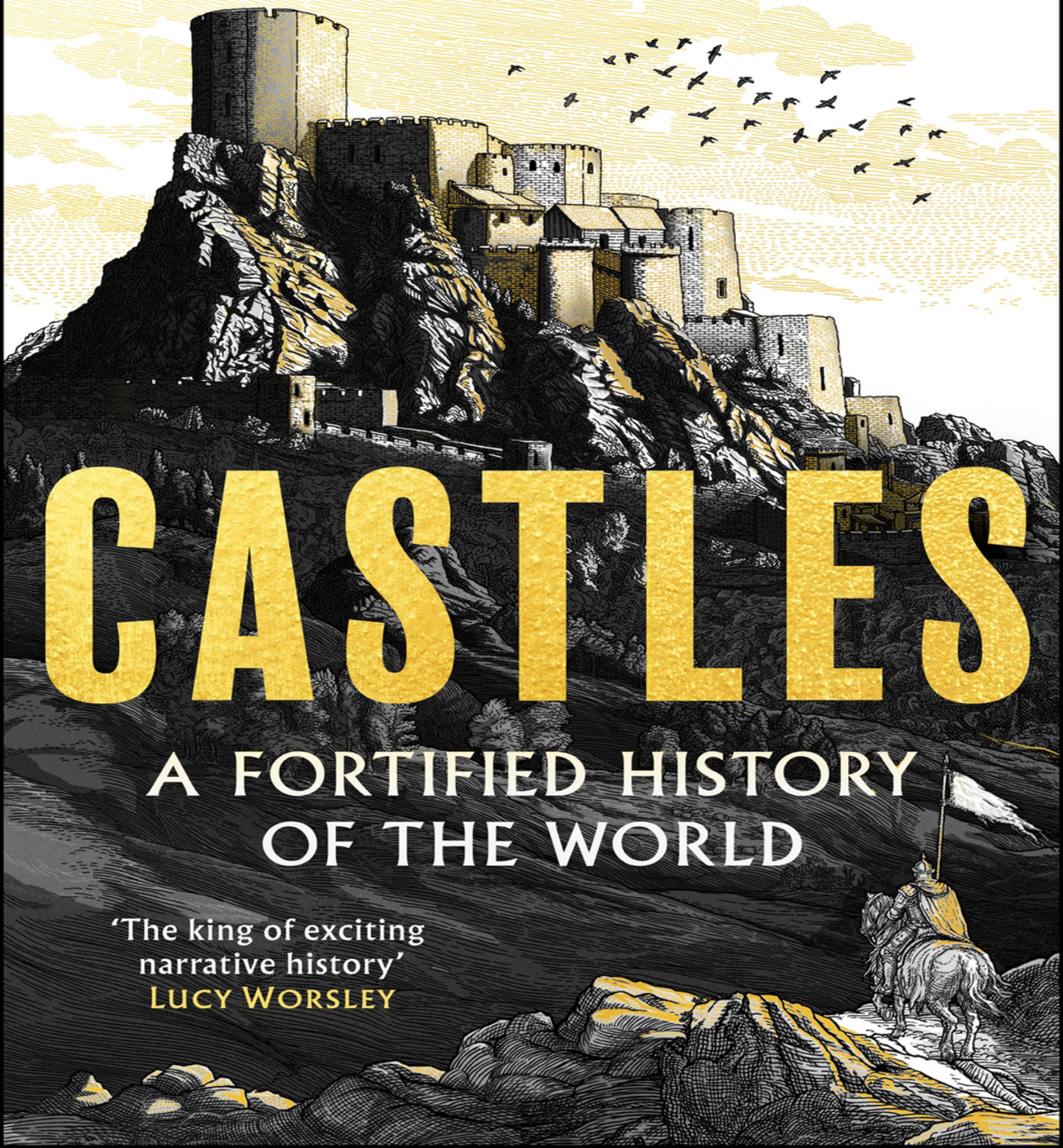
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DAN JONES



CASTLES

A FORTIFIED HISTORY OF THE WORLD

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þanne gan I meten a merveillous swevene,
þat I was in a wildernesse, wiste I neuere where.
[Ac] as I biheeld into þe Eest, an hei3 to þe sonne,
I sei3 a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,
A deep dale byneþe, a dongeon þerInne,
Wiþ depe diches and derke and dredfulle of si3te.
A fair feeld ful of folk fond I þer bitwene
Of alle manere of men, þe meene and þe riche,
Werchynge and wandrynge as þe world askeþ.*

Piers Plowman: Vision One, Prologue
William Langland

And so castles made of sand
Fall in the sea
Eventually.

Castles Made of Sand
The Jimi Hendrix Experience

* Then I began to dream a marvellous dream, that I was in a wilderness, though I never knew where. But as I looked upwards, east, towards the sun, I saw a finely made tower on a low hill. Below it was a deep hollow containing a dungeon, with deep ditches, dark and dreadful to see. Between them I found a lovely field full of folk: all manner of men, the poor and the rich, working and wandering as the world demands.

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Contents

Introduction
1. Bronze Age Cities
2. Iron Age Hillforts
3. Islamic Castles
4. Viking Ring Fortresses
5. Norman Castles
6. Crusader Castles
7. Chivalric Castles
8. Great Walls
9. Renaissance Castles
10. Samurai Castles
11. Fantasy Castles
12. American Castles
Epilogue: After Castles

Notes
Bibliography
Index
An Invitation from the Publisher

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We shape our buildings
and afterwards
our buildings shape us.

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

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Introduction

One evening in March 1314 thirty men gathered silently below the north face of Castle Rock, a steep volcanic plug of dolerite in Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh. Among them was Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray, one of the wealthiest noblemen in Scotland, and a veteran of the wars to defend the kingdom from the English, which had just reached a critical moment. Looming 130–140m above them at the top of the rock-face was Edinburgh Castle, held by an English garrison.

Since almost the dawn of history, this rock had been a stronghold. In the Iron Age, it was a place for war-bands to gather and feast before they rode into battle. For the past 300 years it had been home to a castle, protected by the natural defences of the cliff and by towers and walls built in timber and stone. At the highest point of the castle compound was a chapel dedicated to the canonised Scottish queen Margaret of Wessex. Ever since her death at the castle in 1093 St Margaret had been working miracles: a book of the gospels dedicated to her floated when dropped in water, flashes of light were seen bursting from her tomb, and when her remains were exhumed for reburial in 1250 CE, the sweet smell of 'spice merchants and springing flowers' emitted from her grave.[1] The men at the bottom of Castle Rock would need another miracle if what they planned that evening was to come to a good end.

Their scheme was simple, but not easy. The English garrison had been lodged on Castle Rock for the past eighteen years. Moray's aim was to prise them out. Since he did not have the siege towers, catapults and blockading armies that would be needed to do so by attrition, he would be making his attempt by ruse. At any moment, on the more accessible, southern walls of the castle, another band of his men would be feigning an assault, to draw the castle guards' attention. At that point Moray and his team would begin climbing the rock's north face. To aid them in their climb they had three

essential things: rope ladders, a local guide and their nerve. If any one of these failed, they were in trouble.

The guide – so chroniclers later said – was an enterprising gallant named William Francis, who had once lived in the castle, when his father had served as its constable. In those days, Francis kept a secret lover in the city, and he had found a safe climbing route down (and up) the rock so he could sneak out by night to go and see her. Since what was fair in love was fair in war, Francis had offered to show Moray and his men the way. 'I practised that route so long,' he said, 'I know the path exactly, though the night be never so dark.'[2]

As the light faded, and the sounds of an affray came from the opposite side of the castle, Francis led Moray's little band on their ascent. It was hard climbing, and halfway up they were glad to find a ledge on which they could perch and catch their breath. As they paused, however, they heard a sound that sucked the air out of their lungs again. From above them came a watchman's voice, shouting, 'Away, I see you well!'

Along with the cry came a shower of stones.[3]

Had the sentry really seen the climbers as well as he claimed, their adventure would have been over. Yet from the silence that followed it seemed – as the chronicler put it – 'he did not see them at all. . . The watchmen, when they heard no movement, all left that post together, talking as they went farther away.' Below, Moray, Francis and the rest of the men continued their climb. When they reached the top of the cliff they came to a wall some 4m (12 feet) high. They threw up a rope ladder, and one by one, scrambled onto the ramparts. For a brief moment they found themselves in the castle, unopposed.

Then the watchmen came running.

Fierce fighting immediately broke out. With cries of 'Treason! Treason!' the whole garrison started to rush from the south side of the castle to the north. 'The constable, who was brave, fully armed rushed to the alarm, and with him many bold and stout men,' wrote the chronicler.[4] But Moray had the advantage of surprise, and he used it. 'With weapons in many ways they struck at each other with all their might, until swords, fair and bright were bloody to the hilts.'[5] Eventually, the constable was killed, and when he fell, his men lost heart. They fled their posts and, behind them, Moray and his bold climbers let the rest of their comrades in.

In the opinion of the chronicler, Moray's storming of Edinburgh Castle was a siege second only to Alexander the Great's conquest of Tyre in 332 BCE. It also seemed proof that St Margaret had been looking out for the Scots. In her chapel at the castle there was an inscription in old French. '*Gardez vous de François*,' it read. For years, men had thought this an imprecation against Frenchmen. Now, its meaning was clear. It was a prophecy that one day, Edinburgh Castle would fall to the wiles of a crafty old swain called Francis.



On any given Saturday morning in the late 1980s, one of my parents would take my sister and me on the bus from our home in Edinburgh's suburbs, down through Morningside to the main shopping thoroughfare of Princes Street. I was not yet ten years old, but there were already things that seemed to me to be eternal to the city. The drone of bagpipes, always playing somewhere. The smell of beer brewing. The smell of the sea. And up there, above Princes Street Gardens, huge and grand on its crag, watching us as we went about our errands, emitting a loud boom every lunchtime when the cannon known as the One O'Clock Gun was fired: the castle.

Back then I did not know much about Edinburgh Castle. I did not know about Iron Age war-bands, or St Margaret's miracles, or that the castle had been passed back and forth during the Scottish wars for independence, conquered by daring men like the earl of Moray. I did not know that Mary Queen of Scots had given birth to the future James VI and I there, that it had been bombarded by English troops in the 'Lang Siege', that it had served as a prison in the Napoleonic Wars, or that it contained the Scottish Crown Jewels. Had anyone told me these things, I would have been interested, but it would only have confirmed my opinion of the castle, which was already significant. This huge, ancient building was an essential part of the fabric of the city we called home. Edinburgh was unimaginable without it.

As I grew up, other castles entered my imagination. Whenever we made the long drive to south Wales to stay with my grandparents, we would pass Castell Coch, the Marquess of Bute's extraordinary neo-Gothic fairytale folly, nestled amid the colourful beech trees of the Fforest Fawr. On summer holidays abroad we might also bump into a castle. I remember a

stranger on the beach in Sicily pointing out an old Norman fortress set half a mile or so back from the sand, and explaining that it was connected to the shoreline by smuggler's tunnels. (This seemed to me a Mafia-adjacent twist on one of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* novels, set in the English countryside near the fictional Kirrin Castle.[*]) As a fourteen-year-old I went on an unusually exotic school trip aboard a cruise liner, which sailed around Egypt and the Holy Land, and saw for the first time the Citadel in Jerusalem and the remains of the Hospitaller fortifications on Rhodes. It was beneath the latter fortifications, defended and lost by crusader knights in 1481 following a heroic battle with Suleiman the Magnificent's forces, that my teenage cabin-mates and I bought and consumed our first ever bottle of vodka, with what felt like comparably spectacular results.

Soon after that I began to take a serious interest in history. As a first-year undergraduate, aged eighteen, I became fascinated by the Middle Ages, and from that point on, castles were unavoidable. I studied the Plantagenets – learning with glee about the siege of Rochester Castle in 1215, when 'Bad' King John collapsed one of the towers by firing a mine greased with pig-fat. I worked on the crusades, marvelling at Richard the Lionheart's imprisonment in Trifels Castle on his way home from the Third Crusade – an incarceration that had profound consequences for English politics and produced a rich body of romantic legend. I considered the dying days of the Middle Ages, when in 1527 Pope Clement VII was trapped for months behind the walls of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome by the marauding armies of the Habsburg emperor Charles V – unable to grant Henry VIII of England an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, thereby beginning the chain of events that led to the English Reformation.

Now and again my studies led me outside the Middle Ages. There were castles there, too. Studying nineteenth-century America, I encountered the Third System fortresses built in the 1820s–40s to defend the eastern seaboard of the fledgling United States, which were blown to pieces in the 1860s, not by foreign enemies, but by guns operated by Americans during the US Civil War. A paper covering Europe between the world wars featured the Maginot Line, that tragic chain of fortifications which resembled a Cubist deconstruction of a castle, built in the 1930s to fortify France against German aggression, and scornfully bypassed by the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe during the Blitzkrieg of May 1940. These were not castles in the same way that Edinburgh Castle or the Tower of London

were castles. But they seemed to be cousins in the same extended family. I was fascinated by them then. I still am today.



What is a castle? That is a surprisingly difficult question to answer definitively, and if you approach a historian with it casually, you are likely to be strongly besieged. In the late eleventh century CE the Burgundian cleric Anselm, who came to England to serve as archbishop of Canterbury, thought he had the answer, when he wrote: *Castellum enim dicitur quaelibet turris, et murus in circitu ejus*: 'any tower with a wall around it is called a castle'.[6]

Anselm based his definition of castle on England in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, when the chief tool of colonisation used by William the Conqueror was precisely this: a tower with walls around it, known in Latin as *castellum* and Old English as a *castel*. Yet other definitions were available. For one thing, even in Anselm's day, *castellum* had a complex etymology. In the fourth century CE St Jerome had used it in his translation of the Bible (known as the Vulgate) to render the ancient Greek word κώμη, which today we might translate as 'rural settlement' or 'village'. Mary and Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus, therefore lived in a *castellum*. Was that a motte-and-bailey castle of the sort Anselm saw spreading like a pox across Norman England? Certainly not. Nor was it what the Romans of first century CE Judea would have called a *castra* – a fortified camp for soldiers – though that too could be rendered into medieval English as 'castle'. The French of Anselm's day used the word *chastel*, but that was on a linguistic trajectory of its own towards the word *château*, which would come to mean anything from a fortified building to an unfortified manor house or even a vineyard.

In 1954 one of the greatest castle scholars who ever lived, R. Allen Brown, tried to pin down the meaning of 'castle' as it stood in his time. Brown was described after his death as 'an "old" historian in terms of shunning trendy topics and approaches. He refused to tolerate nonsense, and he spoke his mind plainly, doubtless stepping on many toes.'[7] He ought, therefore, to be a good man to listen to. But even Brown could not quite make up his mind. 'The castle is basically a fortified residence, a residential fortress,' he wrote. But Brown's *basically* was what in poker

would be called a ‘tell’. Almost immediately he qualified his definition: ‘the castle is the fortified residence of a lord, which is to say any lord, not necessarily the prince or a king.’

Or was it? Brown now clarified his clarification. In fact, the castle ‘is the fortified residence of a lord, and as such differs from other known forms of fortification in the history of the West both earlier and later, by its duality as both residence and fortress and by its private as opposed to public or communal nature.’ But maybe even this was imprecise. ‘Of course, there will be untidiness round the edges of this special category of fortification, and scholarly qualifications to be made. . .’[8]

That this brilliant historian, who devoted much of his career to the study of castles, gave no quarter to nonsense and valued plain speaking, could find it so hard to describe the thing he knew most about suggests the task is not a straightforward one. So it may be easiest – and truest – to say that a castle can be many things. The current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives twenty-one different meanings, including: ‘A large building or set of buildings fortified for defence against an enemy; a fortress, stronghold’; ‘A name for large mansions or country houses, which were formerly feudal castles’; ‘Ancient British or Roman earthworks, [such] as. . . Maiden Castle at Dorchester’; ‘A tower or elevated structure on the deck of a ship’; ‘A small wooden tower used for defence in warfare; a tower borne on the back of an elephant’; ‘A visionary project or scheme, day-dream, idle fancy.’[9] Evidently, this is a topic on which reasonable people may differ.

With that in mind, this book takes a broad view on what a castle was – and is. At its core is a series of chapters about the castles of western Europe during the Middle Ages. But it also examines the castle’s origins in the fortified cities that emerged during the Bronze Age in the eastern Mediterranean. It looks at the hilltop settlements of the Iron Age, the desert fortresses of the early Islamic caliphates, Viking ring fortresses, the iconic Norman motte-and-bailey castles, the dynastic seats of European kings and princes in the golden age of chivalry, the vast crusader fortresses built on religious and military frontiers in the thirteenth century, the architecturally and aesthetically beautiful strongholds of the Italian renaissance and the angular and the bristling artillery fortresses of the age of gunpowder. It looks at great walls in China, Iran and beyond, reasoning that in a sense, these can be understood as attempts to make a castle of an entire realm. It

includes a chapter on Japanese castles in the age of the samurai, and it looks at castle-building in the Americas from the age of Christopher Columbus to that of Walt Disney. It also concerns itself throughout with the *idea* of the castle, and the way that the castle of the imagination has intersected with the reality of fortification – from Homeric myth to Gothic literature, from King Arthur to Count Dracula, from Neuschwanstein to Disneyland.

So this is a book that takes an inclusive, ecumenical, maximalist approach to its topic. As with all my books, it uses human storytelling to drive historical analysis, to show how in this case, as Winston Churchill once said of the Palace of Westminster, 'we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.' *Castles* treats castles, as one historian has put it, as 'stage settings'.[10] And in doing so it wanders freely through time. Although I am a medievalist, I have not hesitated to stray outside my lane – for while I believe historians must inevitably specialise, it is a wonderful thing to embrace breadth as warmly as depth. Each chapter of this book focuses on a particular age of castle-building, selects human stories from that time, then sets those stories in their ancient and modern context. In doing so it aims to satisfy one of the many definitions of history: a conversation between past and present.

There are, of course, many things this book does not do, and many places it does not go. Largely these coincide with places I myself have not yet been. The vast and fascinating topics of Indian forts, west African slave-trading castles, Russian kremlins, Korean fortresses, Central Asian desert castles, Omani castles and Ethiopian fortified cities would form the basis for another book again – and maybe they will do in the future. For now, all I can say is that this is a personal tour of castles I have encountered in what I hope has been only the first half of my life.

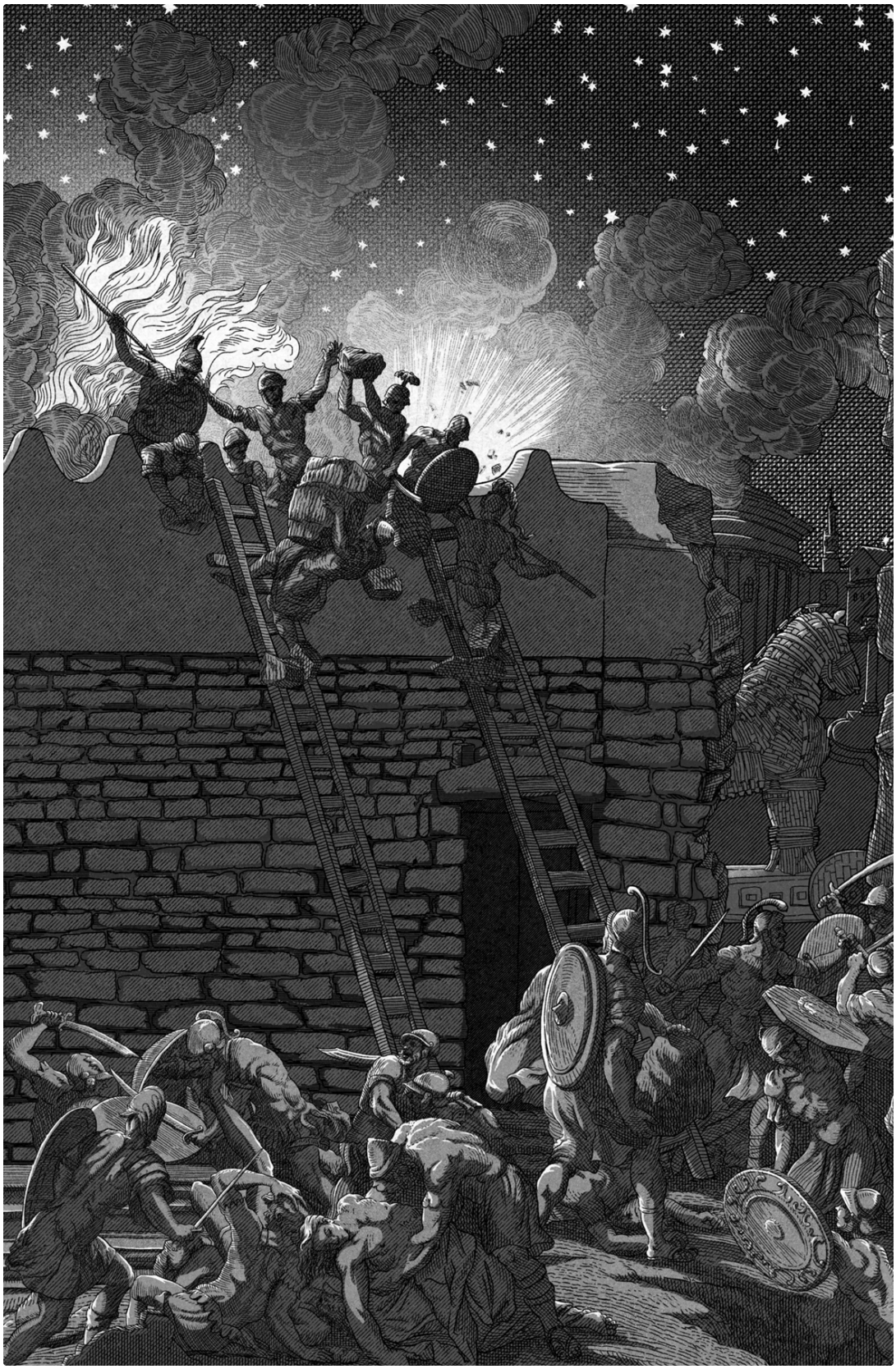
As ever, many people have helped me as I have worked on this book, and to everyone who has answered my questions or offered their advice on any of the chapters that follow, know that I am very grateful. My first professional engagement in castle-bothering was filming two seasons of *Secrets of Great British Castles*, originally commissioned by Ben Frow at Channel 5 in London, and subsequently shown worldwide on Netflix. I raise my glass to Billy McGrath and the team at Sideline Productions in Dublin. Thanks in particular to my patient editors Terezia Cicel, Holly Harley and Richard Milbank, to my wise friend and career-long vibes coach

Walter Donohue, to my brilliant agent Georgina Capel, and to my family, who can mostly take or leave a castle, but have stuck with me all the same.

To all of them, thank you. To everyone else, enjoy the ride.

Dan Jones
Staines-upon-Thames, spring 2026

* Kirrin Castle is strongly reminiscent of the ruins of Corfe Castle, on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. In the novels it is the scene of much criminal enterprise.



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1

BRONZE AGE CITIES

O Ilium, home of the gods!
O walls of the people of Dardanus,
famous in war!

VIRGIL, *THE AENEID*

Night had come rushing up from the sea, wrapping Troy in darkness, when the Greek liar called Sinon crept to the wooden horse and slid back the pine bolts that held fast the door to its belly. Almost everyone else in the walled city with its fortified citadel was asleep: worn out from a day of drinking to celebrate the end of the siege.

For ten years Troy's people – the Trojans – had been under attack by Greek armies, bent on punishing them for the theft of Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman in the world. The plains outside Troy had seen vicious fighting. Great heroes had been slaughtered battling for its walls. But now, at last, the Greeks seemed to have given up. They had lifted the siege and gone home, taking their thousand ships out of the Dardanelles strait and back across the Aegean Sea. All they left behind was this huge, strange, monumental horse, which wily Sinon, posing as a defector, had told the Trojans was an offering to the gods.

As quick to hijack divine favour as they had been to kidnap fair Helen, the Trojans had hauled the horse through their gates, all the way to the citadel, while young boys and virgin girls sang hymns and their elders adorned shrines with festal garlands. In this way the Trojans sealed their own fate. While they slept, Sinon opened the horse, and out slid a platoon of Greek warriors, led by Thessandrus and Sthenelus, Odysseus and Epeius. 'They moved into a city buried in wine and sleep, slaying the guards and opening the gates.' [1]

Outside their comrades were waiting, for the rest of the Greeks had not, in fact, gone home. They had merely taken a short sail over the horizon, returning by moonlight to await the signal to strike. When the gates swung open they poured into Troy in their thousands, sacking, looting, burning, killing, defiling temples and snatching women and children. Greek warriors blocked the streets and took control of the routes in and out of the city. 'Bitter grief was everywhere,' recalled one account of the massacre. 'Everywhere there was fear, and death in many forms.'[2]

The Greeks headed through the citadel in which stood the palace of the ruler, King Priam. Here lay the last bastion of Trojan hope. This was their fortress; the final part of their city, and indeed their civilisation, that they could hope to defend. Here, the Trojans made their last stand. They tore

stones from the defensive towers and hurled them at their attackers, ‘rolling down onto the heads of their enemies the gilded beams and richly ornamented ceilings of their ancestors.’ They stood shoulder to shoulder with drawn swords guarding the doorways that gave access to the fortified palace.[3]

It was all in vain. The Greeks were too many and the shock of their attack too sudden. The citadel was breached, and soon the palace surrendered. King Priam was run through with a sword. By daybreak Troy was on fire. ‘It was the fall of an ancient city that had long ruled an empire.’[4]

The Trojan War was over, and – according to the stories that were repeated and reworked over the centuries that followed – a new age had begun. This was an age of wanderings: Odysseus the Greek making his way home to Ithaca, Aeneas the Trojan finding his way to Carthage and thence to Italy, where his descendants founded Rome. Britons, Franks, even Vikings would link their lineage to this one, epic siege.

Or at least, this was how it was told. The battle for Troy, which is thought to have taken place around 1190–1180 BCE, is a historical mystery clothed in the rich trappings of legend. As portrayed by later storytellers – starting with Homer in roughly 750–650 BCE, four centuries after the war’s end – and fleshed out by the Roman poet Virgil between 29 BCE and 19 BCE – the Trojan War was a test of human strength and divine favour played out on and around the stone defences of a walled Bronze Age city. It started with a kidnapping and ended with furious, bloody sack of a citadel, the consequences of which would echo for eternity.

What *really* happened at Troy has been hotly debated by historians for centuries. Was there a siege? An earthquake? Some scholars doubt anything happened at all. The best that can be said with respect to the facts is that a fortified Bronze Age city, *which came to be identified* with legendary Troy, existed; that it was defined by its strong stone defences, consisting of a walled city with a heavily defended citadel; that late in the Bronze Age it suffered catastrophic destruction; and that this destruction was never forgotten by the generations who came after it.

But what can also be said with confidence is that the Trojan War has become a central part of the western literary and cinematic canon. From Homer to Euripides, Virgil to Ovid, Geoffrey Chaucer to William Shakespeare, Robert Wise to Christopher Nolan, Margaret Atwood to Madeline Miller – generations of writers, dramatists, filmmakers and artists

have sung of Troy's resistance and its fall. Many more will do so in future, revisiting and revising the matter of how, during the age of heroes, a mighty fortification came crashing down.

Inevitably, in the retelling, Troy has morphed and evolved, and every age has remodelled the Trojan War according to its own preoccupations. Sometimes this has meant massaging its characters to fit contemporary archetypes. Sometimes it has meant redesigning its defences. For the late medieval writer Guido delle Colonne, Troy was the forerunner of the early Renaissance Italian fortified city: 'surrounded by walls and towers, fortified with many gates.'[5] For the illustrator of a luxurious calfskin edition of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, produced for a wealthy patron in the early fifteenth century CE, Troy was a dusty pink Gothic castle, with soaring turrets and narrow windows opening onto comfortable chambers in which lovers could meet.

To these men, the Bronze Age walled city with a prestigious, heavily defended citadel was the forerunner of the castle, just as the people who fought over it were the ancestors of western civilisation. That makes Troy – and other Bronze Age cities like it – a natural point of embarkation for any journey through the history of fortification.

In more than one sense, Troy was where it all began.



The ruins of the city called Troy lie on a large plain in modern Turkey (Türkiye), in a corner of Anatolia traditionally known as the Troad. Today this area is connected to nearby cities by a new, fast, multi-lane toll road which briefly becomes the world's longest suspension bridge as it crosses the Dardanelles. That little saltwater strait, less than a mile wide at its narrowest point, rough but swimmable,[*] links the Aegean Sea with the Sea of Marmara, and thereby the Mediterranean with the Black Sea. It is a commercial and military artery and a pinch point on the world map. As one ancient poet wrote: 'Nowhere does a smaller stretch of water sever Asia from Europe.'[6] Once upon a time, before the coastline retreated to its present lie, Troy's proud, sloping walls overlooked it.

