

Castles

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Castles



Written and
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Paula Schricker

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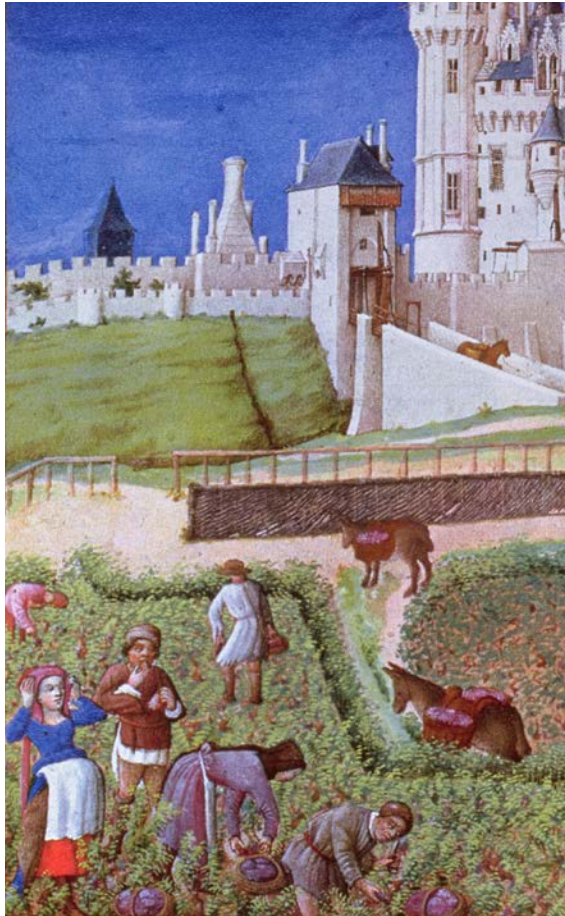
A typical castle

What Is a Castle?

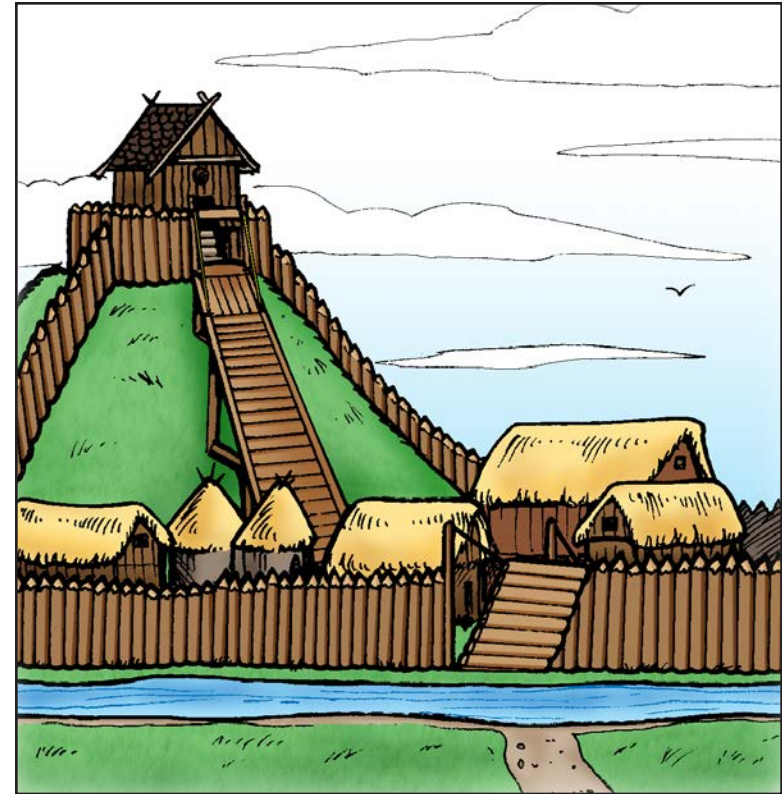
During the Middle Ages, many great castles were built across Europe. The castles were made to protect people from their enemies. They had thick, tall walls and watchtowers where guards stood watch over the castle.

