to understand the complexity of the relationship between the architecture and the owner, the architecture and the landscape, the building layout and the guest, the lord and his household, and ultimately, the residence within wider society.