Over the millennia, Troy has gone by many names. To the Greeks it was *Ἴλιον*. To the Romans, it was *Ilium*. The Hittites, who ruled a powerful

nearby kingdom in ancient Anatolia, called it Wilusa. There have been nine distinct cities of Troy over the ages, each built on the ruins of another, then all eventually lost for centuries beneath the smothering earth. In modern times archaeologists have numbered these in chronological sequence, from Troy I to Troy IX, and applied careful subdivisions within these broader phases. Today the excavated mound where the remnants of all these Troys lie is open for exploration by scholars and tourists. The site is known as Hisarlik, which in Turkish means 'Place of Fortresses'. From Troy's earliest days, that is what it was.

Humans have roamed the Troad since at least 5,000 BCE. The first to settle at what became Troy did so around 3,000 BCE, in the early Bronze Age. The spot they chose had many advantages. The countryside around was thick with pine forests. The soil yielded seams of copper, gold and clay. Natural springs bubbled with freshwater, and there were two rivers close by, known in antiquity as the Scamander and Simoeis. Most important of all, Troy sat beside a large saltwater bay: a cool, calm lagoon which gave passing sailors shelter from the stiff winds and strong currents of the Dardanelles. Troy's first settlers made a living from servicing the traffic that came up and down that seaway, busying themselves in trade and hospitality.[†]

At its heart, 'Troy I' was a simple place, comprising a couple of dozen little oblong houses made with stone foundations and mudbrick walls, along with a few larger halls, of the sort that archaeologists today call 'megarons'.[7] In this it was not exceptional: there were many other settlements like it in the Troad. What made Troy I stand out was its fortifications, which were unusually massive. Around their dwellings, Troy's first settlers constructed a 280m circuit of walls: limestone blocks stacked 3m thick and 3.5m tall.[8] Access was via a gate 2m wide, overlooked by a pair of towers.

To conceive of such thick defences was impressive enough: the early Trojans must have had energetic leadership and a sense of communal identity. To quarry the stone, move it, assemble it and continually strengthen these fortifications would have taken thousands of man-hours. But, clearly, the duty of fortifying this place to such a magnificent standard was given economic, military and even cosmic importance. That was as good as written into the stones themselves. Built into one of Troy's towers was a slab known as a *stele*, carved with a stern warrior's face glaring out

from beneath a military helmet. These walls, their towers and this image sent a simple message to visitors.

Troy was not for the taking.



On the plains of Bronze Age Anatolia, Troy's first, bristling defences were state of the art. But they were not original. The basic architectural idea at work – of gathering people and dwellings in strategic locations, then throwing up a barrier around them – was already ancient. Its origins lay in the Stone Age.

One of the first known examples of man's instinct to fortify can be seen in an archaeological site in the modern-day Czech Republic, called Dolní Věstonice. There lies evidence of one of the earliest formal human settlements ever discovered. It was built more than 20,000 years before Troy was founded, when much of the world was cased in ice[‡] and the people of central Europe shared their land with cave bears and lions, wolves, wolverines and woolly mammoths.[9]

In those times, most humans were still nomadic hunter-gatherers, who followed the migratory patterns of the animals they killed for food. At Dolní Věstonice, however, another lifestyle prevailed. Here, in locations dotted across the hillside, a community of mammoth-hunters settled semi-permanently, making huts, cookhouses and hearths for bonfires. Families lived, worked, hunted and ate. Some wove cloth, some processed furs and some fashioned beautiful figurines from fired clay and carved ivory. When people died, they were buried. This was what we might tentatively call a village, and its boundary was strewn with mammoth tusks and bones, piled around with vegetation and grass-sod.

Dolní Věstonice was not a city as men of the Bronze Age would have recognised it, nor were the scatterings of bones and turf what we might think of as a wall. Yet they formed a perimeter, and a pointer towards the future of life, which was to be communal, enclosed and fortified. As the millennia went by, the earth warmed, the ice retreated, farming began and the Old Stone Age (the Paleolithic) gave way to the New Stone Age (the Neolithic). By 11,000 BCE the first agricultural revolution was underway, and now, rather than chasing down megafauna with spears, humans began to grow crops and herd animals – activities which inclined them to stay in

one place and defend themselves. To mark their territory and dissuade potential enemies from attacking, communities started closing themselves off, digging ditches around their living areas and building walls using the toughest materials they could lay their hands on. Mammoth tusks and turf strips had been all well and good in the chill of a glacial maximum. Amid the fertile throng of the agricultural revolution, sticks and bones gave way to stones.

Making walls from chunks of rock called for many pairs of hands and much time. But this new, agricultural man was busy and ambitious. The largest Stone Age towns were home to hundreds of families, and their new ways of living created surplus and wealth. This gave people both the means and the motive to build defensive fortifications. Those who had the most to defend built the biggest walls; and those who built the biggest walls accrued the most glory. The most famous early example of this was a city in Mesopotamia, in the heart of the so-called Fertile Crescent,[§] the cradle of civilisation. This was a town called Jericho.

Jericho (also known as *Tel es-Sultan*) was built on a landscape that was inhabited from at least 10,500 BCE. The first humans to leave their mark there were hunter-gatherers, attracted to natural springs which flowed freely just north of the Dead Sea. But two and a half thousand years later, farming was enjoying an almighty boom, and Jericho had become a permanent settlement. Its people grew wheat, barley and pulses. They hunted animals. They built mud-brick houses. In these houses they made pottery, tools and jewellery and created macabre art out of plastered and painted human skulls.

By 8,000 BCE several thousand people lived in Jericho and they built a spectacular circuit of stone fortifications. The walls of Jericho were 3.5m high and 2m thick, overlooked by a tower that loomed 8.5m above them. For thousands of years this was the tallest structure on Earth: effectively the first wonder of the world.[#]

Jericho’s walls were functional. But they were also monumental. In other words, they allowed the inhabitants of the city to live securely in their own homes and rent-free in their neighbours’ heads. Indeed, Jericho’s walls made such an awesome impression on people that they found their way into the foundational religious scriptures of the region. When the earliest texts that would form the Hebrew Bible were composed, blending history with theological narrative, the walls of Jericho had stood for more than six

millennia, and had been rebuilt more than a dozen times. They were thought to be unbreakable by human hands – susceptible only to the might of God. The Book of Joshua told how God's favoured people, the Israelites, wished to take Jericho from its inhabitants, the Canaanites. They tried first to do it by force of arms. But Jericho's walls were much too strong for human hands to destroy. Only when the Israelites resorted to prayer, ritual chanting and the blowing of horns did God intervene and knock the fortifications down for them.[ʃ]

So as the Stone Age gave way to the Bronze Age, from 3500 BCE onwards, walled towns were emerging all over the world. And they only grew in popularity. Fortified settlements emerged in the Yangtze River valley in China around 3500 BCE.[Ω 10] From about 2500 BCE, desert folk in Arabia began to fortify their oases with long circuits of walls, which protected both their water-wells and the houses they built around them.[11] Even on the fringes of human civilisation, the idea was catching on: around 1450 BCE, folk at a site called Grimspound in Dartmoor, southern England, surrounded their stone huts with a granite wall nearly 500m in circumference.[12]

Then, around 1350–1200 BCE, in Mycenae, on the Peloponnese peninsula of Greece, fortifications were erected on so vast a scale that later generations could hardly believe they were manmade. They became known as Cyclopean Walls, since it seemed that the huge stones from which they were made could only have been heaved into position by the Cyclopes: the ancient one-eyed monsters who had also presented the god Zeus with his thunder-bolt.

The Cyclopean Walls at Mycenae were constructed from blocks cleverly slotted together so that they held their form with no need for mortar, locked in place only by the force of their collective weight. They soared 12m high in places and the city inside was accessed by the Lion Gate – a set of heavy wooden double doors set into the stone, above which sat a massive triangular limestone lintel carved with lions guarding a column. These fortifications, which outlasted the civilisation that built them by thousands of years, were potent symbols of a rich, self-assured, military society which advertised its greatness by encircling and defending itself.

The Cyclopean Walls are still visible at Mycenae today. They are wondrous even when viewed in the age of skyscrapers and space travel. In

scale and antiquity they can be read as companion pieces to the sun-baked ruins of Troy at Hisarlik. Indeed, it is hard to look at Mycenae and not think of Troy, because in mythology the two places are inseparable. Mycenae, with its Cyclopean Walls, was said once to have been the domain of King Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus and tormenter of the Trojans. In Homer's telling, Agamemnon and the Myceneans were key players in the epic, fantastical, ten-year conflict that came to be called the Trojan War.

So it is to Bronze Age Troy that we can now, therefore, return.



If we were to suspend our disbelief and use Homer as a literal historical source for what happened during the Trojan War, then we would come away with a vivid, exciting, sometimes heart-breaking narrative, full of famous names and tragic-heroic deeds.

The outline of the story handed down by Homer is well known: King Priam's son Paris was granted by the goddess Aphrodite the love of the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen, Queen of Sparta. Paris stole his new beloved from her husband, King Menelaus; so Menelaus' brother Agamemnon of Mycenae led a revenge mission. A coalition of Greeks took ship and besieged Troy for ten years. During the course of this war, many great warriors died. The Trojans lost Paris and Hector, the Greeks, Achilles and Ajax. Eventually the wooden horse was wheeled through the city's gates, and the furious endgame arrived. Troy was destroyed and the survivors scattered. Countless works of art and literature have conjured scenes from this war, and its heroes have lent their names to everything from capital cities to kitchen cleaning products.

Today, of course, no one uses Homer as a literal historical source, any more than they use Ian Fleming's James Bond novels to study the factual history of post-war British spycraft. Yet if we accept that *something* real happened at Troy to inspire the stories that became the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (as well as the clutch of other contemporary Homeric-era texts collectively known as the Epic Cycle) then it is not unreasonable to look for traces in the archaeology at Hisarlik. At the very least, we may hope to glimpse what the fortified city that inspired the great stories looked like.

Assuming the date of the Trojan War was around 1190–80 BCE (while noting that some scholars would place it as early as 1250 BCE), then it

belongs to the phase of Troy's development known to archaeologists as Troy VIIa. By this time, Troy was no longer the squat little limestone-surrounded village that had been founded in 3000 BCE to offer refreshment to sailors at the edge of a Dardanelles lagoon. It was big, strong, famous and rich.

A millennium and a half had passed since the city's first foundation, and in that time its buildings, suburbs and fortifications had expanded dramatically. Now Troy was a heavily defended city centred on a citadel, covering a plot of about five acres (two hectares). The citadel's limestone walls were 10m high and up to 5m thick, flared at their base so that they could bear their own massive weight, and topped with mudbrick breastworks that could be easily and cheaply repaired and replaced. Wide streets, paved and drained, led all the way from the south gate to the heart of the citadel, passing between fine dwellings designed to the owners' individual tastes.[13]

Inside the citadel walls lay the most prestigious buildings – palaces, temples and public spaces used by the city's elites: warriors who wielded ornate bronze swords, women who wore fabulous gold jewellery, priests who conducted holy rites with priceless sacred artefacts. For the first time in Troy's history, horses could be found ambling around the town, while their owners used fashionable pottery which copied designs familiar to other well-to-do Mediterranean cities, including Mycenae. Imported goods arrived from even further afield: fashionable Trojans ate and drank from vessels that had been crafted in Cyprus and the Levant. Outside these walls in the residential district – or lower city – lay humbler houses.[14] These, too, had some protection: the lower city was encircled by a defensive ditch and more walls, and access through these was controlled through two or more gates.

In short, twelfth century BCE Troy was an important Bronze Age city: prosperous, well planned, linked by trade to the world around it. Its population may have been as large as 10,000 souls.[15] It was prone to damage from human enemies – particularly when Anatolia was dominated by a people known as the Hittites – and natural disasters – such as earthquakes, caused by one of the frequent slippages of the highly active North Anatolian fault line near which Troy sat. But for all that, Troy was, as

Homer would later write, a ‘fine town’ with ‘spacious streets’ and ‘sturdy walls’.[16]

Yet in about 1180 BCE it suffered calamity.

Who or what wrought this terrible damage on Troy is a matter of some contention, and archaeologists have come to different conclusions. Some think it really was attacked by Greeks from the lands and islands around Mycenae – just as the *Iliad* and other texts claimed.[17] Others believe Troy was hit by a major earthquake – for which the Trojan Horse was an elaborate poetic metaphor.[18] Others again believe Troy was targeted by the mysterious Sea Peoples, who ravaged the eastern Mediterranean around 1200 BCE and are often blamed for the civilisational catastrophe known as the Late Bronze Age collapse.[19]

Whatever happened, the devastation left permanent marks. Human bodies were left unburied in the streets. Houses burned down. Arrowheads and heaps of stones for hurling in slings were scattered in large numbers.

Was this, perhaps, the Homeric Trojan War? It is impossible to say. Clearly, *something* happened at Troy in or around 1180 BCE, but no one yet knows exactly what it was. The most that can be said from looking at the current archaeology is that around the time the Trojan War is supposed to have taken place, the fortified city whose defensive walls had been weakened by at least one earthquake was militarily assaulted and damaged again. It was not destroyed forever, nor is there any hard evidence to link the archaeology we can see today at Troy to any of the named figures from the *Iliad*. To those who yearn to find some tangible proof of Homer’s legendary history, this is disappointing.

But if we are thinking about the way that fortification and imagination have wound around each other over the millennia, this is not entirely bad news. For although the details of Troy’s assault around 1180 BCE are now lost, and may never be known, what has filled their place is a rich body of conjecture and fantasy, and a long history of great civilisations rooting their own origin stories in the myth of Troy.

This tells us much about the power of fortifications to stir the human imagination. And that is at least half our story.

When Homer wrote his account of the Trojan war in the late eighth or early seventh century BCE – around 400 years after the putative events he described – he was retelling a tale already old and beloved, passed down orally by generations of bards and storytellers. The long lists of names, ships, kingdoms and deeds in which the *Iliad* delights seem to have been preserved with pride by those who wished to give honour to the names of the glorious dead. Homer also peppered his story with 'historically accurate' details that rang true to the appearance of Troy in the twelfth century BCE: the styles of helmets and arms Homer described were authentic to the Bronze Age, and his depiction of Troy's sloped walls also spoke to its appearance during the period archaeologists would one day label Troy VIIa, rather than in his own time.

The effect was convincing enough to persuade informed readers that Homer was describing a real conflict, even if in exaggerated form. So once written down, Homer's works and the rest of the Epic Cycle became canonical history. The great Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, both writing in the fifth century BCE, took it for granted that the war for Troy's walls had actually taken place, and quibbled only Homer's command of detail. The works of many other poets also expanded on Homer's tale, and scenes from the struggle became recurring tropes of art and sculpture. Its popularity was self-perpetuating.

The Trojan War was not only a story told in song and writing. Today countless museum galleries are filled with artefacts inspired by the battle for Troy's walls. In the British Museum collection in London we can find a wine-mixing bowl and a dress-pin dating back to Homer's day, the first showing the abduction of Helen by Paris, the second the Trojan Horse. A fourth century BCE bronze Etruscan beauty mirror in the same collection is engraved on the back with a scene of King Menelaus reclaiming his bride Helen.[20] In the Troy Museum (Troya Müzesi), around a kilometre from the archaeological site at Hisarlik, there sits the breathtaking Polyxena Sarcophagus: a huge marble casket dating to around 500 BCE. The sarcophagus has been made to resemble a temple, around which is carved in relief the dreadful scene of Priam's daughter Polyxena being sacrificed by her Greek captors in one final act of war: the girl's blood drenching the altar as her mother weeps and mourners tear at their hair.

As these items and others like them attest, fascination with the battle for Troy's fortifications was intense, widespread and long-lasting. In first

century CE Egypt, colossal statues of the pharaoh Amenhotep III (originally erected on the banks of the Nile around 1350 BCE, long before the Trojan War) started to be associated with the African king Memnon, slaughtered by Achilles at Troy. Visitors attested to hearing the statue groan at dawn, supposedly the timeless echo of Memnon's mother, the dawn goddess Eos, mourning her son with each new day.[21] In Syria, mosaics were laid in villas depicting scenes from the Trojan War alongside images of other Greek mythological figures, including Hercules and Poseidon. Even in England mosaics have been found illustrating the violent clash between Achilles and Hector, the two heroes hurtling towards one another on chariots.

There was almost nowhere in the western world that the stories of Troy's siege and fall did not become famous. But it was particularly cherished in Rome, where the citizens traced their civilisation's birth back to the story of Aeneas fleeing the collapsing walls of Troy as the city fell. The story was most famously articulated by the poet Virgil in his epic twelve-book history the *Aeneid*, which was written during the reign of the first Roman emperor Augustus, between 29 and 19 BCE, and supplies today many of the details of the Trojan Horse episode. Romans devoured Virgil's work, and decorated their homes with scenes from it. Recent excavations at Pompeii, buried by a volcanic eruption in 79 CE, have revealed a house with a banqueting room decorated with frescoes showing pairs of characters from Troy: Paris and Helen, Cassandra and Apollo.[22] Yet even before Virgil and Vesuvius, great Romans were fascinated by the Trojan War.

In 48 BCE the Roman general Julius Caesar sailed up the Dardanelles, admiring the doomed ancient lover Hero's tower on its 'melancholy shore' before putting in further up the coast and taking a tour of the ruins of Troy. According to the poet Lucan, who described this scene, what Caesar found at Troy was a pile of rubble. 'He walked round the burnt city. . . now only a famous name, and searched for the mighty remains of the wall that Apollo raised,' wrote Lucan. He saw 'barren woods and rotting tree-trunks' growing over what had once been palaces. The citadel was 'covered over with thorn-brakes: the very ruins [had] been destroyed. . . When he stepped carelessly over the rank grass, [his guide] bade him not to walk over the body of Hector.'[23]

Caesar took all this in. Then, in Lucan's telling, he scraped together an altar of grass-sods, lit incense and prayed. 'All ye spirits of the dead, who inhabit the ruins of Troy; and ye household gods of my ancestor Aeneas,'

Caesar intoned, ‘place incense due upon your altars, and solemnly invoke you in your ancient abode. Grant me prosperity to the end, and I will restore your people. . . a Roman Troy shall rise.’[24]

For anyone who knew their Roman history – which was more or less anyone who could read Lucan – this was a scene freighted with significance. Before visiting Troy Caesar had crushed the forces of the Senate in battle at Pharsalus. Now he intended to transform Rome in his own image, effectively destroying the Republic to take power as dictator.[≈] Lucan knew that in giving Caesar his poetic moment on the wrecked fortifications of Troy, he was casting the general as a new Aeneas, setting out from exact same ruins to start a new era in Roman history.[25]

As usual with Trojan tales, the story Lucan told gained something in the writing. Troy in 48 BCE was not quite the wasteland that Lucan, in his poetic rapture, described. There was more there than rubble and brambles. Yet Troy had still fallen a long way from its fortified Bronze Age splendour. The Troad was in a deep economic slump, with many cities so poor they could not even afford to hold religious festivals. Troy’s walls and buildings very likely still showed the signs of an attack that had taken place sixty years before Caesar’s arrival, when a Roman general called Fimbria had laid siege to the city for eleven days and then burned many of the citadel’s public buildings as punishment for the Trojans’ resistance. Another earthquake had added to the misery.[26]

So although Lucan exaggerated the dismal state in which Caesar found Troy, he did so only by degrees. The former fortress-city had long ceased to be the thick-walled redoubt of a warrior people. Troy would remain inhabited until 600 CE, with an injection of money from Rome ensuring that a bathhouse, theatre, temples and imperial statues could be found, marking it out as a decent little imperial outpost. But it would never regain its ancient military majesty. It was just another town.

Except it wasn’t. Caesar, Virgil and Lucan ensured that Romans in the imperial age would see themselves as Trojans reborn. And when Rome also fell, the western half of its empire collapsing in the fifth century CE, the people of the successor kingdoms that sprouted on its ruins did exactly the same. So-called barbarians marched into the lands from which Roman legions withdrew, and once they settled they began to feel the need to dignify their own pre-histories.

Thus, in the seventh century CE a chronicler named Fredegar claimed that the Franks, a Germanic people who had settled in what had once been Roman Gaul, were directly descended from King Priam of Troy. Having been cast out of Troy by the Greeks, they chose a new king called Francio. '[He] was very strong in war, and for a long time fought with a great many peoples, but in the end, after devastating part of Asia, he entered Europe and settled between the Rhine or the Danube and the sea.'[27] (Fredegar also claimed that from the Trojans had sprung other warrior races including the Turks and Macedonians.)

In England, a similar fantastical origin story was concocted. The creative Welsh chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in the twelfth century CE, claimed that the ancient kingdom of Britain was founded by Brutus, a great-grandson of Aeneas, thrown out of Italy for accidentally killing his father during a stag hunt.[28] According to Geoffrey, this Brutus was told in a prophecy that he was destined to live on an island called Albion, which was once full of giants; when this came to pass and he founded its capital he called it New Troy. Not long after, the Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturluson reflected on the Norse myths that had been the religious bedrock of Scandinavian society before Christianity swept in. Snorri contended that the Norse gods were in fact bastardised versions of the heroes of the Trojan war. 'As for the long tale that they tell of Ragnarok, that is the wars of the Trojans,' he wrote.[29]

Gods came and went, but the legend of the clash for Troy's walls and citadel proved a historical constant. And so it was that long after Troy ceased to be of any consequence as a fortification, or even as a town, its symbolic significance continued to grow. Well into the modern era, when sensible scholars had come to scoff at the notion that the Trojan War was 'real', and were uncertain whether a place called Troy had ever existed, the myth lingered on. Medieval poets and dramatists like Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Boccaccio and Chaucer all had their way with Troy, using its imagined walls as the setting for romantic adventure. Early modern dramatists including William Shakespeare followed their lead. The Trojan War provided inspiration for artists from Peter Paul Rubens to J. M. W. Turner, and sculptors from Gian Lorenzo Bernini to Filippo Albacini. Opera writers such as Henry Purcell and Hector Berlioz composed great works that riffed on the *Aeneid*. Early filmmakers like Manfred Noa sought to charm audiences with their rendering of Homeric myth.

But no one did quite so much to dramatise the legends of Troy and the majesty of her ancient walls as a businessman, adventurer and sometime conman of the late nineteenth century, who convinced himself and the world to varying degrees that he had recovered from historical obscurity the ‘real’ walls of Troy over which Hector, Achilles, Ajax and Odysseus had fought. He was called Heinrich Schliemann, and in his story all the threads of Troy’s historical reality and mythic attraction were once more spun together.



One morning in the late spring of 1873 the German multimillionaire and amateur archaeologist Schliemann walked around the half-excavated site at Hisarlik, watching his team of 160 hired labourers toil in the dirt. It was nearly five years since Schliemann had first visited the area, surveying the mysterious mound and – as he would later tell the story – becoming convinced that this spot perfectly matched ‘the topographical requirements of the *Iliad*.’[30] This was his third season digging to prove it.

Now, as he surveyed the works, Schliemann stopped. He had seen something glint in the light. ‘A large copper article of the most remarkable form’ was poking out of the dirt, and nearby he thought he saw the glimmer of gold.[31] In equal parts excited and keen to prevent his workers from stealing, he announced it was lunchtime and sent the whole team off to relax. Then he set to work scrabbling in the earth with his knife, discovering vases and vessels in gold, copper and silver, along with swords, axes, shields, ornaments, jewels and trinkets. There were around 9,000 pieces in total. Retrieving them ‘required great exertion and involved great risk,’ he later wrote, ‘since the wall of fortification, beneath which I had to dig, threatened every moment to fall down upon me. But the sight of so many objects, every one of which is of inestimable value to archaeology, made me reckless.’[32]

Sensing a need to work discreetly – not his normal style – Schliemann recorded that he summoned his wife, Sophia, who wrapped the treasures in her shawl and helped him carry them away. Sophia was later photographed wearing some of the most spectacular items of jewellery that Schliemann had found, including a magnificent headdress made from more than 16,000

pieces of gold.[33] Her photograph was taken in Athens, after Schliemann smuggled his haul out of Turkey. He used the striking image to try and convince the world that he had not only discovered the location of Homeric Troy, but that he had prised from the ground with his own knife a hidden cache, buried as the walls fell and the Greeks came storming in: a priceless hoard he called Priam's Treasure.

Schliemann's discoveries – and the image of Sophia wearing what he called 'The Jewels of Helen' – caused a great sensation in 1873–74 and sparked lively debate in learned journals and the popular press. Not everyone was convinced. Certainly, academics did not begin to take Homer's account of the Trojan War as being factually true. Serious doubts were aired about Schliemann's understanding of the site on which he was digging, and some scholars accused him of being a fraudster who had his entire hoard manufactured in Greece. Most, though, accepted that he had found something very important, even if it was not totally clear what that was. As one expert from the British Museum put it: 'from the day I first saw the photographs of Dr Schliemann's discoveries and saw his photographs, I entertained no doubt whatever as the genuineness of the objects found, nor did his account of the mode of their discovery suggest to me any doubt as to the truth of his statements.'[34]

We now know that the truth was murkier. Schliemann certainly deserved credit for having dug for Troy in the right place. Yet he gave little credit to – and quarrelled bitterly with – others who had led him to that conclusion – notably an expatriate Briton called Frank Calvert, who had bought a section of the mound and made some preliminary excavations before Schliemann began his work.

Schliemann's methods of digging were as destructive as they were revealing, and he seriously damaged large parts of the mound of Hisarlik as he gouged out a huge trench over his many seasons of digging, using dynamite to blast his way through precious archaeological layers, destroying forever what they held. His work brought to light many artefacts that have illuminated the history of the Bronze Age and classical cities that stood at Troy. But he was often wildly mistaken about his findings. The walls below which he found 'Priam's Treasure' were likely those of what is now called Troy II, which had been built at least a thousand years before the Trojan War was supposed to have taken place.

Moreover, Schliemann lacked basic reliability as a witness to his own life. He was possessed of a low cunning and a great hunger for fame. Time and again in his writing he sacrificed accuracy for sensation. He edited his own journal entries to recast his life in the most adventurous light. He outright invented entire escapades.

His account of what happened at Troy on the day he found ‘Priam’s Treasure’ was a typical emulsion of truth and lies. The hoard of jewellery, tools, vessels and weapons may have been a single discovery, or may have been accumulated from different spots over several weeks of digging. His story about having removed it with the help of his wife was a plain untruth: Sophia Schliemann was in Greece on the day he claimed to have pulled the treasure from the earth. Finally, his removal of the goods from Turkey was at best sharp practice, and his subsequent donation of the bulk of the find to museums in Berlin inadvertently led to its disappearance when Berlin was taken by Soviet troops in 1945.[∂]

In the harshest analysis, then, Heinrich Schliemann was a chancer, a liar and an irresponsible amateur who distorted public understanding of Troy and the Homeric war for its fortifications. Worse, perhaps, he knew exactly what he was doing, writing in private that he understood Homer was ‘an epic poet and no historian’ and admitting that linking the fortifications he had excavated could not literally be the citadel over which Achilles and Hector battled to the death.[35]

And yet Schliemann had done what no one else had been able to do. More than 3,000 years after Troy had fallen in whatever the Trojan War really was, almost 2,000 since Julius Caesar had trod lightly about its ruins, 1,200 years since it had been abandoned for good, the great fortress city had finally yielded itself up. For an archaeologist, there was no greater prize in the world.

What Schliemann achieved at Troy in the 1870s – despite his rank malpractice – was a coup to sit alongside any of the greatest discoveries in history. What was more, he followed it up directly between 1874 and 1876 with a dig at Mycenae, which revealed treasures and skeletons just inside the Lion Gate, which he named as the burial-spot of King Agamemnon. He also began excavation at Tiryns, another massive Bronze Age palace-fortress with towers and Cyclopean Walls. Through his work – cavalier, bombastic, self-regarding and misleading as it often was – whole new fields of study into Bronze Age Greece, its civilisation and its fortifications, were

born. It is impossible to tease apart history, archaeology, myth and rhetoric, for they are all part of the same story.

And this is, in many ways, the story of Troy. The walled city that stood, fell and was rebuilt so many times between the Bronze Age and the dawn of the Middle Ages has a vital place in the history of fortifications. It was at one point a state-of-the-art city-fortress at a place where continents divided and great seas flowed into one another. On that basis alone it has so much to tell us about the origin of the castle as a walled bastion as well as a symbol of wealth and power.