The people who lived in the castles were the nobility, or **nobles**. However, they were not the only people living in the castles. The people who served and protected the nobility also lived within the castle walls. The nobles not only owned and lived in the castle, they also owned much of the land stretching beyond the castle. They were loyal to the king. Their loyalty helped the king control even more land.

Living outside the castle was another class of people called **commoners**. They were the craftsmen and farmers who lived in small towns and villages and on farms not far from the castle. The commoners were loyal to the nobles. They paid taxes, which allowed the nobles to live privileged lives.



Peasants farm the land around the lord's castle.



A mott and bailey castle

The First Castles

The first type of castle was called a **mott and bailey**. The mott was a high mound of dirt with a wooden tower built upon it. A wooden fence, called a **palisade**, was built out from the mott. The palisade formed a wall surrounding the bailey, or the yard, that held the kitchen, hall, stables, and other buildings belonging to the noble.

Later, castles had stone motts or towers. Many of these castles also featured **moats**. Moats were ditches, often filled with water, that surrounded the castle. As time passed, castles were built with bigger towers and walls. They became larger, with more rooms and passages. They came to look more and more like the large castles we see today. These castles were well built and have withstood the test of time.

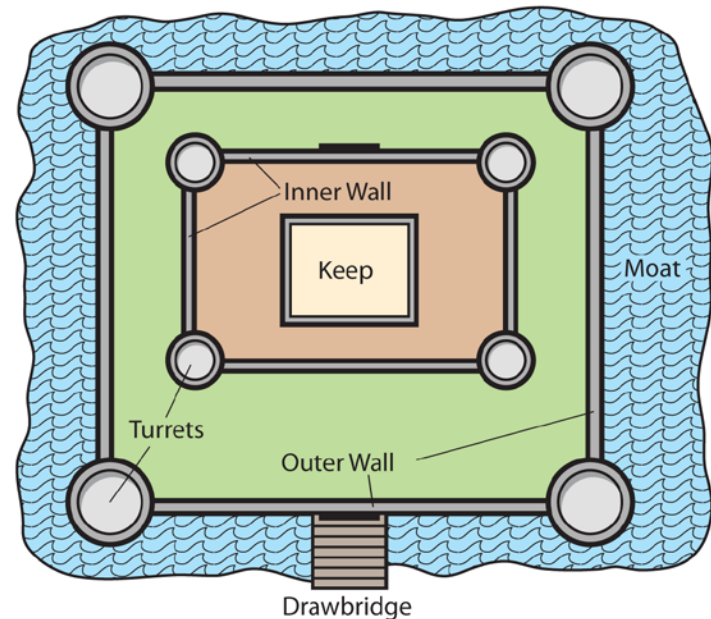


A castle with its moat and stone towers

Outside the Castle

Newly built castles were painted with a mixture of lime and water. This mixture gave the castle walls a fresh, clean coat of white. For this reason, the mixture was called whitewash.

Every castle's design was different. Still, they had many of the same features. Most had towers or **turrets**, and many castles had an inner and an outer wall. Many also had a very strong building in the center of the castle. This building was called a **keep**.



A bird's-eye diagram of a typical castle



The curtain wall and turret of the outer bailey.

Many castles were built in places that made them easier to defend. Many were built in the middle of lakes or on jagged hilltops and cliffs. This made it hard for attackers to reach the castle.

The walls were often more than 3 meters (10 ft) thick. The walls were topped with **crenelations** that gave them a sawtooth look. This design protected archers from enemy arrows. It also made it more difficult to climb over the walls. The primary entrance was through the main gate. But often there were smaller gates around the castle's walls. These smaller gates were used for extra traffic or for deliveries to the kitchens.