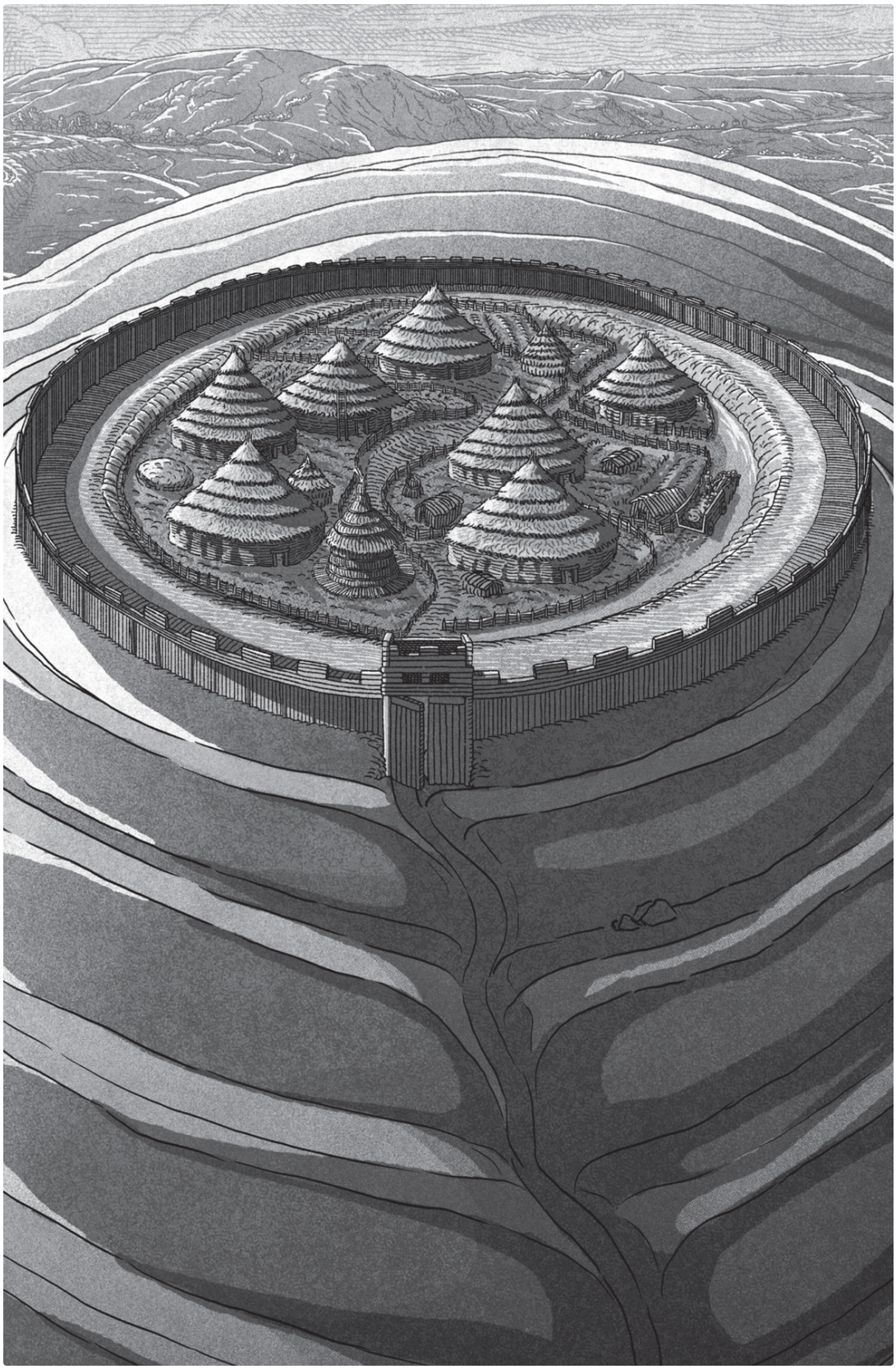
But Troy is also important because of the web of fantasy, legend and half-truth that has been spun around it over hundreds of years. From Homer's day to Schliemann's, and right up to our own, Troy has been the subject of irresistible stories, great works of art and wild exaggerations which stir our imagination as powerfully as any essay of carefully researched academic fact.

Today, a few miles from the excavated mound of Hisarlik, near the centre of the seaside town of Çanakkale, stands a great wooden horse. It was built by the producers of the 2004 Hollywood movie *Troy*, starring Brad Pitt. It is a popular attraction around which, in the summer months, there is a constant swarm of tourists having their photos taken. Did any such wooden horse really exist, to be fatally wheeled through the heavily guarded gates that gave access to the thick, unstormable walls of fortress Troy? If it did exist, did it really look like that? For almost everyone who takes a selfie beside the modern wooden horse, these questions are likely to be meaningless. The story of Troy's fall in the waning years of the Bronze Age is meant to be enjoyed as myth as well as history. The same is true to some degree of every castle in this book.

* The ancient name for the Dardanelles was the Hellespont. Its narrowness is an essential plot device in the legend of Hero and Leander. Leander swam the strait nightly to visit his lover, Hero, until one evening he lost sight of the shore and drowned. Much later, in 1810, Lord Byron also swam the Hellespont and did not drown, later boasting of his athletic prowess: 'I plume myself on this achievement more than I could possibly do on any kind of glory, political, poetical, or rhetorical,' he wrote. See Mirka Horová, '"Headlong he leapt—to him the swimmer's skill / Was native": Byron at Sea', *The Byron Journal* 47, No. 1 (2019), 5–16.

† It is not wholly inaccurate to think of Troy at this time as a Bronze Age motorway service station.

‡ A time given the distinctly unsexy title of the Last Glacial Maximum, or, colloquially, the last Ice Age. Theoretically in the twenty-first century CE, we still live in an Ice Age, although perhaps not for very much longer.
§ The swathe of land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, covering parts of modern Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, the birthplace of farming and technologies including the wheel, irrigation and glassmaking.
Eventually to be superseded by the Pharaoh Djoser's pyramid tomb, built around 2650 BCE.
∫ God instructed the Israelites to send priests to parade the Ark of the Covenant around Jericho's walls on six consecutive days. On the seventh day, they marched around the walls seven times, blew horns and yelled. God did the rest: the walls of Jericho fell down, and the Israelites stormed the city, slaughtering almost ever inhabitant, save the family of a prostitute collaborator called Rahab (Joshua 6:1-27).
Ω Modern researchers in China have found nineteen walled towns in the Yangtze Valley dating to the Lower and Upper Qujialing period (roughly 3500 BCE to 2500 BCE).
≈ The battle of Pharsalus was fought in Thessaly on August 9th 48 BCE. It was a decisive victory for Caesar over troops led by Pompey, which gave Caesar immense advantage in the civil war for control of the Republic. Of course, Caesar was murdered in Rome just four years later in 44 BCE, and it would be his great-nephew and adopted heir Octavian who took supreme power as Augustus and turned the Republic into the Empire.
∂ 'Priam's Treasure' was taken to Moscow in 1945 and classified as war reparations, then kept in secret until the 1990s. It is now on display in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.



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2

IRON AGE HILLFORTS

Good gods – how many of these bottomless ditches? How many of these built-up banks of earth? Again how very steep? It seems to me it is a miracle of art and nature.

JOHN LELAND, *ASSERTIO INCLYTISSIMI ARTHURII REGIS BRITANNIAE*, 1544 CE

The Roman soldiers looked at the grey swell of the sea before them, and did not like what they saw. In 43 CE this narrow channel, with its strong currents and changeable winds, marked a significant geographical and psychological boundary. It was the edge of the known world.[1]

The soldiers' concern at being asked to cross this stretch of water was understandable. Gaul, where they had until now been stationed, was one thing. Gaul may not have been Rome itself: the proud, shimmering city of 1 million souls, ruled by a recently installed line of emperors. But it was nonetheless a Roman province and – therefore – part of civilisation.

The realm that lay *over there*, across the sea from Gaul's shores, was not. Britannia was different. The island was the shape of 'an oblong shield or battle-axe'. Its skies were 'perpetually grey and overcast', wrote one Roman historian, and the people a race of barbarians.[2] They were not wholly cut off from humanity: some British tribal elites were in contact with their counterparts on the European mainland, exchanging goods, weapons and tastes in ritual and costume; they minted coins that imitated Roman currency, imported wine mugs and had developed a taste for delicacies grown in the empire: olives, celery, coriander.[3] Nor was Britannia totally uncharted. Ancient Greek explorers had known of the islands and their people, whom they called *κελτοί* – Celts.[4] In 55 and 54 BCE, Julius Caesar had made two armed expeditions and reported a densely populated place, rich in tin, cattle and timber, with (by his estimate) around 2,000 miles of coastline[*] on which washed up dark, cloudy oyster-pearls. On his visits, Caesar made a show of military force, and persuaded a number of tribal leaders to pay tribute to Rome in return for being left alone.

Yet for all that, Britannia – particularly beyond the south – was unconquered, uncertain, dangerous frontier country. It was a wild west, where special rules applied. 'Most [of the Britons] do not sow corn,' Caesar wrote,

> but live on milk and flesh and clothe themselves in skins. All. . . dye themselves with woad, which produces a blue colour, and makes their appearance in battle more terrible. They wear long hair, and shave every part of the body save the head and the upper lip.

> Groups of ten or twelve men have wives together in common, and particularly brothers along with brothers, and fathers with sons; but the children born of the unions are reckoned to belong to the particular house to which the maiden was first conducted.[5]

These painted, moustachioed polygamists were fierce warriors. Sometimes they hid in woods or marshes and laid cowardly ambushes. At other times they careened about the countryside in chariots, as though fancying themselves demigods left over from the Bronze Age. Then, when they tired of fighting, they would retreat to fortified hilltop settlements, resting before descending to go to war again.[6] The hilltop redoubts to which they fled were known to the Romans as *oppida*. Today we call them hillforts.

Hillforts were everywhere in Britannia. In 43 CE there were more than 3,000 scattered across the landscape, from the wealds and downs of what is now southern England to the lowlands of modern Scotland.[7] Part military encampments and part social and ritual gathering places, they varied wildly in size and design. Some were simple: high ground, a shallow ditch, a single farmstead. Others were huge complexes covering forty or fifty acres. In the biggest hillforts, the natural, steep rise of the terrain was augmented with multiple rings of highly engineered earthworks, ramparts and ditches, long entrance-paths defended by wooden gateways, watchtowers and guard-posts.

Of course, by Roman standards, Britannia's hillforts, built by a people 'scattered and uncivilised', were hardly the most sophisticated fortifications ever built.[8] Contrasted with the Servian walls of Rome – constructed in the fourth century BCE from specially quarried volcanic tuff, which stood 10m high and 3m thick at the base, and were accessed via sixteen manned gatehouses – they were almost laughably crude. But they worked.

Although not all of Britannia's tribes relied on hillforts to the same extent, and some stood empty and abandoned at the time of the Claudian invasion, their presence still posed a challenge, even to the Roman army. Romans considered themselves the best soldiers in the world, unmatched in discipline and efficiency. As one later writer put it, they 'owed their conquest of the world to no other cause than continual military training.'[9] And yet: the prospect of crossing to an island of savage tribal folk with blue skin, bizarre haircuts, bad attitudes and safe-houses on every patch of high ground was no more appealing in 43 CE than it had been in 55 BCE, when

Caesar gave the place up as a bad job, saying – untruthfully – ‘I came, I saw, I conquered.’



History, it has often been noted, starts with geography. Human history has produced no form of castle that is so deeply informed by the shape of the land than the hillfort. And few people have ever made such enthusiastic use of their land to construct fortifications as the Celtic tribes who, by the time of the Roman invasion, had inhabited the British Isles for thousands of years.

As we saw in chapter 1, mankind’s instinct to build fortifications was well established as the Bronze Age drew to a close. In advanced, densely populated regions such as Mesopotamia and the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean, cities were defended by stone walls and garrisoned citadels. Yet even outside those regions, in places where civilisational pillars like the plough and the pen were late to arrive, people felt a need to establish fortified communal centres. They needed defended spaces where in times of peace they could come to meet, worship and trade, and where, in times of war, they could retreat and feel safe. Hills and hilltops were ideal places to do all of those things. Hills were an integral part of land that could be foraged and harvested, mined or forested. As gathering spots for ceremony, celebration, mourning and sacrifice, they had the natural advantage of being visible for miles around. As military strongholds, they were hard to storm. What was more, there was no labour required to raise a hill, only to make it comfortable to live in and painful to climb.

In Britannia, hillforts began to appear at the end of the Bronze Age, around the time of the Trojan War, more than 1,000 years before Caesar and his first legions made landfall. At first they were of rudimentary design: a ditch dug around a hilltop or plateau, a timber gatehouse erected to guard the entrance and a clutch of simple timber-post buildings arranged on the summit, in which to store grain, crops and animal feed.[10] Some were never any more than that, and were then abandoned within a generation or two of construction – or else used seasonally, particularly in the north. But as the centuries passed, designs of the largest hillforts grew more ambitious.

Most of Britannia’s biggest and most complex hillforts lay in the south, in a region marked by a notional line extending from the Thames Estuary to

north Wales.[†] A typical example, thoroughly investigated by modern archaeologists, was the hillfort at Danebury, in Hampshire, near what is today the village of Nether Wallop. The site chosen was a chalk hill nearly 150m at its summit – not monstrous, but bigger than anything else in the surrounding area. Danebury was first occupied around 600 BCE, when a shallow ditch was dug around the summit. Fifty years later, a rampart was erected inside the ditch, built from rubble and spoil, and reinforced with a timber frame. Over the next two centuries the ditch was re-dug, the rampart raised and a drystone wall may have been built at the top. Two gatehouses were built, redesigned, reinforced and defended. Eventually a second, outer ring of earthworks was added.[11]

These successive phases of fortification took place over half a millennium, and during that time Danebury – which was one of a number of hillforts to be raised in its immediate area – served many purposes. Its earthworks and ditches enclosed thirteen acres of chalkland, connected by a through-road connecting two guarded gateways. The inhabitants' names were never recorded, but we know they dug storage pits and sunk post-holes for buildings. They raised shrines to their gods. They cooked and ate, farmed domestic animals and hunted wild birds and beasts. They wove with bone needles. They worked, traded and used all sorts of consumer goods: pots, vases, leather garments, jewellery with glass and amber beads. They sacrificed and ritually buried animals. From time to time they killed and dismembered human beings.[12]

Iron Age Danebury was founded around 600 BCE and inhabited continuously for around seven centuries. The personalities, dreams and fears of the people who lived there are gone along with their names, and exactly what happened politically during that period is almost entirely a matter of guesswork. What we do know, however, is that the other nearby hillforts which sprang up in Danebury's early days – at Bury Hill, Figsbury and Quarley – lasted nowhere as long. All had fallen into disuse by 400 BCE, which may suggest that there ruled at Danebury some king or chieftain whose power grew and radiated from that hilltop. In any case, for the next 300 years Danebury stood in splendid, possibly dominant, isolation. But around 100 BCE, it went into sudden decline. Again, frustratingly, we do not know why, but it is likely that there was violence. A fire destroyed the main gatehouse. Bodies were thrown into charnel pits. After this the population

of the hillfort dropped from several hundred people to around fifty.[13] When the Romans came there were just a few inhabitants left, and by the end of the first century CE, there was nothing left inside the defences of Danebury but a small patch of farmed land inside the shelter of one of the ramparts.[14]

If Danebury's decline predated the Roman invasion, however, there were other hillforts in southern Britannia with more recent foundations which were in far better order in 43 CE, and which therefore became Roman targets for attack and conquest. Two of these stand out: Maiden Castle, in Dorset, and Cadbury Castle in Somerset.



The Roman invasion of Britannia was ordered by Claudius, a lame, half-deaf, unhappily married fifty-three-year-old, who had been installed upon the assassination of Caligula in 41 BCE, and proved to be a surprisingly energetic emperor. During his thirteen years in power Claudius focused on expanding the borders of the empire to both the east and west.

The four legions of troops he commanded to cross from Gaul to Britannia in 43 CE were, as we have seen, reluctant to go. But eventually their commanding general, Aulus Plautius, convinced them, and they warmed to their task and set sail. They landed on the south coast – probably, although not certainly, at Richborough in Kent[‡] – then headed inland to show the Britons that standing up to the might of Rome was a very poor idea.

The pretext for the Claudian invasion was to intervene in British tribal politics, which could be fractious and violent enough without the intervention of a foreign power. In the early forties CE, a tribe known as the Catuvellauni had expanded their territories at the expense of other tribes including the Atrebates, clients of the empire since Julius Caesar's day. Verica, king of the Atrebates, had fled, howling in protest, to seek redress from Rome. Claudius, seeing an opportunity to claim direct imperial control over Britannia's natural resources – while distracting from unsavoury rumours concerning the sexual proclivities of his wife Messalina – agreed to send in the legions.

On arrival, Plautius' troops kept up the partial fiction that they were there to help the Atrebates, by taking aim at the Catuvellauni. At first, the Catuvellauni 'would not come to close quarters with the Romans, but took

refuge in the swamps and the forests, hoping to wear out the invaders in fruitless effort, so that, just as in the days of Julius Caesar, they should sail back with nothing accomplished,' wrote Cassius Dio.[15] Eventually, however, Plautius ran the natives to ground. He met them in battle on the River Medway, then pushed them back north towards the Thames. The encounter with tens of thousands of crack troops was too much for the Catuvellauni, and after two of their leaders were killed, they seemed ready to give in. At this point Plautius sent for the emperor, who duly arrived in Britannia to invite the formal submission of those tribal chieftains who had the good sense to choose surrender and client status over ruin and death.

According to Cassius Dio, when Claudius arrived, he brought along 'extensive equipment, including elephants'.[16] Traditionally, this line in Cassius Dio's history has been read literally – on the assumption that his Greek word *ελεφάντων* means just what it says. It is not impossible: Hannibal had brought elephants over the Alps during the Second Punic War in 218 BCE; later, during the Middle Ages, a number of elephants lived in the royal menagerie in the Tower of London. But it is possible that Cassius Dio was using a euphemistic term for massive siege weapons, and that Claudius' 'elephants' were in fact mechanical tools designed to overcome fortifications built by Britannia's tribes.[§] In either case, Claudius' arrival in Britannia with heavy cavalry or heavy weaponry was recognition that special measures were going to be needed to turn Plautius' early sallies into permanent conquest.

Rome, it was said, was not built in a day. Nor was Britannia conquered in a season. In 43 CE Claudius set up in the town of Camulodunum (Colchester) and accepted tribute from native kings who travelled from as far as Orkney. But the partial surrender of the land was not good enough; indeed, it was arguably worse than no surrender at all, for now a new dividing line was drawn among Britannia's tribes, separating those who bowed to the imperial yoke from those who would not. Resistance to the Romans was led by various famous warriors, including Caratacus of the Catuvellauni, who was killed in 50 CE, and Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, who burned Camulodunum, Verulamium (St Albans) and Londinium (London) during a massive revolt in 61 CE.

Hillforts and high ground played their part in these wars. The future emperor Vespasian, who held senior command during the Claudian invasion, was credited with fighting thirty battles and seizing twenty

oppida, for which, ‘he received the triumphal regalia, and shortly after two priesthoods, besides the consulship.’[17] Later, in 78 CE, the Roman general Agricola battled against a tribe from northern Wales called the Ordovices. It was considered a special mark of Agricola’s bravery that he led the fight into the hills himself: ‘He gathered the detachments of the several legions and a small force of auxiliaries, and then, when the Ordovices did not venture to descend from the hills, led his army to the uplands, himself marching in the van to inspire the rest with equal courage to face similar peril,’ wrote Agricola’s son-in-law, the historian Tacitus.[18]

It took ninety-nine years and many surges of Roman military force to subdue Britannia, and even then the conquest of the whole mainland proved impossible. Several fortified boundaries of maximum extent were drawn: the Stanegate in 77 CE, Hadrian’s Wall in 122 CE and the Antonine Wall in 142 CE. The latter – stretching from the Clyde estuary to the Forth[#] – marked the furthest point Roman rule ever extended in the west. Behind it, buried in the soil of Britannia’s hillforts, was left the grisly evidence of just how fiercely the Roman push towards their world’s end had been.



Of all the weapons deployed in the wars between Romans and Britons, one of the simplest but most effective was the handheld sling. In essence no more than a length of twine, a patch of fabric and a lump of stone or lead, the sling was cheap and deadly. And thanks to the distinctive shape of the ammunition hurled from slings, it is today possible for archaeologists to trace where major clashes between invaders and resisters in Iron Age Britannia occurred. For example, at a site now known as Windridge Farm, near St Albans, more than 100 leaden slingshot bullets have been found over a wide area, suggesting a battle involving Romans and Catuvellauni around the time of Claudius’ invasion.[19] At Hod Hill, a large hillfort in Dorset, associated with the Durotriges tribe, there is evidence of fighting involving slings and Roman ballista – large mechanical catapults, which left their wicked projectiles scattered among the Britons’ houses. One of the biggest deposits of sling ammunition was found at Maiden Castle, another Durotriges stronghold in Dorset. Here, modern archaeologists have dug up

whole arsenals of sling bullets, stockpiled thousands of years ago when that massive hillfort was in its heyday.

By the first century CE, Maiden Castle was already ancient. Humans had inhabited the site – a lone lime- and sandstone hill standing 500m above sea level, with views all the way to Glastonbury Tor – from around 3500 BCE, during the Stone Age. For a time during the Bronze Age it was abandoned to grass and crops, but around 600 BCE it was reoccupied, and in 450 BCE, a vast series of ditches and timbered ramparts were dug into the hillside, enclosing an area of forty-seven acres – as large as thirty football pitches. Within this area lived hundreds of Durotriges. Just as at Danebury, they fought, loved, prayed and worked. They made jewellery and tools. They built roundhouses, granaries, roads and places for weaving cloth and blacksmithing.

Given the size of its population, the value of their work and – we may presume – the self-confidence of the Durotriges, Maiden Castle was heavily garrisoned and stocked with weapons and ammunition. In pits dug at strategic locations around the concentric rings of huge earthworks were vast caches of stone sling-bullets. In one pit, dug beside a stone-built sentry-post near the hillfort's eastern gate, more than 20,000 of these lethal projectiles were laid down. Two more ammunition caches, located near a defensive structure known as a hornwork, contained more than 30,000 stones between them.[20] Even if attackers managed to approach the hillfort's complex gate systems, which were accessed by way of long, walled passages, overlooked by timber guard-posts and blocked by gates, they would have to contend with a hail of deadly slingshot from guards who could hurl stones relentlessly without any fear of ever running out.

That, at least, was the idea. Yet Maiden Castle's defences were not built specifically to resist the wrath of Roman legions. Warfare in Britannia long predated the Caesars, as modern archaeological research at Maiden Castle has made clear.[21] Beneath the ramparts of the hillfort's east gate, the twentieth-century archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler found what was then termed a 'war cemetery', containing dozens of human skeletons, the majority of them belonging to young men, buried with varying degrees of haste. Some were interred with apparent honour, wearing jewellery or carrying valuable 'grave goods' like whittle-tang knives, joints of meat or ear-wax scoops.[ʃ] Others were crammed into old storage pits too small for their bodies and their bones bore the trauma of war-wounds: injuries

consistent with stabbing, slashing and bludgeoning; broken noses, shattered hands and cracked skulls.[22]

As we shall see, it was once assumed that all of these people died at once, during the first wave of Roman conquest. Yet radiocarbon dating of the Maiden Castle skeletons has revealed that in fact, the hillfort was attacked with lethal force at least three times between the first century BCE and the second century CE. The first Durotriges warriors known to have to be buried in the 'war cemetery' could have died as early as 165 BCE – when Rome was still a Republic struggling to assert its dominance over north Africa in the Punic Wars, and Britannia was (to them) a faraway nowhere. By contrast, the latest known burials in the Maiden Castle 'war cemetery' occurred after 120 CE, at which time the emperor Hadrian was raising Hadrian's Wall across the mid-section of Britannia and the Pantheon in Rome and Britannia was, ostensibly, settling down.[23]

All of this is to say that burying war-dead at Maiden Castle was a common task long before the invasion of 43 CE, and long after, too. As Julius Caesar noted, Iron Age Britannia was no peaceful idyll, shattered by the arrival of the legions: 'there had been continuous wars' on the island before he even set foot there.[24] It would be foolish to doubt this, for why else would hillforts like Maiden Castle be protected with defences designed to ward off massive attack, and stocked with tens of thousands of rounds of slingshot ammunition? The Roman invasion was just one major phase of violence among several.

Yet for all that, we cannot write the Roman conquest of Britannia away to nothing. For 43 CE did still represent a landmark moment in the history of hillforts, both in terms of their use and their place in the British imagination. To explore this, we need to look twenty-six miles north of Maiden Castle to another of the great hillforts of this historical age: Cadbury Castle in Somerset.



Amid the charred ruins of the south-west gateway leading to the steep hillfort at Cadbury lay the bloodied and blackened bodies of dozens of men, women and children. Some had died in the prime of life, but the youngest were no more than toddlers. All had been treated savagely: limbs hacked off

and bodies butchered. Some were burned, like the gates and guard-posts that had until recently controlled the entrance to the hillfort. Others had been left to rot, and rats had gnawed their flesh right down to the gleaming white of the bones. Among them lay severed heads, which had been displayed around the burned stumps of the entrance-way, before falling from their posts as they decayed. In its day – probably around 70 CE, a generation after the Claudian invasion – it was a terrible scene to behold. The passing of time scarcely dimmed the horror. Under Durotriges occupation Cadbury Castle had been a thriving place, home to hundreds of people protected by its steep limestone slopes and earthen ramparts. The sudden end its people met, and the mutilations they suffered, were so hideous that, nearly 2,000 years after the event, when archaeologists came across the remains, some were so disturbed that they refused to continue working on the site.[25]

Exactly what prompted the bloodletting at Cadbury hillfort is – like so much in this era – a matter for speculation. It is possible that this was the ritual desecration of a sacred space. But it seems more likely that a local rebellion by the Durotriges against Roman rule was suppressed with extreme prejudice.[26] The massacre could have been carried out in the course of the 43 CE Claudian invasion, but may have taken place during the political upheaval that rocked Britannia around the year 70 CE, during which the Roman governor was forced to flee the realm. Whatever the case, it is certain that the slaughter at Cadbury, during either the first or second generation of Roman rule in Britannia, was deliberately, spectacularly violent.

What is also clear is that in the aftermath of the attack, and the approach of the second century CE, Cadbury – much like Maiden Castle and many of Britannia's other hillforts – sank into disrepair and then obsolescence. Most of the Durotriges who had not been chopped into carrion fled, and those who remained no longer took care of the roundhouses that had once covered the hilltop. Nor did they maintain the roads that ran through the large hilltop compound.[27] The good times were over.

What replaced the old Durotriges roundhouses at Cadbury Castle in the latter half of the first century CE were buildings of a different sort. These were rows of sharp, plain, oblong timber buildings. They were cramped, functional and probably rather ugly, each with space inside to house just one man. They were almost certainly Roman troop barracks, and together

with other necessary facilities – blacksmiths' workshops, cookhouses and stables – formed a military encampment for Roman legionaries and cavalry, which sprung up inside the earthworks of the hillfort as the conquest and pacification of Britannia unfolded. The barracks were built chiefly for practicality, but there was symbolism, too, in setting up camp quite literally on the graves of Rome's foes.

Repurposing a hillfort was not a phenomenon unique to Cadbury. True, some of the most impressive Roman military compounds in Britannia – the legionary fortresses known as *castra* at Deva (Chester) and Eboracum (York) – lay on spots all of their own. Nevertheless, native hillforts were taken over when it was deemed expedient. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, garrisons were set up at Hod Hill in Dorset, Brandon Camp in Herefordshire and Hembury in Devon.[28] Later, other hillforts that had been cleared out (or simply abandoned) in the wake of the conquest were rediscovered and put to new use. This happened across the province, from the little hillfort known as Alfred's Castle in Oxfordshire to a Silures stronghold in south Wales, which became a massive Roman military town called Isca (Caerleon), and Burnswark in Dumfriesshire, where two small Roman forts were built around one of the most powerful hillforts in the Scottish lowlands.

At Cadbury Castle, as we have seen, the Durotriges were massacred, after which Roman troops built barracks and moved in. When they left the site in the second century CE, a temple was built. From the hotchpotch of masonry fragments, carved marble, decorative letters formed from gilded copper, glass and roof tiles that now remain, we can surmise that this was rather a grand place. It was certainly smart enough that after another few centuries, once the Romans had abandoned not only Cadbury but the whole of Britannia, the Saxon people who followed them used the temple's stones to build a church.[29] The foundations of a cross-shaped building on Cadbury's summit give a tantalising hint as to the intended design of this church, which was begun but never finished. And it is fascinating to try and imagine what the church-builders who worked on that spot knew of all that had come before them. Once more, we can wonder more than we can know. But that is no bad thing, for now is an appropriate point to move on from the fragmentary archaeology of hillforts to the imaginative world they inspired.

To do that we must leap forward more than 1,000 years, from Cadbury Castle's capture and abandonment by the Romans to another age in British history entirely: the sixteenth century, when England was ruled by the second king in the Tudor line, Henry VIII.



On May 5th 1542 the scholar John Leland set out on a tour of England's west country to look for King Arthur's court of Camelot. A tireless traveller, Leland was approaching his fortieth birthday and had already lived an eventful life. After graduating from the University of Cambridge, he had served as tutor to the duke of Norfolk's son. In the late 1520s he moved to the continent to continue his studies in Paris, where he mingled with European intellectuals and wrote poetry for aristocratic benefactors back in England.[30] Then, in 1533, the king had tasked Leland with a very special job. Henry VIII was contemplating a raid on the wealth and property of England's religious houses – to be known in time as the Dissolution of the Monasteries.[31] He wanted to know exactly what treasures these religious houses contained. He had therefore sent Leland around England 'to peruse and diligently to search all the libraries of monasteries and colleges of this. . . noble realm.'

That tour, back in the 1530s, had been life-changing for Leland: a free pass to immerse himself in history. His monastic hosts had shown him artefacts dating back to the time of the Romans, the Saxon kings, and a glorious intermediary time,[Ω] during which the great King Arthur had supposedly ruled Britain in the company of his knights of the Round Table.[32] Within the libraries Leland had seen hundreds of histories and romances describing Arthurian Britain in glorious, mythic detail. He became fascinated by Arthur – and decided one day to write a book arguing the case for regarding Arthur as a real historical figure, whose legacy could be found in the English landscape.

Now, in May 1542, that time had come. Leland's new journey was to provide material for two works satisfying his own interests, rather than King Henry's. The first was a book that became known as his *Itinerary*: a record of all the places he had visited in Britain, and the stories he heard told as he went. The other project was his Arthur book.

One of Leland's primary targets in his hunt for Arthur was the county of Somerset, and especially the land around Glastonbury Abbey, which before the Dissolution had boasted a double tomb said to contain the bones of Arthur and his queen, Guinevere.[≈] That tomb had since been plundered and the bones destroyed. But the fact that it had once stood at Glastonbury convinced Leland that the real history of Arthur's reign ought to be located somewhere nearby in south-west England.[33]

As the late spring of 1542 bloomed into summer, therefore, Leland headed into the picturesque countryside of Somerset. He passed through pretty villages including Bruton and Castle Cary. He noted down the stone bridges he crossed and the streams he passed. Eventually, about fifteen miles from Glastonbury, he came to South Cadbury.[34]

Straight away his interest was piqued. Rising sharply up from the village was the site of the old Iron Age hillfort. Any building remains had long been surrendered back to nature. But the altered shape of the hillside remained unmistakeable, and Leland perceived that it had once been 'a famous town or castle, upon a very tor or hill, wonderfully enstrengthened of nature, to the which be two enterings up by a very steep way: one by the north east, and another by south west.' He described the hill as being more than a mile in circumference, with a series of ditches and walls on its sides. 'In the very top of the hill above all the trenches is a campus of 20 acres or more by estimation, where in diverse places men may see foundations. . . of walls.'[35] (Any modern visitor who has hiked up the steep trail to the summit of Cadbury Castle will recognise this basic description.)

This was a good start. But Leland wanted to know more. He heard that Roman coins often turned up on the hilltop, and from this he deduced that it had been at some time an imperial barracks. Then, from talking to local people, he developed a theory that after the Romans had left, Cadbury Castle had become the residence of King Arthur – the famous fortified knightly headquarters of Camelot. 'The people can tell nothing there but that they have heard say that Arthur much resorted to Camelot,' he wrote. Local lore in Cadbury, he insisted, 'makes known, elevates, praises the name of Arthur sometime dwelling in the castle. Which once was magnificent and entrenched, and built as a watchtower, where the hill rose up. Good gods – how many of these bottomless ditches? How many of

these built-up banks of earth? Again how very steep? And to end in a few words, it seems to me it is a miracle of art and nature.'[36]

What drew Leland to give particular credence to Cadbury Castle's Arthurian links is not entirely certain. (Other Camelot candidates were available, in the old settlements of Caerleon and Colchester, and in Cornwall.) It may have been nothing much deeper than etymology: on his way to South Cadbury he had passed the villages of West Camel and Queen Camel, which stood close to the banks of the River Camel.[37] It may have been that Leland put serious store by ancestral folk knowledge. He described the people living in Tudor-era South Cadbury as *Murotriges* – a garbled, exotic name that served to imply that they were direct descendants of the ancient tribes that first fortified the hilltop. Or it could have just been a feeling. Something in the majesty of the steep, banked sides of the hillfort, the proximity to Glastonbury and the fertility of his own imagination told him that this was the place he had been looking for.

Once he had made his mind up that Cadbury could be safely identified as Arthur's court, Leland lost himself in poetic rapture. He invoked the Roman writer Ovid, reflecting on the fate of another lost fortress city – indeed, one we have already met in this book – Troy. With 'Camelot's' disappearance beneath the green Somerset countryside in mind, Leland wrote: 'But cornfields stand where Troy once was, stabling the city,/ And flocks in the deep ditches; and in the turgid ramparts,/ The badger and the cunning foxes set up their beds.'[38]

Camelot may have been lost, but Leland was determined that, like Troy, it should not be forgotten.



John Leland's identification of Cadbury Castle as the ruin of Camelot today seems rather credulous, and perhaps a sign of decline in a man who was not long away from losing his mind.[∂] But once his theory linking the Iron Age hillfort and Arthurian legend became known, it proved too tantalising for writers who followed to ignore. The late sixteenth-century antiquary William Camden followed Leland in recording that Cadbury was known as 'King Arthur's Palace'. Another contemporary, the chronicler John Stow, wrote that the only castle Arthur ever built was at Windsor, but after Stow's

death his publishers amended his text to assert that Camelot lay in Somerset, including a supplementary note pinpointing its location to Cadbury Castle.[39]

In later centuries other writers were happy to follow the same line. In 1723 the physician and antiquarian William Stukeley, who took a keen interest in prehistoric monuments such as Stonehenge, went to Cadbury, sketched the hillfort and made extensive notes on its history. He identified correctly that its summit was the highest point for miles. Of the earthworks still visible, he wrote that it was 'not unlikely that there were buildings erected in the later British times, being of so great strength, and a perfect watch-tower surveying the country around.'[40]

Stukeley recorded that Roman coins and stone slingshot bullets were often found in the local area, which led him to believe that there had at some point been a Roman camp on the summit. And he could not help but float a possible Arthurian connection. The villagers of South Cadbury, he said, habitually brought all stories about the hillfort back to Arthur. They called a natural spring on the hillside King Arthur's Well; an ancient road across nearby fields was King Arthur's Causeway. 'Many are the British stories told of Camelot, of the knights of king Arthur's round table, of the solemn joustings and tournaments there,' Stukeley wrote.[41] If Camelot had to be anywhere, it might as well be at Cadbury.

When Stukeley was investigating Cadbury's hillfort, the field of archaeology barely existed. But as the eighteenth century progressed, a scientific rigour was introduced to digging for evidence of past worlds. In Italy, Roman settlements like Pompeii and Herculaneum were excavated. In Virginia, Thomas Jefferson undertook the systematic study of an indigenous Monacan burial mound on his land. By the nineteenth century the field had advanced beyond the educated guesswork and hearsay of Stukeley's age, to become a fully realised, scientific endeavour. As we saw in the last chapter, archaeologists like Heinrich Schliemann, who knew how to dig, and trained their gaze on sites connected with ancient mythology, could attain worldwide celebrity. The hillfort lent itself to such treatment.[42]

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, therefore, a number of eminent figures turned their attention to hillforts. Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox (also known as Augustus Pitt Rivers, lord of Cranbourne Chase and the founder of the famous museum in Oxford), led

the first serious excavation of Danebury hillfort. The French emperor Napoleon III sponsored digs on French sites where it was thought that the ancient Gauls had resisted the armies of Rome.[43] But no one managed to sprinkle quite so much stardust on Iron Age hillforts as the twentieth-century artillery officer, archaeologist, writer and television presenter Mortimer Wheeler.

In the 1930s Wheeler undertook a four-year programme of excavation at Cadbury Castle's near neighbour, Maiden Castle. He chose the site partly out of bravado: this seemed to be the biggest and most imposing hillfort it was possible to tackle, which made it in his eyes the worthiest subject at hand. ('A fair share of voyaging in many parts of the world has failed to blunt the awe and enthusiasm with which I still approach that vast prehistoric fortification,' Wheeler wrote.)[44] He was also working in the 1930s, as Europe lurched from the long aftermath of First World War to the catastrophic approach of the Second. Wheeler sensed that at Maiden Castle he could tap into a story that would feel particularly germane: that of the native tribes of Britain manning their island's defence-posts against the advance of a continental invader.

Wheeler began digging at Maiden Castle in 1934, and as a clubbable showman, he made sure everyone who mattered knew what he was up to. Celebrated friends like T. E. Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia') and the poet and playwright John Drinkwater came to watch Wheeler and his team cut large trenches through sections of the earthworks, identifying artefacts and building layers that they assigned variously to Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman times. As they worked, Wheeler briefed the *Times* newspaper, as well as keeping up an open dialogue with local press. He fed the newsmen colourful details about slingshot bullets and grave-goods, and they in turn wrote articles which thrummed with exciting narrative recreating lost battles on the hillside. 'From the heights of the ringed chalk ramparts, as they fell back under pressure by an enemy, the slingsmen should have done great execution,' wrote the journalist Walter G. Bell in a large newspaper feature entitled 'Maiden Castle's Last Secrets'.[45] Wheeler knew that publicity of this sort was sniffed at by the soberer members of the archaeological profession. But like Schliemann before him, he did not care. 'I was, and am, convinced of the moral and academic necessity of sharing

scientific work to the fullest possible extent with the man in the street and the field,' he wrote.[46]

By the time Wheeler came to write up his research at Maiden Castle, the Second World War had broken out and Nazi armies were rampaging across Europe. Britain had escaped invasion, but the Blitz had caused dreadful damage to London and other major cities. He was now in sombre mood, and found it impossible to disengage his archaeological work from the fate of the nation at war. 'At a time when the future is more than ordinarily imponderable, it is a duty to my many colleagues and to the great monument itself to place on record at least some considerable part of a work which, unrecorded, resolves into destruction,' he wrote in the foreword to the official report.[47]

The report itself was a meticulous piece of scholarship, illustrated with many photographs of the works Wheeler had carried out, showing how he had literally peeled away the many layers of history at the hillfort to understand life in Iron Age Britain before and during the arrival of the Romans. Across more than 400 pages, the tone of the report was almost exclusively serious and scholarly. Yet there were a few exceptions. When the matter of the Roman invasion arose, Wheeler freed his pen and imagined the attack on Maiden Castle that had produced, as he saw it, a mass gravesite near the gatehouse.

> Under the rising clouds of smoke the gates were stormed and the position carried. But resistance had been obstinate and the fury of the attackers was roused. For a space, confusion and massacre dominated the scene. Men and women, young and old, were savagely cut down, before the legionaries were called to heel and the work of systematic destruction began. . . That night, when the fires of the legion shone out (we may imagine) in orderly lines across the valley, the survivors crept forth from their broken stronghold and, in the darkness, buried their dead as nearly as might be outside their tumbled gates, in that place where the ashes of their burned huts lay warm and thick upon the ground.[48]

We may imagine. Wheeler's flight of fanciful reconstruction of an Iron Age of Maiden Castle was as evocative as any Homeric description of the fall of Troy, and as immediate as any newspaper despatch from a bombed industrial city. The whole experience of digging the hillfort in the context of a major European war touched him deeply, and he never forgot the emotions it aroused. In 1956 he published his memoir, *Still Digging*. By then, the Second World War was over, Hitler defeated and Britain saved. Yet Maiden Castle still thrust Wheeler into an elegiac mood, not least when he

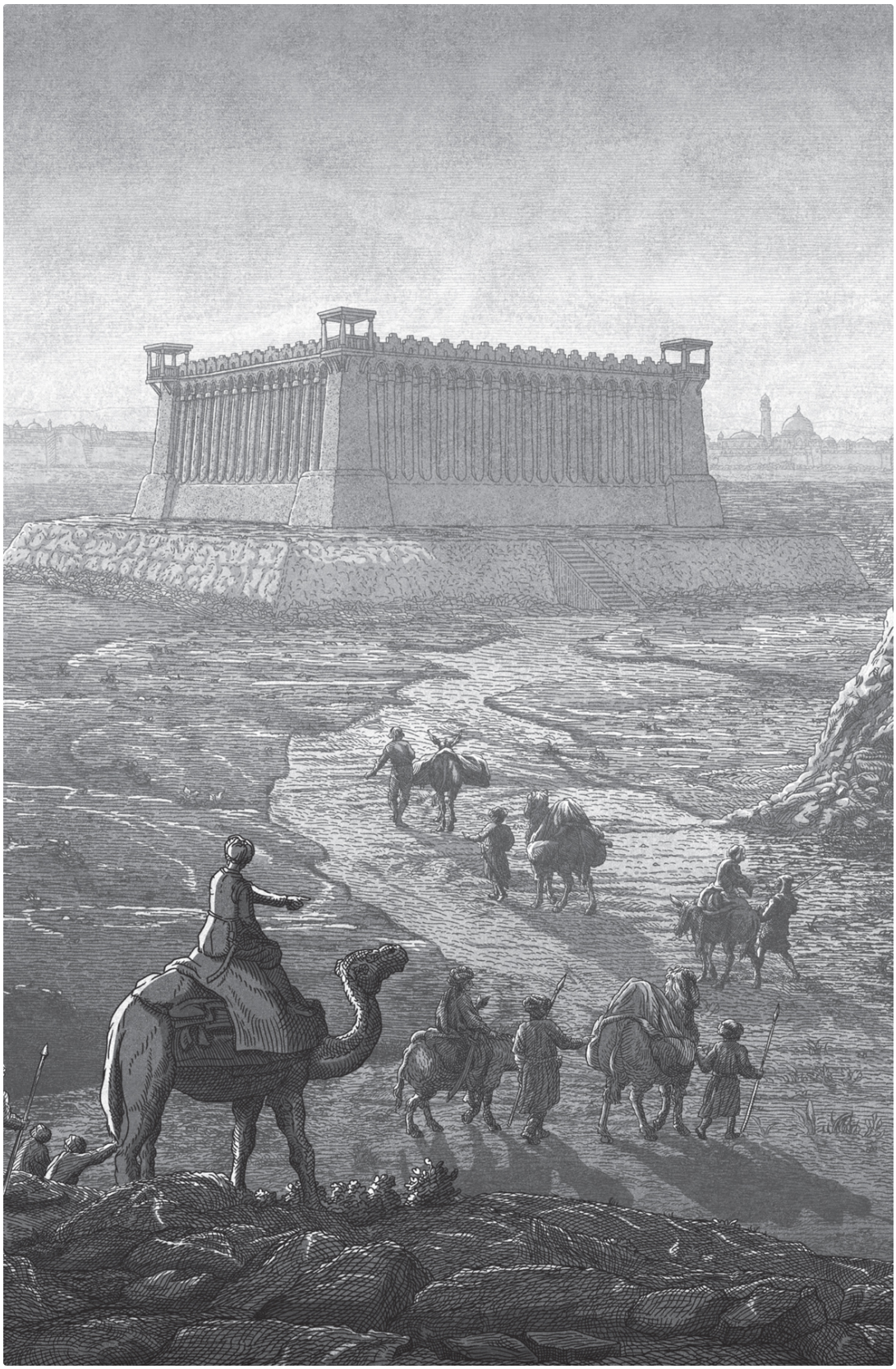
remembered excavating the clutch of human burials by the gatehouse, which he identified as a war cemetery. ‘Surely no poor relic in the soil of Britain was ever more fraught with high tragedy, more worth of brooding comment from the presiding Spirits of Hardy’s own *Dynasts*,’ he wrote.[49]

This allusion to the novelist Thomas Hardy was telling. In the late nineteenth century Hardy had used Maiden Castle as the setting for a short story entitled ‘A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork’, in which the protagonist slips up to the summit of the hillfort at night to dig for ancient artefacts. In that story, Hardy wrote: ‘The profile of the whole stupendous ruin, as seen at a distance of a mile eastward, is cleanly cut as that of a marble inlay. It is varied with protuberances, which from hereabouts have the animal aspect of warts, wens, knuckles, and hips. It may indeed be likened to an enormous many-limbed organism of an antediluvian time.’ He imagined how, during the hillfort’s heyday, ‘men must have often gone out by those gates in the morning to battle with the Roman legions under Vespasian; some to return no more, others to come back at evening, bringing with them the noise of their heroic deeds. But not a page, not a stone, has preserved their fame.’[50]

This was a stirring story, which gave archaeology a romantic, almost sexual allure. But Hardy’s *The Dynasts* was a tale told on a much grander stage: a drama set during Napoleon Bonaparte’s sweep across Europe in the early nineteenth century.

In the first scene of *The Dynasts*, readers find themselves ‘on a ridge in Wessex’ – a hillfort-like location – where troops, travellers, and the spirits of history itself assemble. They are gathering there, just as ancient Britons did in 43 CE, to hold their breath and gather their fighting spirit, as they anticipate invasion from across the English Channel by the massing armies of some unwelcome continental emperor.[51] The travellers quarrel patriotically and almost come to a pistol-duel over which of them thinks Napoleon a greater scoundrel. Then a character named the Spirit of the Years introduces the action with the words ‘Hark now, and gather as the martial mood stirs England’s humblest hearts.’[52] It is not difficult to see what Mortimer Wheeler, maverick archaeologist, liked about it. There could have been no better analogy for the earliest days of the British hillforts, when Claudius’ men waited in Gaul and Britain was ruled by woad-painted tribes, both sides preparing themselves for battle around the hillforts on the edge of the known world.

* Caesar was right and wrong. According to the modern Ordnance Survey, the coastline of mainland Britain is in fact a little over 11,000 miles long. But a coastline has a fractal dimension, meaning its observed length depends on how closely you zoom in.
† Very roughly, what would much later become the medieval kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. In motorway terms, think the M40 plus the M6.
‡ Or, just as plausibly, somewhere around the Solent, much further west.
§ This would not be so strange. Weapons in all ages have been given euphemistic names. The Roman ‘tortoise’ was not a reptile, but a formation of warriors holding their shields above their heads to defend against projectiles. And it was not a ‘fat man’ that exploded over Nagasaki on August 9th 1945, wiping out the city and ending the Second World War, but an implosion-type nuclear bomb.
Or from what is now Glasgow to Edinburgh.
∫ Ear-wax scoops were luxury items for thousands of years. To give just one example, the Tudor king Henry VIII gifted his second wife Anne Boleyn a golden ear-pick during their courtship in the sixteenth century. It would seem their time has passed in the age of the Q-tip; a reminder that human progress is not always linear.
Ω Exactly when that time had been was not certain. Insofar as historians today can tell, if Arthur was ever a real person at all, he can be identified with a Romano-British general called Ambrosius Aurelianus, who fought two battles (at Badon and Camlann) against invading Saxons in the middle of the fifth century CE.
≈ Arthur and Guinevere’s tombs had been put up in Glastonbury after a devastating fire in the twelfth century; in the thirteenth, King Edward I had attended their opening and inspection.
∂ Leland met a sad end. In 1547, around the time of Henry VIII’s death, he went mad – the result, said some who knew him, of the shock of the king’s death combined with a reluctant acceptance that his great literary projects were too ambitious ever to be realised. He lived on, insane, for five years, and died in April 1552. His only publication during his lifetime was his work on King Arthur, the *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii regis Britanniae*.



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3

ISLAMIC CASTLES

Before Islam, the Arabs had been strangers to the realms of which they then took possession. The buildings of others which they found in existence were sufficient for them.

IBN KHALDUN, *THE MUQADDIMAH*

The caliph Sulayman ibn al-Malik, ruler of the faithful Muslims, was a keen soldier, an eloquent speaker and a man of tremendous appetites. One of his fleshly weaknesses was gluttony, and the stories of his eating binges almost defied belief. There was an occasion, wrote a chronicler, on which Sulayman ate an entire lamb, six chickens, seventy pomegranates and a basket of currants. The caliph was tall and active, and needed to sustain his large, busy frame. But even so, this obsessive eating seemed to speak to some deep psychological need. He was, said the chronicler, 'rarely satiated': trapped in a body that 'could not bear hunger.'[1]

Hunger, however, was a valuable political quality in the young Umayyad Empire over which Sulayman ruled.[*] When he became caliph in 715 CE, the empire and its defining religion, Islam, were less than 100 years old. In 610 CE the Prophet Muhammad had experienced his first revelation of God's word, handed down to him by the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) in a cave near Mecca, in the west of the Arabian peninsula; in 622 he left Mecca for Medina, and founded the first Islamic state. Muhammad's followers, the Muslims, multiplied rapidly and after the prophet died in 632 they embarked on a lightning series of military conquests. Hurtling out of their native Arabia, they carved one path westwards through Egypt and north Africa, across the straits of Gibraltar and into the Iberian peninsula; another led them eastwards through Syria into Persia and on towards India.

Now, in 716, under Sulayman's caliphate, the Arab Muslims were casting a ravenous gaze upon the greatest city in the Mediterranean world: Constantinople. For nearly four centuries this extraordinary metropolis had been the capital of the Greek-speaking eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium. By the eighth century, Roman Byzantium had shrunk considerably from its former majesty, so that it now covered only Anatolia, Thrace, the Balkans and some enclaves in Italy. But Constantinople, with its Hippodrome and Forum, imperial palaces and the huge domed cathedral of Hagia Sophia, still spoke to Rome's ancient glories.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the city's massive fortifications: the enormous double lines of the Theodosian Walls that protected the entire landward flank[†] of Constantinople. These walls, built between 404 and 413

CE during the early reign of Emperor Theodosius II, ran 5.5km (3.5 miles) from the Bosphorus Strait to the Sea of Marmara. They consisted of a 12m high ‘inner’ wall, in front of which stood a terrace, a shorter, a 9m ‘outer’ wall, a 1.5m ‘low wall’ and a moat. The huge inner wall was made of a thick core of crushed brick and mortar, faced by limestone and lines of decorative brick, and punctuated by ninety-six defensive towers, some soaring 20m tall. The distance between the inner wall and the outer bank of the moat was nearly 50m, and the gates that gave access to visitors and military patrols were especially heavily guarded. Contemporaries wrote of the ‘lofty splendour’ of these fortifications; indeed, along with its huge number of churches, relics and ostentatious wealth, walls were what Constantinople was known for.[2] The Romans had always been adept at fortification, whether in building walls around their cities, *castra* for their colonising legions or watchtower-studded barriers along the imperial borders. The Theodosian Walls represented the acme of Roman urban engineering and civic majesty. There were no greater fortifications on earth.

Yet those same walls were what the Umayyad caliph Sulayman was set on defeating. The Arab conquests of the seventh century had brought the Umayyads regularly into conflict with the Byzantines as they flexed their muscles in former Roman territories, taking strongly defended cities including Damascus, Jerusalem and Alexandria. Now Sulayman felt the time was ripe to knock out the last great bastion of the old empire’s power. The challenge was formidable, but Islam could hardly consider itself a new superpower unless it was up to the task. The coming months would tell if this glutton of a caliph had bitten off more than his forces could chew.

History was not wholly encouraging. The last time a Muslim caliph had tried his hand at breaking Constantinople’s massive towers and walls, things had gone badly: over four years between 674 and 678, Arab fleets and armies assaulted the city from land and sea, trying to impose a blockade before eventually being driven away by Byzantine ships spraying the deadly incendiary known as Greek fire[‡].

Since then, however, the situation appeared to have changed. In the first place, the relentlessness of the Arab conquests had sparked panic among some non-Muslims, amounting to a fear that the Umayyads were heralds of the end times, when, as prophecy had it, ‘lofty palaces will fall and many people will perish, and high buildings will be cast down and will become tombs for their inhabitants.’[3] In the second place, Byzantium was roiling

with plots and treachery. In the thirty-eight years since the last Muslim attack on the city, six emperors had ruled, and five had been deposed: blinded, mutilated and/or murdered. The Byzantine state was weary from long wars with the Persians and more recently the Arabs themselves. There might be no better time to storm its walls.

To command the assault, Sulayman appointed his brother, a hardened middle-aged general named Maslama. In the winter of 716–17, Maslama began to assemble what one chronicler called ‘a innumerable host of horse and foot from the various people subject to [the Muslims], as well as a great fleet numbering as many as eighteen hundred ships.’[4] The army entered Anatolia from the east through passes in the Taurus Mountains, capturing the fortresses that were supposed to guard these routes. Then they set out on a march of more than 1,000 kilometres through the Anatolian interior, a huge armed column of soldiers and chariots, followed by a supply train of camels and donkeys bearing food, water, weapons and tents. The enormous fleet shadowed the army, sailing along Anatolia’s southern coast.[5] Meanwhile, Sulayman and Maslama stirred the pot of Constantinopolitan politics, by offering to make an Arabic-speaking Byzantine general named Konon their client emperor if he would support their cause. Konon accepted. In March 717 he convinced the Senate and Church in Constantinople to depose the existing emperor, Theodosius III, and appoint him instead. Since Theodosius commanded only lukewarm respect as a military commander, and since deposing emperors had long shed any great association of trauma, this was done. Theodosius was sent, peaceably, to a monastery, and Konon became emperor, taking the name Leo III.

The ease with which the advancing Muslim army swept through the country and captured defensive forts chilled Byzantine writers, and gave rise to rumours of foul play. The western Anatolian city of Pergamon, centred on a heavily fortified citadel on top of a high volcanic mesa with steep cliffs on three sides, fell easily as Maslama’s armies bore down. One chronicler claimed this was because the defenders tried to use black magic to strengthen their sword arms: ‘By some devilish intention the inhabitants of the city took a pregnant girl who was about to give birth to her first child, cut her open and, having removed the infant from inside her, boiled it in a pot of water, in which the men who were preparing to fight the enemy dipped the sleeves of their right arms.’ Revolted, God instead rendered the men of Pergamon ‘incapable of taking up weapons and, in the face of their

inactivity, the enemy captured the city without resistance.'[6] By August 717 the Muslim armies had reached western Anatolia, crossed the Hellespont and were marching on Constantinople itself. A few weeks later the fleet arrived.

With a stooge emperor in the city, a vast navy at sea, and their army camped outside the Theodosian Walls, now should have been the moment when the Muslims delivered their killer blow. Yet fate turned against them. On September 3rd, as Sulayman's fleet sailed towards the Bosphorus Strait, they were ambushed by Byzantine vessels equipped – as in 674–78 – with Greek fire. On land, the troops under Maslama tried to blockade Constantinople, rather than hurling themselves at its walls. They were attacked by sorties from within the city and by Byzantine allies from outside, and when winter came, the Muslims were forced to make camp on frozen ground, with too little food to go around. Inside the city, Leo III proved a faithless ally: instead of rolling over and surrendering the imperial city, he organised its stout defence.

Amid all this, on September 24th 717, Sulayman died. Back in the Umayyad capital of Damascus, he was succeeded by Umar ibn al-Aziz. The new caliph gave his blessing for the siege to continue, but by the summer of 718 it was clear that against the walls of Constantinople the Muslims had come up short. The irresistible force had foundered on the immovable object. And food was running out. The besieging army was starving. 'They ate all of their dead animals, namely horses, asses, and camels,' wrote a chronicler. 'It is said that they even cooked in ovens and ate dead men and their own dung which they leavened.'[7]

Had he lived, even the gluttonous Sulayman would surely have pushed away a loaf of leavened dung bread, and those of the Muslims who did eat such grim fare soon fell sick and died. In August, Umar had had enough. He sent word to Constantinople that Maslama should lift the siege without delay. The general obeyed orders, and the armies of Islam packed up their tents to go home the way they had come. The journey back was miserable – their men were harassed constantly on their march through Anatolia, and almost all their ships were sunk by storms or seized by pirates. They had thrown all they had at Constantinople, but it was not enough. It was time to look elsewhere.[§]

The siege of Constantinople in 717–18 was a turning-point in western history, when Islam's charge around the Mediterranean stalled beneath the

shadow of the greatest set of fortifications the western world had ever produced. Soon after, in 732 the Umayyads juddered similarly to a halt at the other end of Europe, when a Muslim army raiding over the Pyrenees into the lands of the Franks was defeated by Charles Martel at the battle of Tours. Yet if the first age of Islamic expansion was drawing to a close, the age of Islamic fortification had only just begun.