Windows in a Spanish castle

Castles had many windows to let light in. This meant that fewer candles and torches would be needed to light the rooms and halls. Windows near the ground were extremely narrow so that attackers could not climb through them. Since windows high above the ground were difficult to reach, they could be bigger. Most of these larger windows had shutters to keep out bad weather and often had bars to keep invaders out.

The roofs and floors were made of hard wood. Many castles had cellars that were used to store food and wine. After the Middle Ages, dungeons were built in castle cellars. These dungeons were used to house prisoners.

Inside the Castle

Castles weren't just designed to be defended. They were also designed to make life comfortable for the nobles. One of the most important places in a castle was the Great Hall. It was where meals, entertainment, and feasts were held. It was also where everyone gathered to talk or hold meetings.

The kitchens were separated from the Great Hall by long passageways. Some kitchens were outside in another building to avoid the risk of the castles' wooden roofs catching fire.

This meant that food for medieval feasts could arrive at the tables cold or wet with rain!



The Great Hall of Winchester Castle in England.

A castle had enough rooms to house the noble and his extended family. Visitors probably slept on straw mattresses in the Great Hall after the tables had been cleared away. Most castles had spiral staircases. They wound upward in a clockwise direction. They were built this way to slow down invaders by making it difficult to fight in the stairwells.



A spiral staircase in a castle

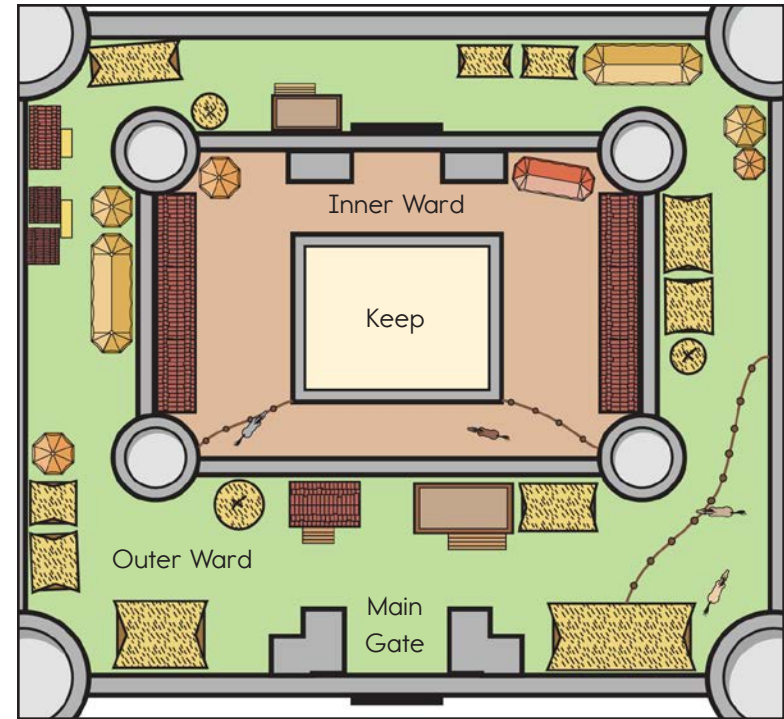


Archers could stand behind the crenellations for protection.

Built for Defense

One of the most important things to consider in castle design was defense. A castle usually had two surrounding walls. The inner wall was taller than the outer one. Archers standing on the inner wall could fire their arrows over the defenders on the shorter wall. It also made it easier for those on the taller wall to defend against attackers who had reached the lower outer wall.

The two sets of gates on these walls often opened at opposite ends of the castle. This forced invaders to circle around the inside of the outer wall to find the other gate. While looking for the second gate, invaders could be hit by the castle guards' arrows.