The blistering wave of military expansion that peaked with the siege of Constantinople established Islam as the next imperial power in the Mediterranean and Middle East. And that meant the caliphs – like the Romans and the Greeks before them – needed to build fortifications to protect what they had conquered. The desert castles, caliphal palaces and walled citadels of the *dar al-Islam* were often highly derivative, for Islam in its foundational centuries was a chameleon, always adaptive to the surroundings in which it landed. Yet what the Muslims lacked – to begin with – in originality, they made up for in sheer variety. And that malleability, which allowed Islam to put down roots at rapid pace everywhere from the plains of Transoxania to the hills of central Spain, makes the tale of Islamic fortifications an important chapter in our history of the castle.



Like the other great Abrahamic religions – Judaism and Christianity – Islam began as a desert faith. Muhammad received his revelation in a cave; in 622 he led his followers on the Hijrah from Mecca to Medina through the harshness of the Arabian desert. The Arabs who first took up his banner tended, therefore, to be in their element on the desert roads that connected the biggest cities of the Middle East and north Africa. And it was along those roads that the early caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty established their first fortifications, building a series of so-called ‘desert castles’ in the Bilad al-Sham – an area roughly corresponding to modern Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. Not coincidentally, this was an area also known as the *limes arabicus*: a frontier zone previously fortified by the Roman emperors of the east, into whose lands those first caliphs so enthusiastically pressed.

The act of conquest that led to the foundation of many of the Umayyads’ desert castles was the capture of Byzantine Damascus. In 634 Khalid al-Walid, a key lieutenant of Muhammad whom the prophet nicknamed *Sayf*

Allah – the sword of God – besieged the fortified city, taking it at night while the citizens were distracted by a festival. A quarter of a century later, the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiya, made Damascus his capital city, and the administrative centre of the Islamic world.

Damascus had long been an important trading town: a key calling-point for caravans travelling the Silk Roads that brought luxury goods, cloths and spices from east to west. Under the Umayyads in the eighth century it flourished, and as the roads bustled with traffic the surrounding countryside felt the benefits of a boom. Wealthy elites started to build desert castles along those trading routes. They did so for a number of overlapping reasons. Desert castles could be country retreats for hunting and relaxing away from the bustle of the city. They could serve as *caravanserai* – stopping-points for travelling merchants to eat, bathe and rest their animals. Or they might be places to meet and break diplomatic bread with the desert tribes through whose lands the roads ran. What all desert castles had in common was that they were designed to be secure, good-looking and comfortable, spaces where visitors could come to enjoy a fine quality of life.

In combining business, security and pleasure, the Umayyad desert castles were echoing – very consciously – the habits of the Byzantine Empire they had displaced. For while Islam had emerged from beyond the borders of Byzantium, and its followers worshiped according to a rite alien to Greek and Latin tongues, their desert castles betrayed the new conquerors' urge to out-Roman the Romans.

A decade after the caliph Sulayman had declared his failed war on Constantinople, in 727 and 728, two splendid desert castles were built north-east of Damascus, either side of the ancient city of Palmyra. Known as the Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi and Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, they were commissioned by Sulayman's brother Hisham, who ruled as caliph between 724 and 743. The easternmost of them, Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (literally, the castle of the eastern enclosure) was a testament to both the ambition and the magpie instinct of the Umayyad elites. It was situated at a crossroads, where the main road leading from the Syrian city of Aleppo into Iraq met the one joining Damascus to the upper Euphrates valley. There, rising out of the semi-arid plain, a long wall enclosed a compound containing grazing land for animals, farm buildings, an olive-oil press, a mosque and several large, square fortified buildings. These were built around courtyards, with

towers on each corner and round half-towers beside an entry gate. Rooms were built into the walls, and the exterior given elegant decoration in brick and stone relief.

In military terms this castle was deceptive: its regular towers suggested that it bristled with hostile intent, as the walls of Constantinople did. But in fact, many of its apparent defensive features were monumental or even decorative: it was a caravan stop dressed up as a castle, and would not have lasted a week if ever laid to siege. In this it was borrowing from a language well established in the Roman and Byzantine world, in which ordinary buildings were given triumphant bearing, to tell a story about the power of empire.[8] And by borrowing the grammar of Roman building, the Qasr reminded anyone who saw it of the caliphs' ambitions to rule the entire world.

A reliable feature of building anywhere in the Roman Empire had always been splendid decoration, whether in mosaics, frescoes, statues or building façades. The desert castles that arose in the Bilad al-Sham under Umayyad control showed the same aesthetic instinct. At this early stage in the development of Islamic art, influences from surrounding cultures still swirled – a rich, figurative precursor to the intricate, non-figurative, calligraphic styles that would later be preferred by the strictest interpretations of the prophet's teaching. Thus, at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi – the 'twin' castle built at the same time as the Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi – the 70m square fortress building was decorated in princely fashion. A floor fresco showed musicians playing pipes and lyres, and a hunter shooting with bow and arrow from the saddle of a galloping horse. Another depicted a lordly young man, surrounded by twisting leaves and branches, guarded by two semi-naked, muscular, bearded guards brandishing spears. Sculpture and reliefs around the building portrayed similar well-to-do men and the heads of proud, prancing animals. Any tired merchant stopping here from many miles away would have been reassured to know that whatever new doctrine was being pronounced in the castle's mosque, the art indicated they had entered the territory of a sophisticated civilisation.

As the eighth century went on, desert castles increased steadily in number and opulence. Just north of the city of Jericho, a castle known as the Khirbat al-Mafjar (also known as Hisham's Palace) was built over a site covering 150 acres. This compound consisted of a central palace arranged over two storeys, with a separate bathhouse, mosque and farm. Within the

palace and bathhouse were some of the finest works of mosaic anywhere in the Mediterranean world. The central pool in the bathhouse covered more than 800 square metres, with a mosaic floor in geometric patterns made up of more than 5 million pieces of local coloured stone. Even more dazzling was the floor of the private audience chamber, or *diwan*, where a 'Tree of Life' mosaic showed a lion leaping through grassland to sink its teeth into the flank of a gazelle it has picked out from a herd. Elsewhere within the buildings stood lifelike statues: a man with a sword, perhaps representing the caliph, and a bare-breasted female servant with a necklace dangling a pendant below her collarbone, and a bunch of flowers in her hand.

Just as fine – perhaps even finer – was the décor of the Qasr Amra, built between 723 and 743 near Amman (modern Jordan) as a royal retreat for the caliph. Here, drawing on Persian building techniques as well as Byzantine styles, arose another luxurious compound, combining a comfortable villa with a sumptuously decorated bathhouse. In the latter, the ceiling was covered with colourful frescoes: an astronomical map showing the zodiac and cartoons of the constellations; pictures of naked women dancing and musicians playing while animals enjoyed the music; the triumph of the Roman god Neptune. In the house itself, the theme of the decorations was distinctly royal. A fresco of the caliph al-Walid II acknowledged the Umayyad ruler under whom the castle was completed. But the finest work was a fresco depicting six kings – including a Byzantine emperor, Persian shah, and kings of Ethiopia and Visigothic Spain. The postures of these mighty rulers, all pointing towards a space where one might expect the caliph to be seated, alluded to the familiar theme of world domination, to be contemplated by whichever Umayyad leader might be at repose in the house, or taking his ablutions in the *hammam*.

Sadly for al-Walid II, this was not him for very long. Al-Walid became caliph in February 743, but fourteen months later his love of drinking, music and loose living aroused the ire of more straitlaced Muslims in Damascus. He was killed in a coup and replaced by one of his cousins. His violent death was followed in 750 by even greater political upheaval, when the Umayyad dynasty itself was overthrown, to be replaced by a new dynastic line, the Abbasids. They moved the capital of the Islamic world from Damascus to Baghdad, bringing to an end the short but brilliant period of Byzantine-influenced desert castles, and ushering in a new age, in which

Islamic castles took on a variety of different forms, each moulded to the place where the faith found its home.



When 50,000 Muslim soldiers and their families were sent to colonise the oasis of Merv, in the far east of the Umayyad caliphate, in the late 660s, they were following in the footsteps of no other than Alexander the Great. The Macedonian general and world conqueror had stormed through Central Asia almost exactly 1,000 years earlier, and founded a new city which he called – like all the cities he founded – Alexandria.[9] That settlement sat in a long-occupied oasis watered by the Marghab River, which flowed out of the mountains of what is now Afghanistan and disappeared into the blisteringly hot sands of the Karakum Desert.[#] It was a staging point on the Silk Roads, and an excellent place from which to control the region known as Khorasan, a frontier zone of the relentlessly expanding Islamic Empire.[10] With this great wave of new Muslim settlers, it was also about to become a thriving Islamic community – the biggest of its kind in the east.

In the millennium since Alexander had founded the city, Merv had been occupied by many rulers, moved between several locations within the oasis and fortified a number of times. When the Umayyad settlers arrived they found two significant fortifications. The oldest, Erk Kala ('Fortress City'), was an oval-shaped citadel with mud-brick walls piled up to nearly 30m in height.[11] This had long overflowed into Gyaur Kala (Infidel City),[∫] a larger city of around 300 acres, also enclosed by mud-brick walls, which were studded with towers. Taken together, citadel and city formed an adequate, secure base which served as the Umayyad capital of Khorasan for several decades. But by the middle of the eighth century, the population had over-spilled the walls once more. A new, much larger suburb destined to be known as Sultan Kala (Royal City) now stood directly next to the older sites.

In the 740s gathering disquiet across the Umayyad Empire reached the oasis of Merv. It changed the shape of the growing city and, as it transpired, the whole organisation of the Islamic world. A former slave from the Iraqi city of Kufa, known by the *nom du guerre* Abu Muslim, fell into the orbit of Abbasid revolutionaries fomenting against what they saw as a corrupt

Umayyad ruling class, who had lost control on sectarian disputes[Ω] and mismanaged relations between Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims. Abu Muslim took charge of whipping up popular anger against the regime in Merv, then turning it into action. In doing so he became the prime mover of a revolution that proposed a new ruling dynasty – the Abbasids – in place of the Umayyads.

In 747 Abu Muslim raised the black flag of the Abbasids over Merv, where it would be almost impossible for the caliphs, 2,500 kilometres away in Damascus, to stamp out rebellion. Abbasid armies swelled and marched through Persia into Iraq, defeating the Umayyads in January 750 at the battle of the Zab. The Umayyad caliph and hundreds of his relatives were either killed in the fighting or systematically murdered in the following months. A new ruler, al-Saffah ('the Bloodshedder'), became the first caliph of the Abbasid dynasty that was destined to rule for more than seven centuries. And as the victor, he now had a free hand to divide the spoils of the vast Islamic Empire.

Al-Saffah rewarded Abu Muslim for his boldness in leading the rebellion that had swept the Umayyads away with the governorship of Khorosan, giving him a free hand to transform Merv into a fortified Silk Roads powerhouse. From around 750, the centre of urban gravity at Merv was shifted away from the old compound of Erk Kala and to the suburb of Sultan Kala, around which walls double the size of the old city's were constructed. Gates controlled traffic along the trade road. Silver coins were minted bearing Abu Muslim's name. And outside the walls of Sultan Kala, an enormous castle was erected.

The Great Kyz Kala, which has been dated to the time that the new Abbasid city at Merv was expanding, was a *köshk*: a fortified or semi-fortified residence for wealthy elites. Like all *köshk*, it stood on a high platform built of rammed earth, from which soared high, rectangular walls decorated with closely packed, corrugated sheets of columns. Within these walls was a two-storey building with luxurious apartments for the governor on the top floor and secure quarters on the lower.[12] Corner towers overlooked the road and canals, and the city half a kilometre away. Anyone approaching Merv from the time of the Abbasid revolution onwards would have seen the Great Kyz Kala before anything else, its huge walls shimmering in the desert heat. The building style was not original – it was fairly common in Central Asia. Yet it served as an advertisement of the

power of the Abbasid caliphs, whose capital in Baghdad was the new centre of the Islamic world.[13]

Abu Muslim did not live long to enjoy the luxuries of the palatial fortress complex at Merv. His growing independence and evident self-regard as a kingmaker sat uneasily with the new Abbasid caliphs. In 755 he was summoned to the caliph's court in Iraq, and accused of overreaching his authority, and of having spent so long in the east that he had succumbed to the temptations of its many other religions and strayed into heresy. Five guards chopped him into pieces and threw his mortal remains into the river Tigris. His rise from slave to imperial power-broker and architect of revolution would not be forgotten in Khorosan, where he was remembered in verse romances narrating his exciting life. But his greatest legacy was Merv itself, where around the *köshk* and the walls of Sultan Kala arose one of the greatest cities of the Middle Ages, which, by the early thirteenth century, had a population of around half a million people.[≈]

Just as the city walls and *köshk* of Merv represented Islamic fortifications adapted to the environment of Central Asia, so there emerged a unique style of Muslim fortification in Iraq. In 762, under the caliph Al-Mansur, the Abbasids took over the unexceptional settlement of Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris, and transformed it into one of the most striking and strongly defended cities in the world, which would grow to such a size that one renowned Muslim scholar of the later Middle Ages estimated that it was serviced by 65,000 bathhouses.[14] Under the official title of Madinat al-Salam (the City of Peace), Baghdad was designed as one large fortress, with three perfectly circular sets of mudbrick walls, surrounded by a moat and accessed through gatehouses with huge iron gates. These gates became famous around the world, as did the iconic buildings inside them, including the library known as the House of Wisdom and the caliphal Palace of the Golden Gate, which was topped with a green dome and statue of a horseman carrying a lance, who was said magically to point in the direction of trouble, should enemies be approaching the city walls.[15]

Baghdad's circular walls spoke to a grand, cosmic vision of a new capital sitting at the centre of the universe.[16] But like the fortress at Merv, they were not original. They mimicked the defences of older Persian round cities such as Gor,[∂] Darabgerd and Hatra. Nor did the Abbasids restrict themselves to aping the fortifications of Persia. They also persisted with

Byzantine styles. Most notable in that regard was the huge desert castle of al-Ukhaidir, built in or around 778, likely by a member of the Abbasid royal family. It was massively bigger than any of the Umayyad desert fortresses, measuring 175m by 169m along its outer walls. There were Persian flourishes to its design, in the form of pointed vaulted ceilings and the blind arches[π] that decorated the inner courtyards and filled spaces between the towers on the outer wall. Yet al-Ukhaidir also showed the enduring Roman influence on Islamic fortification design, more than half a century after the great battles between Umayyads and Byzantines were over.

As has already been noted, one of the keys to Islam's success in spreading so far and so fast was its plasticity. The faith itself was rooted in the precise words of Muhammad's revelations (written down in the Qur'an) and his sayings (collected as the hadith). But – initially at least – there were only a few other rules. Arabic was the universal language, and those who lived under the rule of the caliphs were generally allowed to choose whether to convert to Islam or pay the *jizya* – an infidel tax – to go about their spiritual business as they liked. Everything else could be tailored to circumstance – including castles and fortifications. This made for consistency – and wild variety. A traveller who decided to traverse the vast distance of the Abbasid empire during its medieval heyday would soon have seen this in the shifting concepts of fortification he or she encountered: built by Muslims but rooted in local tradition rather than central planning dogma.

To move west from Baghdad, for example, one would encounter the clutch of Umayyad desert castles around Jordan, then swing into Egypt, where a cluster of military outposts were developing into what would eventually become Cairo. Here, guarding the mouth of a canal linking the river Nile to the Red Sea, the Roman emperor Diocletian had built a thick, round-turreted stronghold known as Babylon Fortress.[Δ] Beside this, the Umayyads had founded a garrison town with a large mosque, known as al-Fustat, which grew into a major city with a population of more than 100,000 people, living in high-rise buildings as tall as minarets.[17]

A traveller visiting after 969 would have seen a formidable new military complex named *al-Qahira* (hence: Cairo), built by the Fatimid dynasty, which had wrestled power in north Africa from the Abbasids. An almost square fortification around 1km on each side, pierced by eight fortified gates, was built first from mudbrick, and later rebuilt from stone. During that rebuilding process there was an appreciable lurch back towards

Byzantine defensive planning, blended with local building techniques that went back to the times of the Pharaohs. Indeed, the architect (an Armenian Muslim convert called Badr al-Jamali) often pulled down pyramids and other ancient pharaonic monuments to save himself the work of quarrying.[18]

The result in Cairo was a set of walls built on the same scale as those of Constantinople, topped with ramparts and opening into gatehouses flanked with towers which were each the size of a standalone fortress. The swaggering names of these gates – Bab al-Nasr (Gate of Victory) and Bab al-Futuh (Gate of Conquest) spoke to the military confidence of the Fatimid dynasty that now held Egypt. Yet the iconography that decorated them looked in another direction than Mecca: Byzantine swords and shields were as prominent on the stonework as graffiti from a much older Egypt, carried over from the ancient buildings al-Jamali had plundered for the limestone he needed to build them.

Moving west from Cairo, our traveller would have come across many more captivating examples of Islamic fortification across Muslim north Africa. In Ifriqya – what had once been Roman Africa, and is today Tunisia – there stood dazzling structures dating from several ages of Islamic history. Mud-brick walls fortified the inland capital of Kairouan. But on the coast stood an entirely different type of structure: the *ribat*. These were small, square or rectangular fortresses designed to garrison troops watching over borderlands. They became associated with devout warriors, who were expected to live in a quasi-monastic austerity, while readying themselves at all times for action to protect the land from infidels. A ribat such as that at Sousse or Monastir[**], on the eastern coastline of Ifriqya, would be able to accommodate a few dozen soldiers. It was typically accessed by a single gate, loomed over by a tall watchtower (for use as a lookout post and signalling-point for passing ships) and arranged around a central courtyard, off which were galleries with small cells for the troops. For nourishment the garrison would be provided with a rainwater cistern and a small mosque.

There was even more to see elsewhere. Sicily had been under Arab rule from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. And though its most impressive castles were built in the twelfth century CE, when it was conquered by Norman kings, those northern invaders had no qualms about employing Muslim craftsmen, thereby fusing castle-building techniques from north-west Europe with decorative styles that had evolved in Islamic north Africa.

In Morocco, meanwhile, a 20km circuit of rammed-earth walls around Marrakesh integrated Berber building techniques with tooth-like crenelated ramparts more characteristic of building styles current in western Europe. The *ksar* (or fortified caravan town) of Ait Benhaddou, a cluster of rammed-earth buildings packed together in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, was a north-west African take on the desert castles of Greater Syria, fitted to the conditions of trade on the roads leading from the Sahara desert to Marrakech and beyond.

The variety was enormous, and could even be overwhelming. Those who did travel far and wide in the Islamic world, such as the brilliant fourteenth-century polymath Ibn Khaldun, despaired at the unfussy attitude with which Muslims approached building works, and their readiness to adapt to local tastes rather than impose their own. ‘Before Islam, the Arabs had been strangers to the realms of which they then took possession,’ he wrote. ‘The buildings of others which they found in existence were sufficient for them.’ When it came to developing a universal, signature Islamic style of construction, Ibn Khaldun felt Muslims simply had other matters to worry about. ‘They have no interest in these things,’ he wrote. ‘They only see to it that they have pastures for their camels.’[19]

This was perhaps a little harsh. Another writer, roughly contemporary with Ibn Khaldun, wrote that although traditional desert tribespeople were incompetent builders, the Muslims had distinguished themselves by their willingness to learn. ‘They are experts of the cities with all their armament, materials and tools, and they know how to build fortresses and all that is convenient to punish the enemies,’ he wrote.[20] The capacity to shape-shift had been an essential condition for the early spread of Islam, and that continued to apply to castle-building and fortification for centuries after the first conquests. A traveller who did venture a long way through the *dar al-Islam*, inspecting its castles, city walls and ribats might conclude that a ready willingness to hybridise with local culture was a sign of cultural tenacity, rather than a lack of care. Nowhere, perhaps, was this more true than in one of the furthest-flung provinces of Muslim rule: the province of al-Andalus, on the Iberian peninsula.

In 750, when the Abbasid revolution swept from Khorasan towards the Umayyad capital of Damascus, one young prince of the ousted dynasty managed to escape. Abd al-Rahman was not killed at the battle of the Zab, nor at the banquet where the Abbasids tricked and slaughtered his surviving relatives. He was not caught by pursuers who forced him to swim for his life across the wide waters of the Euphrates. And he could not be tracked down by the many assassins who tailed him thereafter. He lived. And for five years he ran: out of Syria, through Palestine, Egypt and north Africa, until in 755 he reached Morocco, crossed the strait of Gibraltar and arrived in the Muslims' westernmost province of al-Andalus. When he arrived, he found a troubled land ready to receive him as a rival to the governor, Yusuf al-Fihri. After a year of fighting, Abd al-Rahman defeated al-Fihri, nailed his head to a bridge in the city of Cordoba and proclaimed himself the new ruler of Islamic Iberia – which he declared an emirate still loyal to the Umayyad tradition, commanded by his own hand. In time, his descendant and namesake Abd Al-Rahman III would go one better, and declare himself a caliph.

To be an emir was great – to be a caliph even greater. But to rule over a province as large and fractious as al-Andalus was a job that required near-constant military campaigning, both against fellow Muslims and the Christian kings who ruled the territories of the peninsula's north. So in the centuries that followed Abd al-Rahman's power grab, a number of spectacular fortresses were built around the province, from urban citadels to mountain strongholds, to one of the most breathtaking fortified pleasure palaces in the world: the Alhambra, perched near the city of Granada, between the beautiful, white-tipped Sierra Nevada mountains and the sea.

The earliest surviving fortifications from this renegade Umayyad state (which became known as the emirate, or caliphate, of Córdoba), were typically adaptive, pragmatic projects known as *alcazabas*.[††] In 835 the ruler Abd al-Rahman II built a large *alcazaba* at Mérida, which served as a governor's palace and controlled access to Córdoba. The *alcazaba* sat across a Roman road, guarding a Roman bridge across the Guadiana River. Its 10m high walls were built according to Byzantine ideas of fortification, with towers set at regular intervals around a rectangular perimeter, which was defended by a moat. The stones used were salvaged from centuries-old Roman structures which had fallen into disrepair.

Similar derivative structures were installed at other critical points all over al-Andalus: at Badajoz, Toledo and Zaragoza – usually to keep watch over troublesome cities or frontier zones. But by the tenth century CE, when Abd al-Rahman III declared himself caliph, Córdoba had grown to become one of the largest, richest and most sophisticated cities in Europe, attended by ambassadors from every major realm and thronging with brilliant scientists, philosophers and artists. (A poet of the era wrote: 'Do not speak to me of the court of Baghdad nor of its magnificence, nor boast of the various merits of Persia or China, because there is no place like Córdoba anywhere on this earth.')[21] And the castles built in this era reflected its rising confidence. One of the crowning glories was the gigantic hilltop fortress of Gormaz, constructed from 965 on a ridge overlooking the Douro river, in border country between the caliphate and the Christian kingdoms of Léon and Castile to the north. Gormaz was part of a long chain of frontier fortresses, which guarded the valley and provided a base for raids into Christian territory. When it was built, it was one of the biggest fortresses anywhere in Europe.

Abd al-Rahman III was particularly hands-on in micromanaging building projects, and liked to 'inspect the observance of his orders and to see the buildings and fortifications that he had ordered to be built.'[22] And although Gormaz was constructed a few years after his death, under the supervision of one of his protégés, Ghalib ibn Abd al-Rahman,[‡‡] a new self-assurance could be seen in both the scale and sophistication of the fortifications. Stone scavenged from Roman ruins still found its way into the walls, but Gormaz had an architectural logic of its own. Walls around 1km in perimeter were adapted to the irregular shape of the hilltop, with conventional square towers protruding at regular intervals. But its most striking feature was its main gatehouse. Here, two towers framed the main entrance to the castle compound, and these were guarded by state-of-the-art defensive sentry points, common to Christian castle-building at this time as well as Islamic. Unmistakeably Córdoban, however, was the arch that sat above the gate: a horseshoe curve which would have been plastered and perhaps painted with Arabic inscription.[23] Anyone approaching the castle who had ever been to the caliphate's capital would have recognised it immediately as a reference to the great mosque in Córdoba, founded by the first emir, Abd al-Rahman I, and greatly expanded since. Above the mosque's doors and within the

prayer hall were countless such arches: mathematically precise and visually unmistakeable. Gormaz was a frontier castle not only in its location, but in its announcement that behind it lay the lands of the caliphs, in all their might and glory.

In its day, there was no fortification in the caliphate that could match Gormaz for scale and self-confidence. Even today its ruins are a striking sight. Yet it was not the greatest Islamic fortification ever built in Spain. That accolade belongs unquestionably to the Alhambra, built during a period when the caliphate had collapsed, and the prospect of Islamic rule in al-Andalus was becoming increasingly uncertain.

The Alhambra was founded in the thirteenth century by Muhammad I ibn al-Ahmar, the first Nasrid ruler of Granada – an emirate whose destiny was to be the last Muslim polity standing as the Christian armies of the Spanish kingdoms to the north ground their way inexorably towards the southern coast. It was established out of dire need: in 1236 Córdoba was seized by the armies of the Christian king Ferdinand III of Castile and Léon, leaving the Muslims of al-Andalus bereft of their greatest city. Two years later, in 1238, Muhammad, who had made a peace deal with the ascendant Christian king, started work on a new capital, fortifying high ground where a previous Berber dynasty, the Zirids, had maintained a small *alcazaba*. Like the Zirids, Muhammad made use of the iron-rich red clay of the surrounding hills to make rammed-earth walls (al-Hamra literally means ‘the red one’). This was the start of a project that would take generations to complete – and which would exceed in splendour anything Muhammad could have foreseen.

In its first form, developed under Muhammad and his successor, Muhammad II, the Alhambra was a conventional hilltop citadel. Like Gormaz castle, it had strong walls and a tall, square watchtower. It was only at the end of the thirteenth century that the castle complex started to assume truly regal form. That work was done chiefly by the emir Yusuf I and Muhammad V, whose combined reigns spanned most of the fourteenth century, from 1335 to 1391. These years represented a cultural zenith for the emirate of Granada, during which the court thronged with writers, historians, poets, scholars and physicians, some of whom held high political office. And the intellectual flowering they sponsored was reflected in the fabric of the Alhambra.

Yusuf substantially remodelled the fortress, and turned a military garrison into an artistic and intellectual paradise. He commissioned the practical Gate of Arms, through which troops marched. But he also built the ceremonial Gate of Justice: a portal to the palace over which sat a series of horseshoe arches and a female hand carved in marble, which is now thought to represent the five tenets of Islam: monotheism, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca.

Within the walls he developed the Comares Palace, an exquisite suite of rooms organised around a courtyard with a reflecting water pool. These rooms included the Hall of the Boat, with an ornately carved wooden ceiling resembling the hull of a ship; and the massive Hall of Ambassadors, a throne room with an intricate dome ceiling decorated to resemble a brilliant starlit night. Around this astonishing work of art was inscribed the lines of scripture speaking to the might of Allah and the perils of disobeying him: 'He is the One Who created seven heavens, one above the other. You will never see any imperfection in the creation of the Most Compassionate. So look again: do you see any flaws? . . . Those who disbelieve in their Lord will suffer the punishment of Hell. What an evil destination!'[24]

Under Yusuf's son, Muhammad V, the Alhambra grew more beautiful still. The Palace of the Lions – a modern appellation referring to a courtyard fountain featuring carved lions who spit water from their mouths – was decorated throughout with muqarnas vaults. These elaborate, three-dimensional ceiling vaults resembling jewels falling in stalactite formation first appeared in Abbasid architecture in the eleventh century, but there were few places in Europe where they were used to such stunning effect as in the Alhambra under the Nasrids.

Muhammad V had succeeded his father Yusuf in 1354 after Yusuf was stabbed to death by a madman while at prayer in Granada's Great Mosque, and this, sadly for the Nasrids, was a taste of political trouble to come. In the fifteenth century, under renewed pressure of Christian conquest and clan fighting within the emirate itself, the unity of the last Islamic territory on mainland Europe began to crumble. Although the Alhambra continued to be beautified and developed – along with an urban quarter to house the vast numbers of workers and attendants who served in the palace, a separate summer-palace known as the Generalife, and lush terraced gardens fragrant in springtime with the blossom of fruit trees – the dynasty that had built it was losing its grip on power.

In the late fifteenth century the emirate of Granada dissolved into civil war, which subsequently invited attack by the combined forces of the united powerhouse Christian kingdoms of Spain: Castile and Aragon. In 1483 the Nasrid emir Muhammad XII (sometimes known as Boabdil) was captured and ransomed back to his people on condition that he rule as a vassal to the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. This was the prelude to final destruction, which arrived on January 2nd 1492, when in a ceremony conducted at the Alhambra, Muhammad handed over the keys to Granada before departing into lifelong exile in Morocco. The last Muslim ruler in Europe had been despatched and the Reconquista was complete. What remained, however, was an architectural legacy seen most proudly in the elegant palaces and gardens of the Alhambra. Even after these were modified and added to by the sixteenth century Spanish Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, their core remained true to the Nasrid vision.



In 1829 the American writer Washington Irving visited the Alhambra, climbed the Comares tower and marvelled at what lay before him.

> We cast a general eye over the splendid panorama of city and country; of rocky mountain, verdant valley, and fertile plain; of castle, cathedral, Moorish towers, and Gothic domes, crumbling ruins, and blooming groves. Let us approach the battlements, and cast our eyes immediately below. See, on this side we have the whole plain of the Alhambra laid open to us, and can look down into its courts and gardens. At the foot of the tower is the Court of the Alberca [the courtyard with the pool within the Comares Palace], with its great tank or fishpool, bordered with flowers; and yonder is the Court of Lions, with its famous fountain, and its light Moorish arcades; and in the centre of the pile is the little garden of Lindaraxa, buried in the heart of the building, with its roses and citrons and shrubbery of emerald green.[25]

That view is substantially the same today, and more than 2.5 million people visit the Alhambra to see it every year, thronging through the palaces and courtyards in an almighty press, and queueing patiently (or not) to take selfies and make TikToks on the spot Yusuf I built and Irving described. It is easy to understand their enthusiasm. The Alhambra was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984, recognised and protected for bearing ‘exceptional testimony to Muslim Spain [between] the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. . . [it is] a remarkable example of the palatine

residences of medieval Islam, neither destroyed nor changed by the vicissitudes of time.’

And here, perhaps, was a form of triumph. Early Islam fortified its vast empire by a process of mimicry. But there in the red hilltops of southern Spain, still stands an Islamic castle to pass measure with the old Theodosian Walls of Constantinople. When Irving left the Alhambra in 1829, he felt a twinge of the same agony Muhammad XII had experienced on the occasion of his own departure in 1492. As he went forth ‘to mingle once more in the bustle and business of the dusty world,’ Washington asked himself: ‘How was I to encounter its toils and turmoils, after such a life of repose and reverie! How was I to endure its commonplace, after the poetry of the Alhambra!’[26]

* The Umayyads were the second dynasty of Islamic caliphs. The Rashidun (Rightly Guided) caliphs were those followers of Muhammad (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali) who succeeded him as leader of the Muslims following his death. In 661 CE Mu’awiyah I, a member of the Umayyad clan and relative of Uthman, established a hereditary caliphate with its capital in Damascus.

† Ancient Constantinople occupied the land on the western, European, side of the Bosphorus Strait, forming a rough triangle protected on two sides by water. The Theodosian Walls formed the triangle’s third side, sealing the city from the lands to the west. Modern Istanbul has a far greater footprint, sprawling across both sides of the strait. Old Constantinople corresponds roughly to the districts of Fatih and Beyoglu.

‡ Often described as ‘medieval napalm’, this was a naphtha-based liquid which was sprayed from pumps, ignited anything it touched, and burned even on contact with water.

§ An Islamic army did finally succeed in breaching Constantinople, but this was more than 700 years later, in 1453, under the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II.

Now covering much of central Turkmenistan. As well as being blisteringly hot, it can be extremely cold. Alexander’s armies lost toes to frostbite and eyes to snow blindness when they traversed this part of the world in 330–329 BCE.

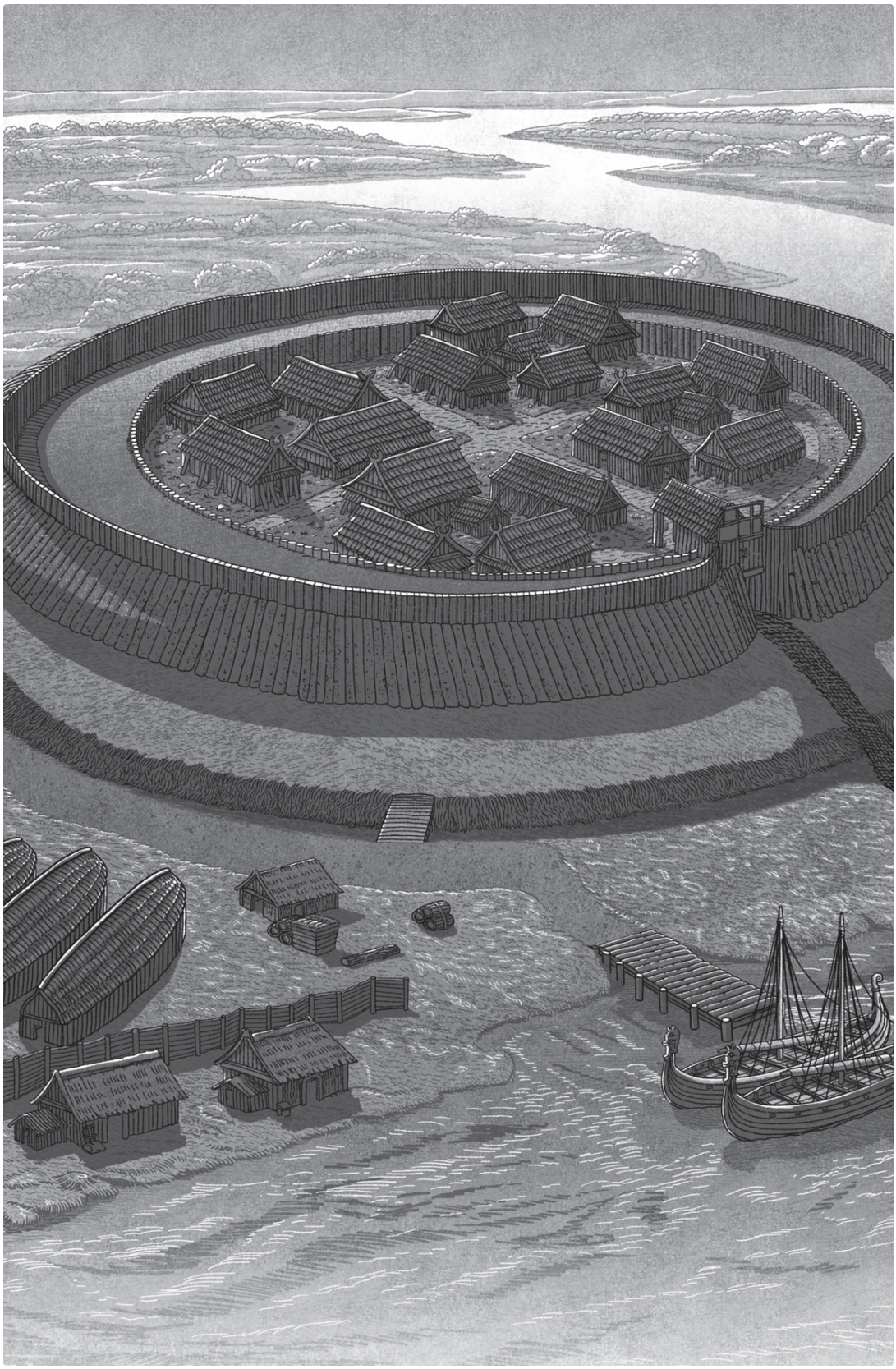
∫ So-called for its large mixed population of Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Christians and other non-Muslims.

Ω The main sectarian dispute in Islam was (and is) the split between Sunni and Shia, which reached back to contention over the rightful successor to Muhammad on his death in 632. Abu Bakr won this contest, defeating Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law Ali, who eventually became the fourth caliph. The rival factions in this dispute adopted different political and theological traditions. To this day, Sunni Muslims accept the legitimacy of Abu Bakr and subsequent caliphs including the Umayyads; Shia Muslims believe Ali and his descendants, known as Imams, represent the rightful line of descent.

≈ That Merv is now an archaeological site rather than a city is thanks to the Mongols, who destroyed it and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants in 1221; and a mostly forgotten Uzbek despot known as Shah Murad, ruler of the short-lived Emirate of Bukhara between 1785 and 1799, who razed the city and forcibly evacuated its people.

∂ Present-day Firuzabad, Iran.

π Simply put, a blind arch is the frame of a door or window built into a wall for decoration.
Δ Sections of Diocletian's Babylon Fortress, erected around 300 CE, still stand in Cairo today.
** The ribat at Monastir, distinctive for its angular, multi-level courtyard interior and chimney-like watchtower, was used to represent first century CE Judea in the 1979 film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. It was from a cell of that Abbasid-era fortress that Terry Jones delivered the famous line, 'He's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy' – considered blasphemous by some Christians, but in somewhat close accordance with Islamic theology.
†† *Alcazaba* is derived from the Arabic *al-qasba*, meaning citadel or fortified stronghold. It is one of many bastardised Arabic words that have entered Europe's languages. See: algebra (*al-jabr*), alcohol (*al-kuhl*) and algorithm (named for the mathematician al-Khwarizmi). Also: nadir (*Nazir as-samt*), tariff (*ta'rif*) and zero (*sifr*, via the Italian *zefiro*).
‡‡ A powerful general who was the public face of the caliphate for a time after Abd al-Rahman III's death. He shared his mentor's name because the latter had freed him from slavery.



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4

VIKING RING FORTRESSES

Listen! We have heard how, in days gone by The Spear-Danes and their trueborn kings had courage, And how those noble princes performed mighty deeds.

BEOWULF

One night in the middle of the tenth century CE, Thyra, queen of Denmark, lay beside her husband, King Gorm, and refused to let him touch her. A naked sword glittered between them, marking a sharp boundary down the middle of their bed. The couple's wedding had taken place three days ago, but since then Thyra had refused to consummate it. She wept, prayed, feigned bashfulness and made excuses. Gorm was confused. He did not understand what Thyra was thinking.

What Thyra was thinking was this: it was all very well being married to a Dane, and a powerful one at that. But she was the daughter of a foreign king,[*] and she had a nagging worry that this dynastic union with Gorm would not produce children. Before risking her own bloodline, she wanted to wait for an omen.

Beside her, Gorm fell asleep, and began to dream. 'While his mind was sunk in sleep, he imagined that two birds, one larger than the other, fluttered forth out of his wife's womb, then hovered in the air before soaring to the sky,' wrote a chronicler, some years later. 'They took off with outstretched wings, till at last the smaller of them flew back alone, its feathers smeared in blood.'[1]

Gorm groaned so loudly that servants came running and woke him. When he explained his nightmare, Thyra listened with delight. This was the sign she had been waiting for. Not only was she destined to have children – her offspring were fated to do something special. So now, 'exchanging celibacy for sexual love, [she] gave her husband the welcome chance to possess her. . . Nor did Fate cheat her expectations; she shortly became the happy mother of two sons.'[2]

One of those sons was named Cnut. The other was called Harald. As young men, Cnut and Harald were intrepid Viking warriors, sailing far and wide to raid the coastlines of north-west Europe, where lay easy pickings in treasure and slaves. But this was dangerous work, and in the course of their adventures, an Irishman shot Cnut with a bow and arrow and killed him. So Harald was the bloodied bird who came fluttering back. Around 958 CE, he returned to Denmark and succeeded Gorm as king. He was known to posterity as Harald Bluetooth.[†]

Harald Bluetooth's reign proved to be a transformative time in the history of Denmark. He was the first Danish king to embrace Christianity. He made great strides towards unifying the Danes under centralised royal rule. He fought bitter wars against the European superpower known as the Franks. He spent his reign trying both to expand the borders of the lands of the Danes, and to suppress rebellion within them.

In pursuit of all these goals Harald Bluetooth was also the first Danish ruler to build castles. They are known today as Viking ring fortresses – huge, geometrically precise compounds big enough to house hundreds of Viking warriors and workers. The ring fortress's distinguishing feature is massive earthworks and ditches, inside which internal streets form quadrants that once contained wooden longhouses. The timber buildings are now long gone, though they can be reconstructed from the evidence of their foundations.

Harald's ring fortresses overlooked sensitive trade routes and sea lanes. Collectively, they formed a militarised umbrella of defences at the limits of what Harald defined as his kingdom. They looked outwards towards those he considered enemies or potential subjects. They also looked inwards towards a rebellious people who did not take easily to Harald's religious or centralising ambitions.

The ring fortresses were built at scale, quickly, around the years 980–81. They must have required huge amounts of labour, and cost a fortune. But they were plainly of immense importance to Harald Bluetooth in the transformation of his Viking kingdom. Designed to incorporate the shape of a cross, but capable of garrisoning hundreds of bloodthirsty warriors, they speak to an age of momentous change in Scandinavia, during which pagan tradition was colliding with Christian culture.

Five Viking ring fortresses are known today in Denmark: at Aggersborg, Trelleborg, Fyrkat, Nonnebakken, and Borgring, the last of these only very recently discovered with the use of LiDAR mapping and other modern technologies.[3] (There may well be more yet to discover, and there are at least two similar sites in southern Sweden.) Only three are in anything resembling their original form. And even then, a good deal of imagination is required to bring back what they must have been like in their late tenth-century heyday.

All the same, the ring fortresses are special. They are testament to Harald Bluetooth's astonishing wealth and the scale of his political ambition. They

offer us a rare glimpse into the Viking world as it pivoted away from paganism and piracy towards a more conventional form of European, Christian state-building. And besides any of that, they are deliciously, delightfully weird.

Viking ring fortresses are extraordinary, idiosyncratic landmarks, captivating even today, when they are mostly grassed over and grazed by animals. Viewed from above they are as otherworldly as crop circles. The Viking Age has been reimagined and romanticised countless times during the last millennium, in medieval chronicles and Marvel comics, nineteenth-century novels and Netflix dramas. The ring fortresses and the story of their remarkable architect offer a window directly onto the real world behind the legends.



Humans came to Scandinavia[‡] in the Stone Age, following the migrations of reindeer herds moving into land released from the grip of the last Ice Age. Although the climate in the north could be hostile and the winters dreadful and dark, Scandinavia was largely habitable for men and women who showed a talent for hunting, farming and trading by boat. The land could be ploughed and animals herded, while long stretches of coastline pocked by fjords and inlets were good for fishing and trade.

Scandinavians began farming around 4000 BCE and with agriculture came social organisation. By the Iron Age land was governed by chieftains or petty kings.[4] Some of these chieftains built hillforts. But from around the fifth century CE the focus of chieftains' power and patronage tended to be in longhouses known as feasting halls. Inside these, kings and warriors ate, drank, gave gifts and sometimes fought.[§] Scandinavia possessed a lively military culture, centred on the hall, and this was overlaid with a rich storytelling tradition. This was most famously captured in the epic poem *Beowulf*, set in Iron Age Scandinavia in the fifth or sixth century CE, but written down at around the time Harald Bluetooth's ring fortresses were built.[#]

Scandinavian culture differed sharply from that of much of the rest of Europe. No Scandinavian realm ever belonged to the Roman Empire, and until deep into the Middle Ages, it was only loosely linked to broader

networks of exchange and trade. Outsiders scarcely knew what to make of the place. In 325 BCE the Greek explorer Pytheas travelled to somewhere he called ‘Thule’ – likely Norway or Iceland – and reported a sunless, rainy region where very little grew and where ‘the people live on millet and other herbs, and on fruits and roots’.[5] In 98 CE the Roman historian Tacitus described a race he called the *Suiones*: warrior tribes who lived surrounded by oceans and organised their society according to wealth and military might. (Tacitus noted that these people were talented sailors with powerful fleets in which each ship had ‘a prow at each end, with a beak always ready to be driven forwards.’)[6]

For the most part, however, engagements with the rest of the world were fleeting. Scandinavia had its own languages, mythologies and cultural mores. Untouched by the desert monotheisms of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the people cleaved to a folk religion rooted in the natural world, which told of elves, dwarves and trolls, gods such as Thor and Odin, dramatic warfare between cosmic realms, and a giant tree which bound together all earthly life. This was the way things remained for many centuries. Then, in the eighth century CE, on a small island off the coast of north-east England, everything changed. The Viking raids began.

The traditional date given for the beginning of the Viking Age is 793 CE, when pagan warriors described as ‘Northmen’ appeared in England, heralded by whirlwinds, lightning storms and the appearance of fiery dragons in the skies.[7] They beached their ships on the little island of Lindisfarne, off the Northumbrian coast, plundered its abbey and slaughtered the monks. The next year they came back and attacked the monastery at Jarrow.

The violence, irreligion and seafaring skill of these raiders shocked the Christian world, and was written up in grim accounts by churchmen who could scarcely believe what was going on. ‘Never before in Britain has such a terror occurred as we have now suffered from a pagan race,’ wrote the great scholar Alcuin of York.[ſ 8] But the terror had come to stay, in England and beyond. During the decades that followed, Viking raiders appeared all over the British and Irish isles, in the kingdoms of the Franks, in Iberia and north Africa. They burned Paris and London. They travelled by river and sea to besiege Constantinople. A chronicler at Noirmoutier, at the mouth of the river Loire, saw the abbey there looted in 799 BCE and wailed of ‘the

endless stream of Vikings [that] never ceases to increase. . . the Vikings conquer everything in their path.'[9]

What prompted this eruption of Viking violence at the end of the eighth century is a complex matter. The simplest explanation is that within Scandinavian society, where men could still take multiple wives, there were increasing economic pressures – and incentives – for young warriors to find new ways to enrich themselves. Improving ship technology – clinker-built vessels[Ω] powered by great square sails, rather than just banks of oars – made it possible to go further in search of fortune. This led the acquisitive and adventurous to the flourishing Christian kingdoms across the sea, where gold, silver, coin and plate was stored in monasteries: institutions managed by feeble men and women who could easily be robbed, enslaved or killed. The result was that the ninth and tenth centuries CE became a golden age for vigorous adventurers – like Harald Bluetooth and his brother Cnut – to set sail in search of riches. Usually they brought their booty home, though as time went on, some chose to settle in the lands they visited.

The essential feature of the Viking Age, then, was a sudden turn to long-range seafaring and interaction – usually very violent – with kingdoms near and far away. Indeed, this concept was baked into the word 'Viking'. In Old Norse the word *vikingr* described a way of life. A *vik* was a sea-bay, and a *viking* was, crudely put, a pirate: a man who sailed the seas to kill and steal. Monuments referred to young men 'in Viking' – on expedition.[10] Yet it was also possible to be a Viking and stay at home. A little after Harald Bluetooth's day a runestone carved in Sweden paid tribute to a man called Assur 'who kept the Viking watch' – meaning he trained a careful eye on the coastline.[11] Was he looking out for Vikings? Or was it an admissible Viking activity to guard one's home and people? We should keep this idea in mind as we consider what prompted Harald Bluetooth to conceive and build his network of Viking ring fortresses.

If we are to understand how Harald Bluetooth, a warrior prince foretold in his father's dream, who spent his youth committing armed robbery in Ireland, came to build a series of castles, we must begin in the old heartland of Danish rule, at Jelling, in central Jutland (Jylland). Jelling sat in the

middle of farmland, within a few days' ride of all the major Danish towns, including Hedeby, Århus and Roskilde. It was not exactly a military hub, but rather a place of assembly and administration, from which any part of Danish lands could be reached in a week. Although there is no fortress on this spot, this was Harald's dynastic seat, and the place where, at the start of his reign, he first expressed his monumental, experimental vision of Viking kingship.

When Harald was born, at some time in the first half of the tenth century, Jelling had been his family's power base for some time, though exactly how long is hard to establish. Equally difficult to work out is to what extent the Jelling dynasty – or anyone else – could truly call themselves 'kings of the Danes'. There is some archaeological evidence that in the eighth century CE a single ruler may have controlled southern Jutland, and around the turn of the ninth century the great Frankish emperor Charlemagne fought a war with a Danish king called Godfred. A source called the *Vita Anskarii* claims that in the mid-ninth century Godfred's son Horik governed over all of the Danes, yet at the time Horik was supposed to have ruled, there was almost certainly another chieftain, called Harald Klak, who claimed the same title.[12]

So this is all rather murky. (Not for nothing have the years of the early middle ages been given the pejorative title 'the dark ages'.)[≈] The best we can say is that at the time of Harald's birth, his father King Gorm nursed the same wish as many of his forebears to unite Denmark – Jutland and the neighbouring islands including Funen and Zealand – and he had built at Jelling a palace complex worthy of his ambition.

Jelling was, undoubtedly, a luxurious fortified compound. It consisted of a number of buildings surrounded by a palisade fence constructed from more than 1,000 felled trees. Within this fence was a 354m-long 'ship-setting': a formation of dozens of heavy standing stones arranged in the outline of a ship big enough to carry a giant across the seas. Inside this ship-setting King Gorm raised a runestone, carved with text that read: *King Gorm made this monument in memory of Thyra, his wife, Denmark's salvation.*

Evidently, then, Thyra died before her husband. In 958 CE, Gorm died too – supposedly from the shock of learning of his son Cnut's demise – and Harald succeeded him. Harald took what was already an impressive royal residence at Jelling and transformed it. Across the ship-setting he built two

huge burial mounds, one for each of his parents. These hill-tombs consisted of hundreds of acres of earth scraped up and piled to form solemn hummocks of earth 8m wide and 11m high. In their time these would have been visible on the skyline for miles around; even today they loom over the buildings of the modern town.[13] They were expressions not only of Harald's respect for his family, but of the huge resources he commanded and his absolute command over the land. Hundreds of acres of earth was not merely dirt: it was precious farmland that could feed many hungry mouths.

Alongside the burial mounds Harald built a church when – as we shall see – he abandoned his old pagan ways and accepted baptism into the Christian faith. He also raised a runestone of his own. This depicted Christ victorious with his arms outstretched, and a ferocious four-legged creature, perhaps a lion, with a snake coiled around it. Its text read: *King Harald ordered these monuments made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thyra, his mother; that Harald who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway, and made the Danes Christian.*

Some of this was true, some of it was not, and some of it was debatable. What is important for our purposes here is that it offers us a clue to Harald's mindset as a ruler. His kingship was dynastic, expansive and missionary. It was defined by territorial and spiritual conquest, and it was to be commemorated monumentally, with the raising of huge structures that reformed the Danish landscape according to his liking. No one in the history of his realm had done anything like this before. It is traditional for historians to see the erection of this runestone as the starting point of Danish history proper: the moment from which we can speak of a realm of Denmark, rather than simply a land where there were Danes.[14]

It is easy to look at Harald's building projects – from Jelling to the ring fortresses – and think that no one had done anything like this because no one had been mad enough to try. But the real reason is more likely to be found in the changing nature of the Scandinavian world around the end of the tenth century. Thanks to several generations of Viking raids on neighbouring European realms, centuries of relative Scandinavian isolation was giving way to integration. In Denmark's case, that meant armed conflict with their neighbours to the south, the Franks.

The Franks – originally a tribe who had migrated into the Roman province of Gaul during the collapse of the western empire – had been the mightiest power in Europe for several generations by the time Harald Bluetooth rose to power. Their apotheosis had come during the reign of Charlemagne, who had united territories roughly equivalent to modern-day France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland, northern Italy, Austria, Slovenia and a little of Spain. In 800 CE Charlemagne had convinced the pope to crown him as a new western Roman emperor, and though Frankish power had splintered since then, the Frankish pretension to absolute supremacy over Europe had not waned.

Moreover, in recent decades, the Franks had clashed regularly with the Danes, for in the course of Charlemagne's conquests, they had pushed their borders into pagan Saxony: lands which bounded those of Denmark. Proximity did not breed harmony. Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries Danish Viking raiders gleefully attacked Frankish monasteries and cities. The Franks reciprocated by targeting Danish towns: particularly the wealthy trading port of Hedeby, on the Baltic Sea, which, with the conquest of Saxony, was now close to the Frankish zone of interest. Hedeby was a dropping-off point for valuable furs imported from the Arctic circle and its fringes, which were then transported overland to North Sea ports, whence they could be traded with western Europeans. It was also a regular flashpoint for violence.

According to the chronicler Adam of Bremen, there had been clashes between Franks and Danes around Hedeby dating back to Gorm's reign. In Harald's reign, during the 970s, these escalated. The Danes murdered a number of Frankish churchmen, along with a nobleman of the high rank of margrave. In retaliation, the Frankish king Otto II 'at once invaded Denmark with an army. Crossing the Danish frontier. . . he devastated the whole region with fire and sword, even to the furthestmost sea which separates the Northmen from the Danes.'[15]

This was a shameful defeat, and a painful one, and Harald could not leave it unanswered. 'As [Otto] was leaving,' continues Adam of Bremen's account, 'Harold met him at Schleswig and offered battle.' The Franks won, 'and the vanquished Danes retreated to their ships.'[16] This was a terrible

humiliation. To settle the war, Harald was forced to submit to Otto, accept baptism as a Christian and send his young son Sweyn to be raised at the Frankish court. A lesser ruler might have been crippled by the shame. But it was in many ways the making of Harald. Having embraced Christianity, he leaned into the new faith, founding a church at Jelling and translating his father's remains out of the burial mound and into a tomb within it.

He then proceeded to refashion his kingdom so that it was more secure from future such attacks. In part, that meant modelling his kingship more directly on that of Otto's: Christian, courtly and centralised. But it also meant fortifying, so that no enemy could ever again ride with impunity the length and breadth of the lands he called his own. Harald set his sights on overhauling his whole security system.

If he really wanted to be king of Denmark, Harald realised he needed to project his authority to the fringes of his lands, with buildings that expressed his capacity to command and defend. In England, the ninth-century ruler King Alfred 'the Great' had done something similar, building a network of fortifications known as *burhs* all around his kingdom – towns protected with timber palisades and earthworks. (He had done this, ironically, to create a defensive system that could resist invading Viking armies.) Harald seems to have decided to do something similar. In the words of one Norse chronicler, he 'had the defences of his land put in order.'[17]



In the aftermath of his defeat to the Franks, Harald's first project was to make extensive renovations to a fortification line in southern Jutland known as the Danevirke. The Danevirke had first been built around 650 CE to defend Hedeby. It consisted of a huge series of earthworks, ramparts, ditches and timber fences, which crossed the neck of the Jutland peninsula, through what is now the state of Schleswig-Holstein. But it was badly in need of improvement. Harald overhauled the Danevirke, raising the height of the earthworks and extending the palisade that ran along its top.[18] He also built a huge wooden bridge across marshland at Ravning, near Jelling, capable of bearing five tonnes of load – enough to move significant

quantities of troops, building materials and commercial goods about his kingdom.[19]

The ring fortresses, built around 980–81, were the next stage in this project. The Frankish war of the 970s had made it painfully apparent that a single line of fortification was not adequate defence for the whole kingdom. Otto's troops had overrun Harald's kingdom, slashing and burning their way 'to the furthermost sea'.[20] A system of interior fortifications would be essential if they came again.

Yet the ring fortresses speak to more than Harald's wish to repel enemies. At the same time as he was shoring up his kingdom against the Franks, Harald was also striving to imitate them, by asserting his mastery over all the Danes, and imposing on them his newfound Christian faith. The coins he minted in the 970s no longer bore images of ships and mythical beasts, but crosses and simple images of Christ.[21] Yet soft power could only take a ruler so far. Harald could not hope to establish himself as a true king of Denmark unless he established outposts of royal power in the most sensitive parts of the kingdom.

Frustratingly, the chronicle accounts of Harald's reign are vague about the precise chronology of Harald's military campaigns to bring Denmark to heel. We do know, however, that he faced sporadic resistance to his rule, during which times his enemies 'harried far and wide in the Danish realm.'[22] From that fact, and the locations of his ring fortresses, we may infer a story.

The largest ring fortress Harald built was at Aggersborg. This was in the very north of the Jutland peninsula – probably the furthest point to which the Franks had charged during the 970s. Aggersborg stood beside the Limfjord – a calm inlet on a busy sea route connecting the North and Baltic seas. Here, Harald installed a huge military base, 240m in diameter, containing forty-eight longhouses, with capacity for as many as 5,000 troops. It was scored into quarters with two bisecting roads, forming the shape of Harald's newly adopted cross.[∂] Thus fortified, Aggersborg could serve as a base for forward operations towards the lands of the Norwegians and Swedes, or for longer-range raids to the kingdoms of England and the British and Irish isles. Yet its sheer size suggests that it also faced inwards: a rebuke to any of the Danes who tried to wriggle loose from obedience to their king.

Moving south and east along the coast from Aggersborg, the next ring fortress one encountered was Fyrkat. This fortress was only half the size of Aggersborg, its circular ramparts being 120m in diameter, but this was big enough to oversee the main trading road between the settlements of Ålborg and Århus. Next, some way further south, on the island of Fenen, Harald built Nonnebakken – placing it carefully within range of both the fjords where traded or plundered goods would be unloaded, and the roads that connected the rest of the island.[23]

Harald's two remaining ring fortresses were raised on the western and eastern ends of Zealand, also at strategically sensitive coastal points. From their placement, it seems likely that Harald's drive to bring Denmark under his thumb proceeded from west to east; that he gave special consideration to controlling road junctions and shipping points, and that once his conquest was done, he was eager to mark the perimeter of his power with buildings that were sufficiently monumental to demonstrate the scale of his resources, while also serving an active military function.