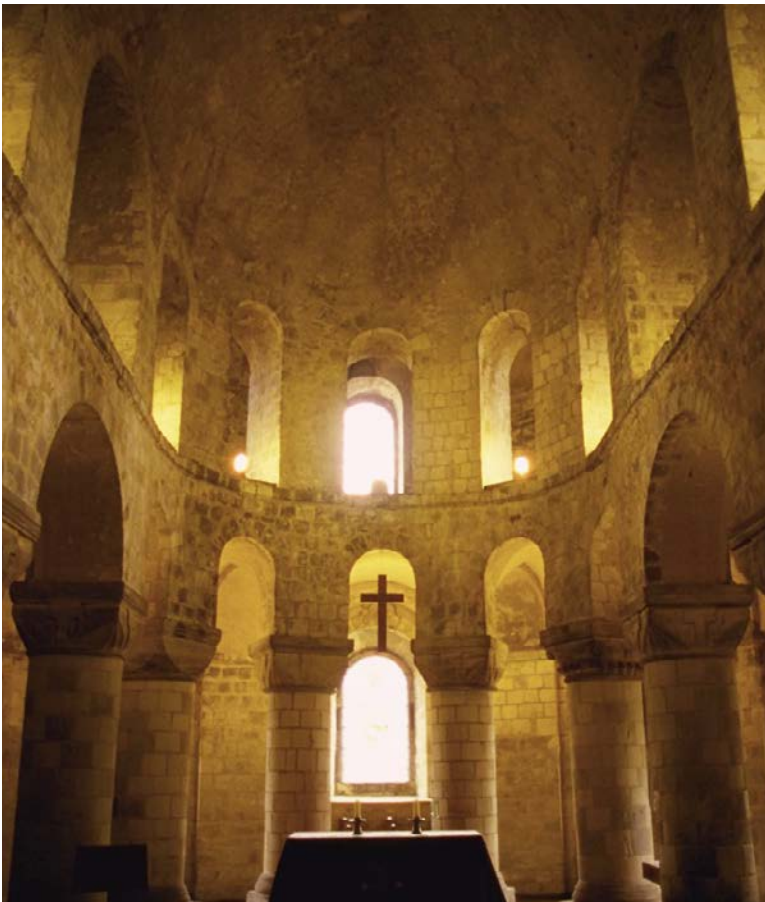


Between the castle walls were the outer and inner wards. The outer ward was filled with shops and houses. The inner ward was where the food and weapons were stored, the knights stayed, and water wells were dug.

In the center of the castle was a separate building called the keep. It was here that the nobility lived. It was the safest part of the castle and the hardest to enter. It was designed so that if the rest of the castle were captured, the nobles could still be defended.