Collectively, then, these fortresses marked out the perimeter of what Harald claimed as his royal domain: 'all of Denmark', as his runestone had it. They were boundary posts at the fringes of his kingdom, as well as regional nodes of royal power in the provinces, keeping the 'Viking watch' on coasts and roads, and serving to warn the local population against the folly of rebellion.[24] For a short time at least, they did their job.



The drive west from Denmark's modern capital of Copenhagen, across the island of Zealand, towards Trelleborg ring fortress, passes along smooth, flat modern highways for an hour or so. The route skirts the small town of Slagelse, before one turns off into quiet rural farmland, where crops rustle right up to the roadside. Eventually there is a car park, a modest visitor centre and then a track leading down a slight incline towards a natural fork between two small rivers. And there, at last, it is: a huge circle of steep grassy earthworks, protected by a deep ditch, a long gateway cut through the ramparts, and a flock of long-fleeced, beady-eyed sheep.

A little imagination is required to conjure Trelleborg in its short heyday – but only a little. The earthworks stand 5m high and form a perfect geometric ring 135m in diameter, which encloses a space of about six

hectares (fifteen acres). Around 25,000 cubic metres of earth and stone and timber were used to assemble the walls, and it has been estimated that nearly half the trees on Zealand were felled to create its wooden internal frame, a timber fronting, and the fence that would once have run continuously along its ridge. The bridge that crosses the dry moat leading to its main gate would once have been guarded by timber-and-stone sentry boxes. It would have been a dangerous place to approach uninvited.

In designing his fortresses in the early 980s, Harald and his military engineers were almost obsessively precise, and tracks in the grass still show the path of their north–south and east–west roads, once paved with timber planks: the spiritual branding which divided the internal space into four segments. It is easy, therefore, to identify the segments that would once have contained four longhouses arranged in a rectangle, with a courtyard space in the middle. The very fact of the fortress's regularity, as well as the scale of building, feels like a deliberate signature – a mark on the landscape that says, as it were: Harald was here.

There is no need to wonder what life inside such a fortress longhouse was like, for at Trelleborg, one has been reconstructed: it is entirely timber built, with self-supporting walls and a roof that bulges towards its middle and tapers away at each end, rather like the upturned hull of a boat. A smaller gallery roof runs around the building's perimeter, keeping rain away from the walls, windows and doorways. In the tenth century, the dominant smells inside such a building would have been smoke, human and animal bodies, and cool natural building materials: oak, earth and turf.[25]

Archaeology has shown that the most comfortable longhouses of this type consisted of one large central room with a smaller chamber at each end. The roof's timber rafters were exposed. A hearth occupied the centre of the room and benches arranged around the fire might have been covered in warm animal skins. Large shields, covered in leather, may have hung on the walls: those in today's reconstructed longhouse echo the design of a large round wooden shield excavated in the grounds of Trelleborg in 2008.[26] That shield was made from timber felled in the late tenth century, around the time that Harald Bluetooth was in power.

Every longhouse in a ring fortress looked the same – they were built to a near-identical design, like modern-day flat-pack furniture. But their functions varied. Some were dwellings. Others were functional outhouses, used for storing supplies, stabling animals and working metals. At Fyrkat

the grain-house contained rye imported from Poland and Ukraine, the cookhouse had Norwegian pots and pans, and the inhabitants decorated their bodies or braided their hair with glass beads from western Europe.[27] It is possible, even likely, that once the ring fortresses were built, one of their purposes was as tax collection hubs, for coins were weighed in some of the buildings. Certainly there was on-site farm-work: crops were grown and mown, and animals including pigs, cows and sheep were herded. The collection of items pulled from the ground at Trelleborg includes padlocks, pliers, knives, awls, nails, bronze casts, belt buckles, hair-combs, fire-lighters, and intricately carved pieces of stone and bone used for playing games.

All of this implies that the people who lived in these fortresses were more than just soldiers. Plainly many of them *were* warriors: besides the Trelleborg shield already mentioned, archaeologists have found arrowheads, spear-heads and axes dating to that fortress's active duty days. In a small cemetery outside the main ramparts at Trelleborg, 157 bodies were buried; significant numbers of them had been slung into mass graves, five or ten at a time; presumably these people were killed during a violent clash on or around the fortress's walls. But in the same cemetery were buried women and children. (In one particularly macabre burial, the remains of two children, aged four and seven, were discovered at the bottom of a well.) Who all these people were is not easy to piece back together, but it is certain that the ring fortresses would have been places that rang with a babble of different languages: Trelleborg's cemetery contained not only Danes but also Slavs, Norwegians and Franks.[28] These may have been mercenaries, brought to the fortress as hired swords. Or perhaps they were slaves, captured on Viking expeditions and put to work building or servicing the finished fortress. There was also, perhaps, a blend of religions. As we have seen, Harald was a Christian convert, and in his mind his own conversion was to be synonymous with Denmark's. Yet in the cemetery at Fyrkat, notwithstanding the cruciform structure of the fortress itself, one woman was buried with the appurtenances of a pagan witch.[29] Making a clean break with centuries of ancient Scandinavian belief was easier said than done.

There is much we do not know about Harald Bluetooth's ring fortresses and the people who lived there, but this we know for sure: these huge, monumental structures were constructed around 980–1, at what can only

have been huge cost, with immense precision, in locations that were intended to embed royal authority at key locations on the periphery of the Danish kingdom. They were more than just barracks for troops – a rounded life that went beyond narrow military encampment was lived by the men, women and children who found themselves in the shadow of their circular ramparts. After the trauma of Harald's war with the Franks, the ring fortresses were a demonstration of just how much the Jelling dynasty could do, in its role as the royal dynasty for all Denmark.

No one in Denmark's history had built on this scale before – and on that score alone, Harald was a trailblazer. Unfortunately for him, while his efforts to fortify his way to supremacy over all the Danes were impressive enough to leave a mark on the landscape that lasted more than 1,000 years, they were not enough to establish and keep the peace in his own day.



By the mid-980s Harald Bluetooth had been king of the Danes for nearly thirty years. He had fortified his realm, managed to save it from being totally overrun by the Franks, and established to some extent his dominance over the neighbouring people in Norway, taking the homage of the powerful Norwegian earl Hakon of Hlathir. His monumental building programme, along with his embrace of Christianity, seemed to have established his dynasty as Denmark's (and indeed Viking Scandinavia's) first royal family in the mainstream European mould.

Sagas written some years after his reign told tangled stories of his convoluted political struggles with the other leading magnates and kings of Scandinavia. One tale suggested that for a time he considered conquering Iceland, sending a warlock in the guise of a whale to swim north and make a full survey of the coasts and fjords. (The whale-warlock came back with discouraging news: the seas were rough and the main island was guarded by poisonous toads, snakes, a belligerent bull and a race of giants who wielded iron bars.)[30]

In the end, however, ruling Denmark was enough of a challenge for Harald, and the last years of his reign were plagued with rebellion from within his own family. The prime troublemaker was his son, Sweyn. As we have seen, in childhood Sweyn had been sent to the Frankish court of Otto II to be raised, as a condition of the Franko-Danish peace. This had not

turned him into a Frankophile – Sweyn helped organise resistance to further Frankish incursions across the Danevirke. But he was hardly a loyal son, either. Around 985–6, Sweyn decided that his father was now past his prime as a ruler, and rose up in rebellion against him. According to the chronicler Adam of Bremen, Sweyn fell in with powerful Danish magnates 'whom his father had against their will compelled to embrace Christianity' and with whom he sought 'to see how he might deprive [Harald] of the throne now that he was advanced in years and less strong.'[31]

At first Sweyn seems to have demanded that Harald partition his kingdom and share power. Harald refused. So, according to another chronicler, 'Sweyn procured himself warships and indicated that he would go on a Viking expedition.'[32] The Viking expedition went no further than Zealand and the Isafjord, which lay halfway between the ring fortresses of Trelleborg and Borgring. 'There, King Harald lay moored with his fleet, making ready to go on a sea expedition.'[33] Sweyn attacked, and a terrible battle followed. Although Sweyn was put to flight, during the fighting Harald was mortally wounded. He left Denmark and limped to a fortified city called Jomsborg (possibly Wolin, in modern Poland). He died there on November 1st 986, and back in Denmark Sweyn had his wish. He was king, heir to the kingdom his father had laboured to unite under Jelling rule, and governor of all the great fortifications Harald had built.

If Sweyn appreciated what effort had gone into Harald's expansion of Denmark, he did not show it in the upkeep of his father's magnificent ring fortresses. At one time these were thought to have been built by Sweyn to house expeditionary Viking armies. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the evidence points to lasting damage done to the ring fortresses during Sweyn's uprising. At Trelleborg, arrowheads have been found lodged in the wooden faces of the ramparts. At some point the gatehouse was burned – as was the huge wooden palisade that surrounded the monuments and runestones at Jelling. All this destruction, and the remains of mutilated bodies hurled in mass graves at Trelleborg, likely speak to Sweyn's ferocious assault on his father's bastions of royal power.[34]

Once Harald was dead, Sweyn's focus as king was determinedly outward looking. The main project of his reign became the conquest of England, which he achieved after a good deal of effort in 1013, though he died just months after being proclaimed as English king. It was left to his own son,

Cnut the Great, to complete his vision of assembling an empire that included the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and England. All this amounted to a formative period in the history of the North Sea world, during which the old Viking kingdoms, led by Denmark, abandoned paganism, adopted Christianity and forged ever-closer links with their neighbouring realms. Yet the ring fortresses built by Harald Bluetooth played no part in it. Once built, the longhouses within their ramparts were never repaired; given the nature of the Danish climate, it is almost certain that by the end of Sweyn's reign all the ring fortresses would have been in ruins. From the early eleventh century onward, there is no evidence that the ring fortresses remained in use at all. They were simply landmarks, left to decay and grass over until eventually their very purpose was forgotten. Their future lay not as active fortifications, but as monuments to Harald Bluetooth and the wholesale changes he had initiated in Denmark and the broader Viking world.



In about 1185, nearly 200 years after Harald Bluetooth died and his mighty ring fortresses fell into decay, a clerk known as Saxo Grammaticus sat down to write an epic history of the Danish people. Saxo had been born on Zealand, so when he was a child he may well have seen the mouldering remains of Harald's fortresses of Trelleborg and Borgring. As a man he had come into the service of the archbishop of Lund, a chief advisor to King Valdemar I, whose reign between 1154 and 1182 somewhat resembled Harald's.

Valdemar had claimed the Danish crown through victory in a bloody civil war. He was forced to take up arms to deal with unrest among his own people, who resisted his attempts to strengthen royal government and collect taxes for the Church. He fought long battles against foreign enemies – in his case, a people known as the Wends. As part of his strategy for dealing with all this, Valdemar had embarked on major programme of fortification and castle-building. Like Harald he strengthened the Danevirke. And he began works on new castles at Vordingborg, Sprogø and Sønderborg. Although turbulent, Valdemar's reign was regarded as another formative time for Denmark, and it was partly in recognition of that fact

that Saxo Grammaticus began his chronicle, shining a light on the earlier history of the Danes.

One of the many stories that Saxo Grammaticus collected was the tale of King Gorm and Queen Thryra, and the bird-dream that smoothed over the first, uncertain days of their wedding, which encouraged the conception of Harald Bluetooth and his brother Cnut. (This was in fact the very last tale in Saxo's chronicle: a punctuation point that suggested the birth of Harald, Denmark's first Christian king, was a watershed moment.) Yet the tale he told that would come to grip readers' imaginations most tightly was that of another Danish ruler who lived a tangled, bloody and dramatic life. This was Amleth.

The story of Amleth, which Saxo Grammaticus unfolds at some length across two of the nine books of his chronicle, can be summarised as follows. Amleth is a Danish prince who fears his uncle (who is also his stepfather) wants to kill him, and therefore pretends to be insane, jibbering and rolling in the dirt, to the amusement of all at court. When his stepfather begins to suspect the trick, he sends Amleth to England, along with a secret request that the English king put Amleth to death. Amleth subverts the trick, has the messengers killed and marries the English king's daughter.

Returning to Denmark, Amleth exacts revenge on his stepfather, murdering him and burning his courtiers to death. He then goes back to the British Isles, woos a second wife in the form of a Scottish queen called Hermuthruda and defeats the English king in battle. Back once more in Denmark, however, fate catches up with Amleth. He is killed in battle by a new Danish ruler and his Scottish wife marries Amleth's vanquisher. Saxo Grammaticus lamented his death: 'If fate had tended him as kindly as nature, he would have shone as brightly as the gods and his courage would have allowed him to surpass the labours of Hercules.'[35]

Nowhere in Saxo's account of Amleth's ill-starred adventures does the hero inhabit a castle, ring fortress or otherwise. Yet in time, the legend would come to have a castle very firmly attached to it. For at the end of the sixteenth century, the tale of Amleth was picked up, refashioned and dramatised by William Shakespeare. Saxo's legend, via a heavy rewrite, and a relocation in time to the later Middle Ages, was popularised as *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* – or, more simply, *Hamlet*.

There is no need to rehearse here the plot of *Hamlet*. What matters for our purposes is that in giving his violent tragedy a setting, Shakespeare

chose to place it in a Danish castle. That castle was Elsinore, a version of the medieval stronghold known as Kronborg, which stands by the coast in Helsingør, on the north-east tip of Zealand.

This massive, magnificent Renaissance palace-fortress was a world away in design from anything Harald Bluetooth could ever have contemplated. Yet it had something of the same purpose behind its construction. It overlooked a strategic seaway controlling passage between the Baltic and North Sea. It had been founded by a king – Erik VII of Denmark – who had ambitions way beyond ruling the Danes, but found his reign perpetually disrupted by internal strife. It looked both inwards and outwards, and it memorialised a time when Denmark's borders were in flux and royal authority was contested.

The first scene of Hamlet is set on the ramparts of Elsinore, where Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo encounter and seek to interrogate a ghost that bears a striking resemblance to their former king.

Horatio demands of the spirit:

> What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
> Together with that fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried Denmark
> Did sometimes march? By heaven, I charge thee,
> speak.

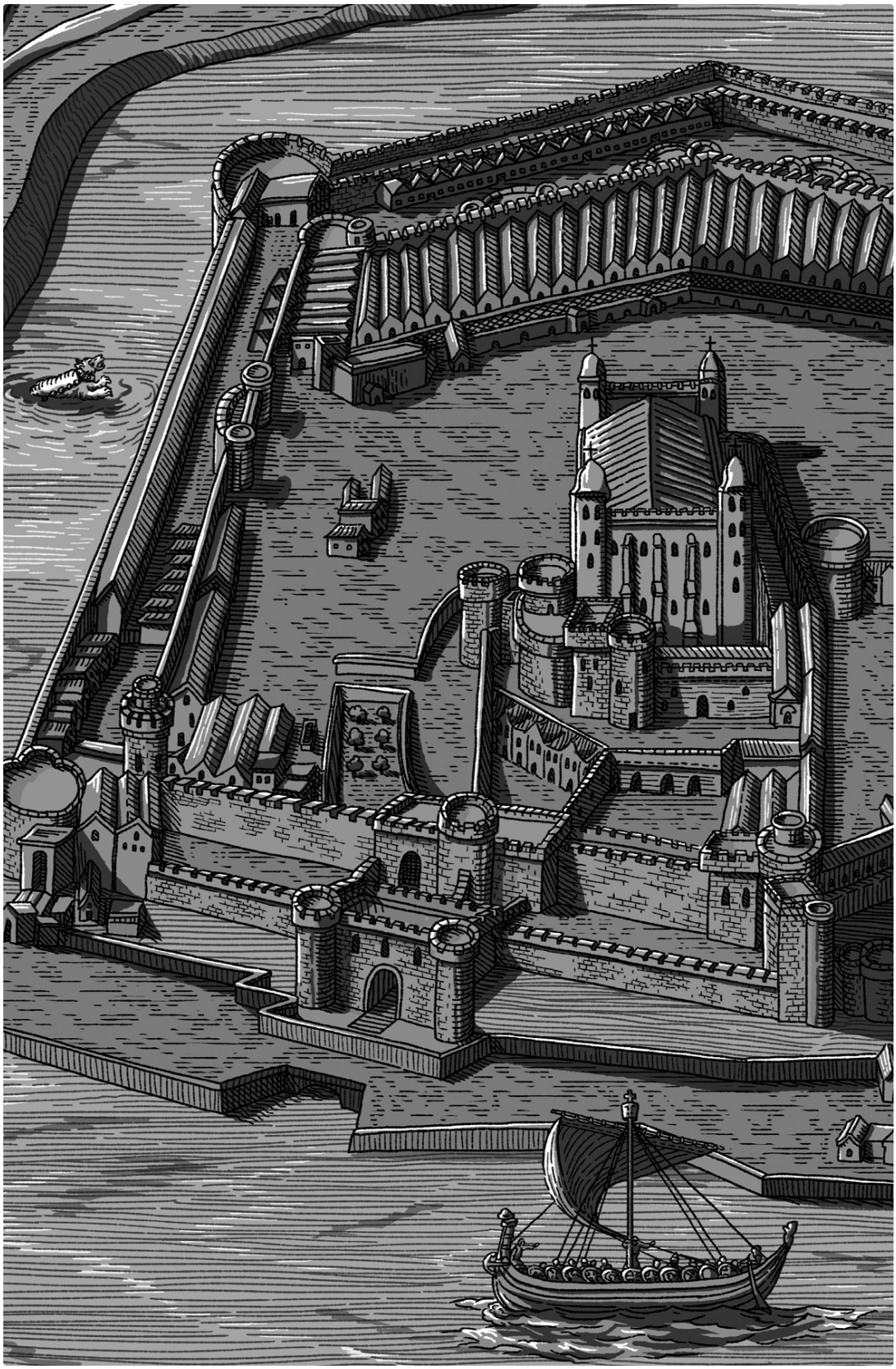
When we stand in the centre of one of Harald Bluetooth's ring fortresses we gaze around the towering ramparts, the faint path where cruciform timbered streets once ran, the outlines of longhouses in which Viking warriors, workers, women and children once went about their business and ask the same thing.

Unlike Hamlet's ghost, if we listen carefully enough, the ring fortresses will whisper us an answer.

* Often thought to have been Aethelred, king of England, although this is not easy to square with known chronology: Aethelred was born around 966 CE, around two decades too late for him to have been Thyra's father. Other traditions hold that she was the daughter of a German emperor.

† Harald's name has become ubiquitous, since it has been borrowed for the mobile technology that allows devices like mobile phones and personal headphones to connect directly with each other. (The analogy is with Harald's role in uniting Scandinavian kingdoms.) Bluetooth's distinctive geometric icon is formed of two runes representing the letters H and B. Whether or not he really had a blue tooth is now unknown.

‡ For the purpose of this chapter I use Scandinavia to refer to modern Denmark, Sweden and Norway, acknowledging that a broader definition could also include Finland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands.
§ Take, for example, the legend of Ingjald, putatively a sixth or seventh century CE king in Sweden, who was a cowardly child until he was fed a roasted wolf's heart, which made him extremely fierce (although with terrible breath). To enlarge his own kingdom he invited all his subordinate kings to his feasting hall, got them drunk, then set fire to the hall and burned them all to death. This was considered by the poets to be a tricksy, but not particularly excessive, act of war.
The only extant manuscript of *Beowulf* was written between 975 and 1025 CE – so in Harald's day or shortly afterwards. The action involves the eponymous superhero battling a monster called Grendel, Grendel's mother and, fatally, a dragon.
∫ In Alcuin's opinion, the arrival of the Vikings was God's punishment, inflicted on the English because of their fornication and a fashion for shamefully long beards.
Ω A clinker-built hull is one in which the timbers overlap each other like roof-tiles. It makes a ship strong but flexible – a distinct advantage when navigating rough seas.
≈ A term that makes many medievalists puce with rage. Avoid in polite conversation.
∂ The view from above resembles a hot cross bun.



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5

NORMAN CASTLES

. . .they built castles widely throughout this nation,
and oppressed the wretched people.

THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE

On Christmas Day 1066 a king of England was crowned at Westminster, in the new abbey church that lay outside the walls of London. The abbey was packed with the great and good of England, along with a large number of the new king's countrymen, who came from the duchy of Normandy. They all knew that they were about to witness a turning point, not only in the life of the forty-year-old who was to be crowned, but in the history of the realm.

Two months earlier, William the Bastard, duke of Normandy, had fought a famous battle against his rival for the English crown, Harold Godwinson. The battle had been a long time coming: it was the culmination of a simmering feud between William and Harold over which of them ought to succeed the late king Edward 'the Confessor'. On October 14th, near Hastings, that issue had been decided. William's Normans had crushed Harold's Saxon army, leaving the earth 'covered with the flower of the English nobility and youth, drenched in blood.'[1] The thousands of dead included Harold and his two brothers: Harold, it seems, succumbed to an arrow in his face or throat.

With the would-be royal house of Godwin roundly defeated, there was little question that William held the right to the crown. To make the point his army marched around southern England burning the countryside. When they came to London, William prepared battering rams, mining equipment and siege engines, then gave word that he was preparing to raze the city to the ground. The Londoners quickly 'submitted themselves and the whole city'.[2] A date was set for the coronation. After the horrors of Hastings, everything seemed straightforward. Indeed, according to his chaplain, William was so relaxed in the days leading up to Christmas 'that he could, if he wished, have spent his time in hunting and falconry.'[3]

Yet there were hints that everything was not as tranquil as it seemed. To ensure that the Londoners remained committed to his cause, William built a temporary wooden fortress on the edge of the city, from which his henchmen could keep a careful watch for rebellion: a little tower of London. It was, wrote the chaplain, 'of the first importance to constrain the Londoners strictly.'[4] The castle placed to oversee them had a timber tower

and two sets of enclosing fences. It was entrusted to the command of one of William's henchmen, a man named Ravengar.

The wisdom of William's makeshift fortification became obvious on his coronation day. When he arrived at Westminster to receive his crown, security was tight. But it was not tight enough. According to English tradition, it was customary during a coronation service for those assembled to cheer their approval for the new king. No such tradition held sway in Normandy. So when the moment of acclamation came inside the abbey, the Norman guards who had formed a cordon around it panicked. Thinking the yelling was the sound of their leader being attacked, they set fire to buildings all around the abbey. Some began looting. The smell of smoke and the noise of chaos in the streets spread alarm back inside the church. The congregation stampeded from the building, leaving only the churchmen and the king to complete the rites. By the end, William was shaking with fright. Perhaps London – and beyond it, his new kingdom at large – was not as easily pacified as the last few weeks had given him cause to believe. His temporary fortress might be the shape of things to come.

So it would prove. William I of England is best known to history as William the Conqueror, and his arrival in the realm as the Norman Conquest. These terms are sometimes used as if they refer to events that took place solely within the last months of 1066, when William sailed to England, fought for the crown and took it. But the Norman Conquest was a process, not an event. In taking command of England, William did not just install himself as the new chief executive of an existing organisation. He – and his descendants – set about a wholesale reformation of the kingdom. The English ruling caste was replaced en masse by a colonising elite made up of thousands of foreigners. Old systems of landholding were torn up and redrawn. The English Church was reorganised and centralised. Every major Saxon church was demolished and new, stone-build Norman churches and cathedrals were put up in their place. Regions which resisted William's takeover – most notably the north – were subjected to slaughter, starvation and fire. Twenty years after the battle of Hastings, William commissioned a detailed census known as the Domesday Book to survey the entire realm and all its people.

Taken together, this was an enormously complex task, and making Norman rule stick meant finding some means to impose the new reality of government physically and symbolically upon the land. Fortunately, the

Normans were adept at deploying a piece of technology that was perfect for the job: the castle.

The Normans had a particular approach to castle-building, a template developed in the duchy of Normandy from the early tenth century, and after they came to England in 1066 Norman castles spread over England like a rash. Norman castles served a triple purpose. They garrisoned soldiers who could put down resistance to the new rulers. They were administrative centres, to some degree 'public' buildings, where people came to interact with power. And they were implicitly threatening symbols of authority: both of the individual might of the Norman lord who held the castle, and of the public authority of the new king, from whom, after 1066, all things very explicitly derived.

As we have seen, the land had known Iron Age hillforts and Roman encampments long before 1066.[5] Under the Saxons a mainstay of civil defence had been the *burh*: comprising anything from a fortified town to a large private residence with a gatehouse, a hall and a clutch of domestic buildings, a chapel and a wooden tower.[6] Yet the Normans brought something new, that would leave England with the permanent scars of conquest. When the word 'castle' was first recorded in English, around the time of the Conquest, it was linked specifically with 'foreigners'.[7] When William left England to deal with ducal business across the Channel a few months after his coronation, leaving trusted lieutenants with instructions to fortify at scale and speed, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle summed up the policy sourly: 'And they built castles widely throughout this nation, and oppressed the wretched people; and afterwards it always grew very much worse.'[8]

The Normans were directly descended from Vikings. The clue was in the name – a form of Northmen (Normanni).[9] In the 880s, a Viking warlord called Rollo joined in a siege of Paris, part of a long-running series of confrontations between Viking raiders and Frankish kings. Rollo remained a menace to the Franks until, in 911, he forced the Frankish king Charles the Simple to make him a permanent grant of land stretching from the long beaches of the Cotentin peninsula to the fertile valley of the river Seine. Rollo and his men were allowed to settle on condition that they converted to

Christianity. The chronicler who reported on this agreement (known as the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte) hoped it would encourage Rollo to 'leave the unspeakable work of the devil. . . give to the people laws, and inviolate rights to the clergy.'[10] This was optimistic: throughout the tenth century Norman rulers were known as leaders of pirates and their stronghold at Rouen was 'the city of the Danes'.[11]

William, future conqueror of England, was born around 1027–8, the son of the Norman duke Robert I and an unmarried woman called Herleve, said to have been the daughter of a tanner or gravedigger from Falaise.[*] By the time of his birth the Normans were well settled in their new home. They spoke French and baptised their children with Frankish names. They endowed churches and supported abbeys. Their dukes minted coins and issued charters. Their leading families began to think of themselves in terms of lineages associated with particular places, adopting toponymics[†] – names that referenced their place of residence.[12] And just as the Franks did, they fortified their homesteads. Ironically, the Frankish practice of castle-building had originally arisen as a direct response to Viking raids on their lands in the ninth century.[13] But now the Normans adopted it. By William's day, it was the practice of most of the great Norman families to base themselves in a fortress.

Exactly what *sort* of fortresses these were has been the matter of vigorous archaeological investigation in modern times. In the beginning, most Norman castles were probably quite basic, comprising earthworks, surrounded or surmounted by a timber fence. Some, however, were more robust. They had stone towers and stone walls, which enclosed complexes of buildings covering several acres. But there was also a third, quite distinctive sort of castle, which is depicted a number of times on the most famous artefact from all of Norman history, the Bayeux Tapestry. This was the motte-and-bailey castle, in which an artificial mound topped with a tower of stone or wood (the 'motte') was defended by a fence or wall enclosing a wider area of land and outbuildings (the 'bailey'). The Normans worked on castles of all these styles in the decades before they invaded England. But the motte and bailey was their signature design.

The reason the pre-Conquest Normans saw fit to build so many castles becomes obvious when we consider William's youth. Violence was baked into Norman politics, and when William became duke in 1035, aged seven

or eight years old (following his father's death returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem), there was a drastic surge in disorder. Norman lords tested the will of William's regents, assassinating his officials, seizing lands and power and then throwing up fortifications to defy any attempt to discipline them. The chronicler William of Jumièges summed up the desperate state of Norman politics: 'From [William's] tender years onwards many Normans built earthworks in many places and erected fortified strongholds for their own purposes. Having dared to establish themselves in their own fortifications, [the lords] immediately hatched plots and rebellions, and fierce fires were lit all over the country.'[14]

When William turned fifteen and was allowed full political control over his lands, he started putting those fires out. It was not easy, but with the help of the French king he vanquished his enemies in battle at a place called Val-ès-Dunes. This was 'a happy battle', wrote William of Jumièges, since 'in one day [it] ruined so many castles of criminals and houses of evil-doers.'[15] By the dawn of the 1050s, William was growing more secure in his duchy. He had attracted the notice and respect of neighbouring kings. He had also come to understand first-hand the importance of castles in governing a land.