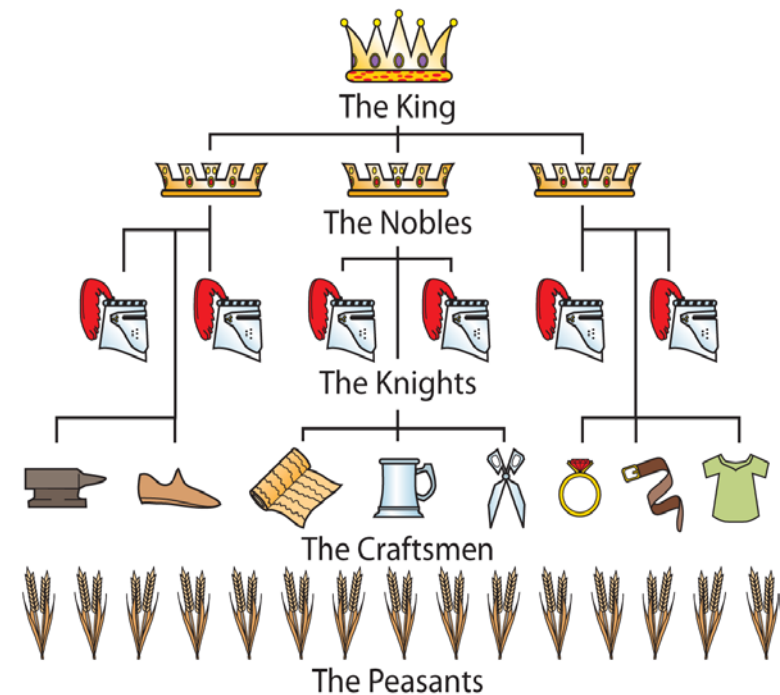
People In and Around the Castle

During the Middle Ages, life revolved around the church. People believed that God gave the kings and nobles the power to rule. The church had at least as much power as the king. It represented the authority that gave the king his right to rule.



The interior of the Chapel of St. John

The king and church had great power. They ruled everyone in the kingdom. Under the king and queen were several other classes of people. The highest class was the nobles. They paid the king a tax for the privilege to control land in his kingdom. The knights also ranked high in the kingdom. Below the knights were the merchants and artisans. And below them were the more common people, such as blacksmiths and shoemakers. All of these people paid taxes to the nobles. They were allowed to hold land.





Peasants used very simple tools for farming the land.

The lowest class was the **peasants**. They had to remain on the land where they were born. Peasants did not own land. These farmers had to give much of what they produced to the king and the landowner.



This painting of a siege shows a catapult and a trebuchet.

Castles and War

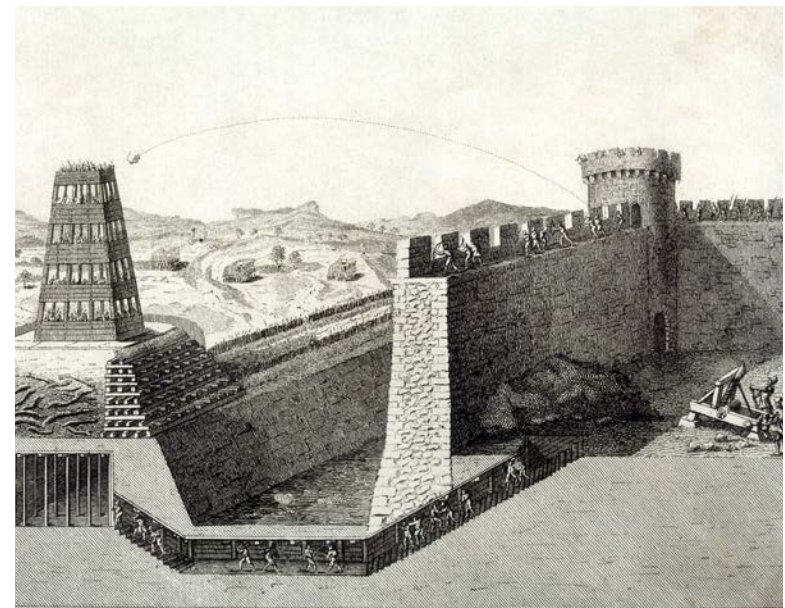
Castles were the targets of many long-running wars. Sometimes, walls were built around entire towns. The peasants would defend this town wall for as long as they could. If the town wall were overrun, then knights would defend the outer wall of the castle. If that fell, then the inner wall was defended. And lastly, the center building, or keep, that housed the nobles was defended.

Defending the castle was not easy. Enemies used many weapons to try to take over a castle. They used large **battering rams** to hammer away at the castle's walls and gates. They used weapons called **catapults** to hurl rocks, debris, and even dead animals or people over the walls. Giant slingshot-like weapons called **trebuchets** were also used to hurl objects over the walls. And to discourage the castle defenders from rushing out of the castle to attack them, the attackers used giant crossbows mounted on carts.



Art showing an attack on a castle

Many methods were used to keep attackers from entering a castle. Holes were cut into the floors of arches above the castle entrance. Defenders poured burning sand or tar on anyone trying to batter down the gates. Newer castles replaced arrow slits with keyhole-shaped windows where cannons could be placed.

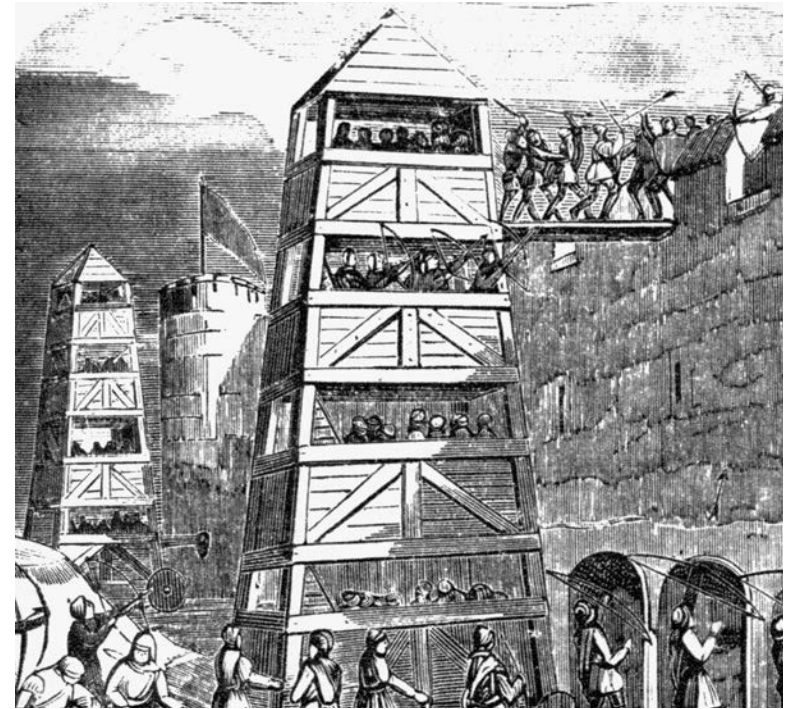


Defenders use a catapult to repel an army that is using a siege tower. Meanwhile, soldiers tunnel underneath the moat and break into the castle.



Moats made castles harder to attack.

The moat, often filled with water, surrounded the castle. It was difficult to tunnel under a moat, and attackers could not wade across the deep water. There is a myth that crocodiles were placed in some moats. Some moats did have eels and other kinds of fish in them for food, but there were no crocodiles.



A siege tower being used to attack a castle.

Enemies also dug under castle walls to make them collapse. Sometimes they moved large wooden towers against a wall. They then used the towers to climb onto and over the walls. Attackers were known to use portable bridges, or barges, to cross the moat and attack a castle. But often it was not possible to break into a well-built and well-defended castle. So the attackers would simply wait for the castle's residents to run out of food or water.



The ruins of a castle in Scotland

Around the 1600s, castles became less and less popular. They were no longer easy to defend because of the use of heavy cannons in warfare. The nobles also wanted more comfortable and open places to live. Still, many castles stand today as a reminder of an age gone by.

Glossary

battering rams	reinforced logs with metal heads used to break down a castle's gates (p. 19)
catapults	weapons used to hurl objects over castle walls (p. 19)
commoners	people without noble rank (p. 5)
crenelations	the portion of the wall at the top of a structure that has alternating gaps where weapons can be faced outward for defense (p. 9)
keep	the central tower or building in a castle (p. 8)
moats	deep, wide ditches around a castle, often filled with water (p. 7)
mott and bailey	early castle made up of a large, fenced-in area (bailey) surrounding a tall hill (mott) that often had a tower (p. 6)
nobles	people of the ruling class, below the king (p. 4)
palisade	a spiked wooden wall built around the bailey of a castle (p. 6)
peasants	the lowest class of people in a kingdom (p. 17)
trebuchets	large slingshot-like weapons used to throw rocks or other objects during a siege (p. 19)
turrets	castle towers (p. 8)