With that in mind, William became an energetic castle-builder. Pursuing a conflict with Geoffrey Martel, count of nearby Anjou, William erected four castles around the town of Domfront, which allowed him to establish a long-term siege, and eventually to take the town.[‡] When he wanted to establish his dominance over the same Geoffrey Martel in the borderlands between Normandy and Maine, he built a stone castle at the strategic town of Ambrières. Geoffrey was unable to break this fortress despite launching a fierce assault against it, described in lurid terms by William's chaplain: 'The battle is fought with great violence on both sides. Missiles, stones, heavy stakes, and also lances rain down from above. Struck by these, many fall, slain; others are driven back. . . They attack the wall with a battering ram; but. . . it is broken.'[16]

Sometimes William's castles were temporary, expedient structures. But often they were built to last. One of his most enduring works was the great fortification of Caen. This town stood on high ground overlooking the valley of the river Orne, about twelve miles inland from the stretch of coast where William assembled his English armada. It was a modest settlement at

best before William got hold of it: there was a port, a marketplace and a regular fair, but it was nothing when compared to the towns of Rouen and Bayeux, or the ducal residences at Fécamp, Falaise or Valognes.[17] A castle, however, could be the making of a place. And in the 1050s William chose to redevelop Caen as a major new town, which could serve as a dominant centre of his ducal power in lower Normandy, while also serving as a new dynastic seat. To that end he founded two huge abbeys – the Abbeye aux Hommes and the Abbeye aux Dames – intended as burial sites for himself and his wife, Matilda of Flanders. Between the religious houses he built a vast stone wall enclosing the flat top of the high ground above the river. Within the circuit of the wall, he set up buildings including one that still survives: a long, elegant Romanesque hall, known to modern historians as 'The Hall of the Exchequer' or simply *l'Exchiquier*.[18]

Thanks to its heavy defences, which were improved by William's descendants to include a huge stone central tower (known as a *donjon* or keep) and a feasting hall that in the 1180s could accommodate 1,000 knights, Caen became one of the most important military strongholds in Normandy. Its fortifications were fought over bitterly throughout the Hundred Years War between England and France, when it was besieged three times: in 1346, 1417 and 1450. Its keep was largely destroyed in 1793 during the French Revolution, when it was (quite accurately) considered an emblem of medieval aristocratic power. Caen was still a prized military target in 1944, when it was subjected to devastating shelling during a seven-week battle fought over the city between Allied and Nazi armies resisting the D-Day invasions.

Needless to say, when William began his work fortifying Caen around 1060 all this was impossible to know. His concerns were with advertising his own wealth, splendour, piety and military might, in a location handily situated between the coast and the Norman interior. His ability to lavish money and resources on Caen's defences was proof in itself of the mastery over Normandy that his campaigns since being knighted as a teenager had brought him. William's castles were proxy images of himself: symbols of ducal pre-eminence, as well as a reminder of just how far the Normans had come since their early days as a band of marauding Vikings. In the words of one contemporary, by the time Caen was under construction in the 1060s, William duke of Normandy was 'the ruler of his whole land, something which is scarcely found anywhere else.'[19]

But Normandy alone was not enough. In 1066 William decided that he was going to expand his dominion into England. He claimed Edward the Confessor had nominated him as heir to the Saxon crown, and when Edward died on January 5th of that year, William began making his plans to take it. The result we have already seen: the battle of Hastings, William's chaotic coronation in London and the beginnings of a conquest that would export Norman castle-building wholesale across the English Channel.



The greatest castle the Normans ever built was a tower overlooking London, which developed on the spot where, in the autumn of 1066, William had installed a makeshift timber fortress to pacify the city. From these simple beginnings arose what became known first as the White Tower,[§] and later, simply the Tower of London.[20] As we have noted, the Normans planted hundreds of castles in England, and some of these early foundations would develop to become immensely grand fortified palaces: from Pevensey Castle on England's south coast to Durham Castle in the north, and from Norwich Castle in East Anglia to Launceston Castle in Cornwall. But the Tower would come to have a historical legacy unlike any other castle in England, and 950 years later it is still a working royal palace with a military guard.

Its site was a plot of about an acre and a half inside the angle formed at the far south-east of the city's old Roman walls. Built around 200 CE and reinforced in the late fourth century, these walls still stood in remarkably good repair in 1066, running along both the landward sides of the city and along the north bank of the River Thames. From the Tower's position in the south-east corner it could look in many directions at once: downriver towards the estuary, upriver towards Westminster, and directly onto the city. The siting replicated that of existing urban fortresses in Normandy, at sites including Avranches, Bayeux and Rouen.[21] And it offered a pleasing military symmetry, for at the same time that the Tower was being built, work was also underway on another fortification in the west, near St Paul's Cathedral on what is now Ludgate Hill. This original western castle was short-lived, but it would eventually become the dual fortifications of

Baynard's Castle and Montfichet's Tower,[#] which guarded west London for more than a century.[22]

The Tower's original design was a familiar one: a central keep set in a bailey formed by outer defences. The footprint of the main building was more or less the same as can be seen today: almost square with a turret on each corner. The north-east corner bulged out slightly into a circular tower containing a spiral staircase which gained the name 'the great vice'; and the south-east corner stuck out even more, to form the apse of a chapel, which would be dedicated to St John the Evangelist. It did not stand on an artificial mound, or motte, as so many other Norman castles did. But the perimeter defences formed by the Roman walls, palisade fence and a ditch fed by water from the Thames created a formidable barrier against the outside world.

The Tower was constructed from stone quarried near William's fortified new town at Caen. Importing it to England was costly, but it was worth the trouble. Caen stone has a beautiful, creamy hue, and as William knew very well, when it caught the light on a sunny day, it gleamed. That effect can still be seen today inside the chapel of St John in the Tower of London. When sunlight floods through the rounded windows of the apse, the thick columns which crowd around the altar and the tiny nave sparkle. It is a cool, peaceful calming space among a building which was otherwise constructed to convey political power and military might.

Today a journey around the White Tower follows winding stairs that join together a basement with three more levels. (It is possible, though only by special arrangement with the Tower authorities, to go all the way to the roof, from which there is a magnificent view of London's skyscrapers, which now soar over the city's skyline just as the White Tower once did.) That layout is substantially the same as it was in William's day, and a visitor can still sense the facilities which in Norman times would have been considered luxurious: besides its glorious chapel, the Tower had a water-well in the basement, staircases built into three of its four corners, latrines which emptied out of the building, fireplaces to provide warmth and windows throughout for light. The external door was on the first floor (in the same place it is today), accessible by a wooden stairway that could be sealed off in times of emergency. Nothing of comparable size and sophistication had been built in London for at least seven centuries, since Roman times.

Given its complexity, the Tower took years to plan and construct. Foundations were probably put down in 1067, and modern studies of the timbers used in the oldest sections of the Tower suggest that wood and stones were being laid by 1068. Around 1077–8 William appointed one of his most capable officials, Gundulf, bishop of Rochester, as supervisor of the Tower project. Gundulf's were trusted hands: respected, pious and well connected, he had once been a monk at the Abbeye aux Hommes in Caen, so had witnessed William's ambitious attitude towards fortification. After his appointment, works progressed quickly, with a five- or six-year burst of construction lasting until about 1083. Then there was a short break, and the next big push to complete the Tower took place between around 1093 and the century's end.

The Tower was certainly fully functional by 1101, when a veteran servant of the Norman crown named Ranulf Flambard, bishop of Durham was imprisoned there and escaped by getting his guards drunk, then shimmying down a rope and fleeing England. Ranulf is now remembered as the first person ever to escape from the Tower – a feat only matched by about forty of the thousands of prisoners who would be locked up in the Tower in the nine centuries that followed. The fact that his escape was recorded is a sign that from its earliest days the White Tower lodged itself in the English imagination as a place synonymous with punishment and oppression. This was exactly as William the Conqueror intended. Under the conditions of the conquest, fear was a vital weapon – because from the start, William and his castles were constantly under strain.



In 1067 a fleet of ships sailed across the English Channel from Normandy by night, heading for the English coast. The fleet was led by a tough military veteran from northern France. His name was Eustace of Boulogne, and when it came to invading England, he had form. Fifteen years earlier, Eustace had started a riot in the town of Dover in which at least forty men were killed. In 1066 he had joined William the Conqueror's army and was said by one chronicler to have helped kill King Harold.[23] He had 'prowess in war and fortune in battle'.[24] Now Eustace was coming back to England, but not as a friend of the new Norman king. Fancying that it was not so difficult a matter to lay claim to the English crown, Eustace had formed an

alliance with men from Kent who wished to overturn the result of the battle of Hastings. They were preparing an armed uprising, aimed at Dover Castle, which sat high on Dover's famous white cliffs beside a Roman lighthouse and Saxon church.

This was the first serious test of William's grip on his new kingdom and it came at a moment when he was away in Normandy. In his absence, England was being governed by William's brother Odo and his relative William FitzOsbern. Their security system relied on castles such as Dover, so Eustace's invasion was also an early stress-test of England's new Norman fortifications.

Since it was the closest point in England to the continent, Dover had been fortified since long before the Norman invasion, having once been the location of an Iron Age hillfort. During Anglo-Saxon times it had been defended in the manner of a *burh*. William had personally overseen eight days' work on defensive upgrades directly after the battle of Hastings, and Odo had been given direct responsibility for its upkeep.[25] So it was an ambitious target for Eustace and his Kentish allies to attack, even though at the moment they chose to launch their assault Odo himself was not on duty, having 'gone away across the river Thames, taking most of [his] troops with him.'[26]

For all that Eustace rated his own skill as a commander, and the men of Kent fancied their chances of catching the skeleton garrison unawares under cover of night, the size of the task became horribly clear as soon as his fleet landed. As William the Conqueror's chaplain later told the story, the rebels found Dover's defences 'less slack than they expected'. Part of the point of a castle was to function as a base from which armed knights on fresh horses could ride out at full charge against enemies who had travelled from further away. That was now demonstrated. Alerted to Eustace's arrival, Norman knights charged out from Dover castle into the dark, and the unexpected vigour of their sally frightened the rebels into immediate disarray.

The local rebels turned tail and fled along the paths that led away from the headland, vanishing into the countryside. Eustace, having made trouble in Dover before, was also familiar with the landscape: he spurred his horse and galloped back down to the beach where he found his ships ready to weigh anchor. Some of his friends from Boulogne were not so lucky. Running blind in the darkness many were chased over the clifftops and dashed on the rocks. Although Eustace was later reconciled with William

and pardoned, an early warning had been served to all who were considering resisting the Normans and their castles.

If the warning was served, however, it was unevenly heeded, and in many ways the history of William's reign in England was one of a generation-long struggle for mastery, as the Normans sought to carve their supremacy onto the English landscape and the English imagination. Some of the objections of the native English were straightforward: they resented being ruled by foreigners, and disliked William's punitively heavy taxation. But there were times when the disruptive act of building castles itself was enough to cause a rebellion. In 1067 in Hereford, in the borderlands of England and Wales, locals who were press-ganged into building a castle rebelled against their new lords: as the Anglo Saxon Chronicle put it, they 'became hostile and they attacked the castle-men in Hereford, and did them many injuries.'[27] Thereafter Herefordshire became a hotbed of violent resistance to the conquest, led by a renegade Saxon nobleman called Eadric the Wild.[28] In the south-west, Exeter was a focal point for disorder, and at one point William was forced to lay it under siege for eighteen days, after which he built a castle to try and suppress further risings. Later, in the East Anglian fenlands, rebels also fought a long battle against conquest, centred on the Isle of Ely and led by a nobleman-turned-outlaw called Hereward the Wake.

Nowhere, however, was the clash between Norman invaders and their new English subjects so brutally waged as in the north. Here, rebellion stirred at the end of 1067 with rumours of a plot for the mass ambush and murder of Norman troops. The following summer, in 1068, full insurrection broke out. It centred on a group of powerful native Englishmen who were uneasily reconciled to the new Norman regime, including the exiled sons of Harold Godwinson and a descendent of Edward the Confessor, known as Edgar Aetheling. But in character it was a truly regional uprising, in which the northern folk made their general hatred of the Normans known. In the words of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, 'the king was informed that the people in the north had gathered together and would stand against him if he came.'[29]

Inevitably, William came – and when he did, he marched with fire, fury and fortification on his mind. He swept into the English midlands with an army, allowing his men to ravage, kill and burn as they went. In every major town they came across, William built a castle: the famous

strongholds that stand today in Warwick and Nottingham have their origins on this campaign, as does Clifford's Tower in York. When William marched back south he ordered further castles erected at Lincoln, Huntingdon and Cambridge. Each of these was put into the hands of a Norman loyalist, to whom the responsibility of holding the line against the natives was now delegated. The result was threefold. Towns were now invested with a permanent and panoptical guardhouse, from which royal authority could be projected. Great families were given a fortress with which they could identify their dynasty and name – and many did so, building up family seats at castles that became the hub of their regional power for generations afterwards. And England was littered with monuments to Norman victory – psychological reminders of what would happen if arms were raised against the new occupiers.[30]

Although there were moments when William struggled to find Norman lords willing to take on the job of managing castles deep in hostile country – one writer claimed that Norman women were beginning to complain about their absentee spouses and threatened to take new husbands if their menfolk did not hurry home – the buildings themselves were effective. 'The fortifications that the Normans called castles were [previously] scarcely known in the English provinces, and so the English – in spite of their courage and love of fighting – could put up only a weak resistance to their enemies,' wrote Orderic Vitalis, a chronicler who had been born in England but raised from the age of ten as a monk in Normandy.[31] There were many towns – such as Winchester or Oxford – where resistance to the new regime was muted, but castles were installed all the same, often with huge areas of the urban landscape ripped up to accommodate them.

Despite William's efforts, the north would not submit easily. In January 1069 the Norman-appointed earl of Northumberland was murdered by a mob, and rumours held that northern rebels had asked the king of Denmark to invade the realm. In September those rumours were proven to be true when a Danish fleet appeared off the coast and anchored in the river Humber. Danes poured off the ships, marched to York, defeated a Norman army and occupied the city.

But the Danish triumph did not last long. Although at the time of the incursion William was occupied with unrest in south-west England and Wales, he turned to march on York with thousands of troops. The Anglo Saxon Chronicle described the clash between the Norman army and the

rebels in York in laconic tones, but the authors could not hide the scale of the violence. ‘King William came. . . by surprise from the south with a streaming raiding-army and put them to flight, and then killed those who could not flee – that was several hundreds of men; and ravaged the town and made [York Minster] a disgrace.’[32] The Danes retreated back to their ships at anchor in the Humber. The king swept into the burned-out city and on Christmas Day – the third anniversary of his coronation – he wore his crown in the blackened ruins of the burned Minster. He founded a second castle to guard the first, and sent envoys to cut a deal with the Danes, saying they were welcome to ravage the North Sea coast for a few months on condition they went back to Denmark by the spring. For the English in the north it was to be a grim Christmas, for now the Conqueror began his revenge.

The Harrying of the North, which occurred over the winter of 1069–70, seared itself into the cultural memory of England for generations. One of the authors of the Anglo Saxon Chronicle wrote that ‘King William went out into the shire and ruined it completely.’[33] Animals were killed, crops destroyed and homes burned. Orderic Vitalis wrote that William ‘made no effort to restrain his fury and punished the innocent with the guilty. In his anger he commanded that all crops, herds and food of any kind be brought together and burned to ashes so that the whole region north of the [river] Humber be deprived of any source of sustenance.’[34] Columns of starving refugees wandered the countryside, their children dying of hunger. There were reports of cannibalism. Orderic estimated that 100,000 people died. Fifty years later, the chronicler William of Malmesbury stated that the devastating effects of the Harrying could still be seen on land and people.[35]

After the Harrying of the North, William doubled down on his policy of maintaining and garrisoning castles. In the north, new castles were installed at Richmond, Durham, Pickering and Pontefract. These served both as nodes of royal power and as menacing reminders of a punitive military operation not far from the definition of genocide.[36] Since it remained difficult to find loyal men keen to take up posts in these castles, William ordered a raid on Church wealth in order to bribe them to stay on the front line. For those who were willing to brave the job, it cannot have been much fun. In the 1080s William ordered the great survey of his lands that produced the census known as the Domesday Book. Its pages counted the

wealth and population of England, but in doing so revealed the dreadful cost of the realm's fortification.

Where castles had been installed, or military campaigns fought from behind their walls, Domesday recorded high levels of something its scribes generically termed 'waste'. This could mean houses abandoned, land that yielded no crops and therefore no taxation, or villages that were empty of human life.[37] Castles had been essential to William transforming his victory at Hastings into lasting control of England, and in turn to the establishment of a cross-Channel Anglo-Norman aristocracy, which would shape the course of English history for the next half a millennium. But they had also bled the country dry.

In September 1087 William – now grotesquely fat and worn out – died in Normandy, having injured his abdomen while riding. He was buried, as he had wished, in the Abbeye aux Hommes in Caen, within sight of one of his grandest fortifications. His burial left an unpleasant memory on those who were there: his corpse had become bloated by gas in the days after his death, and had to be crammed into his tomb. This effort caused his belly to burst, releasing fumes so disgusting that the abbey was emptied of onlookers. It was an undignified end, though there were many in the lands William had conquered who would have said he deserved nothing better. Yet if William was feared and unloved, he could not be forgotten. His legacy in England and Normandy would last for 1,000 years, developed by the line of kings and dukes who followed him, and memorialised in stone in the castles that he built to enforce his rule.



In 1252 Norwegian ships arrived in England, carrying with them a precious cargo, destined for London's premier castle. It was a polar bear, sent from Greenland as a present from the king of Norway, Haakon IV, to the king of England, Henry III. Haakon and Henry were on good terms and their kingdoms were trading partners. To keep their deal sweet, Haakon often sent his English counterpart curiosities from the Arctic fringe, including falcons and goshawks, walrus tusks and elk horns.[38] But to gift a polar bear was a sign of extra-special friendship. The bears' thick warm pelts were prized as rugs in Scandinavia and traded as far away as Cairo and

Damascus. Alive, their value as trophy pets was virtually limitless, and only the greatest rulers could lay their hands on one.[ʃ]

Receiving exotic animals was the rare pleasure of kings, and since the reign of Henry III's great-great grandfather, the Norman king Henry I, the finest of them – leopards and lions, lynxes, porcupines and a camel – had been kept in a menagerie at the royal hunting lodge in Woodstock. Now they and the bear were given a new home, at the Tower of London. Inside the fortress, cages and pens were built and keepers were hired. Henry III allotted two pence a day from the royal purse to pay for his bear's food, but ordered that if that were not enough, then the beast could be allowed to swim and fish for salmon in the River Thames. He ordered London's sheriffs to buy a muzzle and chain for the bear while it was on land, and a 'strong cord' to keep it from swimming away when it entered the river. Its keeper was provided with waterproof clothes for these fishing trips.[39]

By the time Henry III moved his pets into the Tower, the fortress had been substantially expanded from its eleventh-century foundations, and was well on its way to becoming the biggest and most instantly recognisable of all England's Norman castles. Along the riverfront where the bear lumbered out to fish was a new rampart wall, into which were built two large towers – the Lanthorn and Wakefield towers – between which were a set of royal apartments and a great hall. The line of the riverside defences were extended east and west, and now formed part of a huge fortified 'curtain' wall, studded with further towers, which encircled a space more than twice the size of the original compound. Buildings that once stood at some distance from the Norman fortress had now either been demolished to make way or – in the case of a little chapel dedicated to St Peter ad Vincula – absorbed within the line of the walls. A wide ditch was being dug around the outside, so that access from the city was limited to a bridge and gatehouse in the western flank of the wall – where Beauchamp Tower stands today.

Perhaps most strikingly, the Conqueror's fortress had been whitewashed, so that the creamy gleam of Caen stone was replaced by the harsher dazzle of slaked lime. (A similar treatment was given at this time to the Norman castles at Rochester and Corfe.) Henry was pleased with the effect and keen that it should not be spoiled by bad weather: he issued instructions for improvements to the White Tower's guttering so that rainwater would not splatter against the walls and cause the whitewash to peel.[40]

All the expense and attention lavished on the Tower might seem strange, for no king of England ever really cared to stay there for more than a few nights. Other royal castles – like Windsor or later favourites such as Kenilworth – were for living in. But the Tower was supremely functional. It reminded the citizens of London where ultimate power lies. It had important ritual uses: medieval monarchs inducted young aristocrats into the Order of the Bath there, and traditionally paraded through London from the Tower to Westminster Abbey on the day of their coronation. At times of crisis, the Tower could serve as a bolthole for beleaguered monarchs and their governments, as it did in 1263, when Henry III and his queen, Eleanor of Provence, were forced to take refuge there as the realm teetered on the brink of a civil war fuelled by the reforming baron Simon de Montfort, or, more than a century later, when the young king Richard II was trapped there by his angry subjects during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. And it was the site for political executions, when men and women deemed to be enemies of their monarch and realm were beheaded and butchered on Tower Hill.

And this was not all. The Tower's role as a menagerie endured from Henry III's reign until the Victorian era: the polar bear was joined by an elephant in the 1250s, and a new lion den built in the west of the tower grounds in the later thirteenth century meant that the beasts' intimidating roars could be heard far beyond the walls. From the reign of Edward I (1272–1307) until the nineteenth century the Tower housed the royal mint, where moneyers struck coins in hot, caustic, highly secure premises, located in a long building beside the Tower's western wall – the area today known as Mint Street. In other areas of the Tower, arms-makers manufactured spears and lances, crossbows and bolts, and the components for siege catapults and, from the fourteenth century, cannon and gunpowder. The headquarters of the king's master builders and carpenters was located in the Tower. So too, from the early fourteenth century, was a major branch of the royal administration. The Great Wardrobe – a storage unit for royal property including, but not limited to, fabric and clothes – could be found in the Wakefield Tower. The chapel of St John was for a time used to store administrative records and financial documents – part of a sprawling bureaucracy that had different branches across London, from the Exchequer to the New Temple to the Tower itself.[41] The Crown Jewels were stored in the Tower from the late sixteenth century, melted down in the Mint during

the Commonwealth, and then re-committed to the Tower's safekeeping when a new set was made after the restoration of King Charles II in 1660.

One of the most famous functions of the Tower was as a prison. As we have already seen, Ranulf Flambard, bishop of Durham was locked in the Tower – and escaped – in 1101. Many more would be locked up after him. Richard III's nephews, known as the Princes in the Tower, disappeared, presumed murdered, after being locked up in the Tower 1483. During the reign of Henry VIII, the Tower's inmates included the Catholic writer and politician Sir Thomas More; Henry's second queen, Anne Boleyn, and his fifth, Catherine Howard; and his chief minister Thomas Cromwell. All were beheaded within the Tower's precincts. Later, the would-be Queen Jane Grey was imprisoned and executed in the Tower; the future Queen Elizabeth I was imprisoned but survived. The explorer and courtier Sir Walter Raleigh was sent to the Tower three times before his execution in 1618. The conspirator Guy Fawkes, who tried to blow up Westminster and thereby assassinate King James VI and I, was tortured and killed as a traitor at the Tower in 1606. Even in the twentieth century the Tower was still sometimes used as a jail: after the Nazi deputy führer Rudolf Hess fled Germany in 1941 and was captured in Scotland, he was kept in the Tower for four days; in 1952 the notorious gangsters Ronald and Reginald Kray were also held prisoner in the Tower for a short time while they awaited court martial for abandoning their national service in the British Army.

Any one of these stories might merit a chapter in its own right. Suffice to say here that by the end of the Middle Ages – let alone the modern day – the Tower of London had vastly expanded from its earliest form. It now not only intimidated London, advertising and defending the interests of the monarchy, but had also become a hub of other political and administrative activity. And it bore testament to the wider castle-building programme the Normans introduced after 1066: an extraordinary feat of military engineering and psychological domination that William achieved during a twenty-one-year reign whose effects can still be felt in England today.



Just before Christmas in 1962 Sir Neill Cooper-Key, Conservative MP for Hastings, stood up in the House of Commons and told his fellow Members of plans that were afoot in his constituency to commemorate the 900th

anniversary of the Norman invasion, which was to fall four years hence. There would be re-enactments of the battle, he said, along with other entertainments the organisers felt could evoke the spirit of the Conquest. A highlight would be a light and sound show at Hastings Castle, which claimed to be the very first Norman fortress erected in the aftermath of the battle.

Sir Neill hoped the government might see fit to make a grant of funds. He stressed the benefits that such a pageant might bring to Hastings and neighbouring towns. 'The south coast resorts, because, of the extreme war damage they suffered [in the Second World War] and the changing fashions of holidaymakers, have not shared in the general national prosperity,' he told the House.[42] Here was a chance to put that right.

The government was not moved. Already the president of the Board of Trade had told Sir Neill, in a terse note, that 'the benefit of a Battle of Hastings commemoration would not be sufficiently widespread to justify the Government seeking Parliamentary approval for a special grant from public funds.'[43] Now the Minister who responded to the question on the floor of the Commons elaborated. An old-fashioned objection, he said, might be that, 'although one of the genuinely decisive battles of the world, Hastings was, after all, one of the very few occasions on which an English army was overcome on English soil by a foreign invader.' The Minister hastened to say that he himself was more enlightened that that. 'Ours is, in fact, a nation of many strands – as the poet put it, "Saxon and Norman and Dane[Ω] " – and I agree entirely. . . that some sort of celebration of the events of 1066 is appropriate and important.'[44] Nevertheless, there was to be no public money.

When October 1966 arrived, therefore, commemorations of the Norman Conquest were on a smaller scale than had originally been hoped. Hastings Castle hosted no light and sound show. Discussions over inviting the French president Charles de Gaulle to attend a gala luncheon in the town were squashed by the Foreign Office, amid tensions over de Gaulle's attempts to withdraw France from the NATO alliance and his hostility to Britain's proposed membership of the European Economic Community (EEC).[45]

All the same, the date did not pass totally unmarked. Queen Elizabeth II made a visit to Pevensey Castle, where in heavy rain she inspected the east gate of the castle William had founded there within the walls of an old

Roman fort. On the battle site there was a re-enactment, sarcastically reviewed in the pages of the *Guardian*: ‘It was distant and a bit tame, but it was all mud and muddle, and that no doubt was authentic.’ Other activities put on during the day included an archery contest and a drinking contest, in which students from two local universities tried to outdo one another in slurping booze from little clay saucepan-type bowls known as pipkins. The competition was overseen by a celebrity judge: Lesley Langley, the reigning champion of the Miss World beauty pageant.

Nine centuries after the Norman Conquest, then, the English seemed a little uncertain about where the event stood in their cultural memory. And though fifty years on, in 2016, commemorations were a little more confident – historical re-enactors marched 300 miles from York to Hastings before putting on a more full-blooded recreation of the battle, and the Royal Mint issued a special 50p coin – there was still a degree of cultural uncertainty over how the legacy of the Norman Conquest should best be regarded. At the time of writing, the Bayeux Tapestry is being prepared for a state loan from France to the UK, where in the autumn of 2026 it is to be displayed temporarily in the British Museum. This will no doubt be an opportunity for another round of analysis about the contribution of the Norman invaders to a nation in which nativists still routinely describe themselves as Anglo-Saxon.

One thing, however, can be said with certainty. The Norman invasion of England in 1066 was a pivotal moment in the history of England and of the English castle, for it brought across the English Channel an unprecedented spate of castle-building, and imposed the political conditions that made it near essential to erect castles in every major town and all over the countryside.

From the Tower of London to Clifford’s Tower in York, and at countless places in between, the Norman conquerors fortified their new realm in ways and at scale that had never been seen before. The Norman revolution touched almost every facet of English life, and it created a cross-Channel culture, in which castles, language, family ties and administrative structures were interwoven in ways that resonated for centuries. They and their descendants, the Plantagenets, also deployed castles to extend their power outside England. Hundreds of castles were founded in Wales, including Cardiff Castle, built in the late eleventh century on the ruins of a Roman troop barracks, Pembroke Castle, overlooking a river-harbour in the south-

west, and Caerphilly Castle, a vast and elegant thirteenth-century stone fortress whose lopsided ruins are today one of the most striking sites in the principality. In Ireland, Dublin Castle was founded in 1204 by King John to perform a similar function to the Tower of London, and would remain the heart of British rule in Ireland until being handed over to the new Irish government that was created in 1922.

Yet it was not only in the British Isles and Ireland that the Normans left their mark. For while William the Conqueror and his heirs were busy reshaping England, far away in southern Europe another Norman dynasty was making its mark on a different realm. In the 1060s, Norman adventurers arrived in southern Italy and Sicily, and began a campaign to wrest control of that region away from the various powers who held sway there – from papal armies to Arab emirs. By the end of the eleventh century Apulia, Malta and Sicily were all under Norman rule, and overseen by spectacular castles designed to project both force and fear. And their arrival in the Mediterranean would have consequences for castle-building in a region of the world far more hotly contested than England. The Normans of Sicily found themselves drawn deep into the crusades – and it is to that world, and the fortifications that it produced, that we will now turn.

* Hence: William the Bastard. This was not a name it was wise to use in William's earshot. He could be sensitive, and cut off the hands and feet of men who mocked his illegitimate birth.

† Under such a system I would be not 'Dan Jones', but 'Dan of Staines-upon-Thames'.

‡ Not only did William take the town, he also captured nearby Alençon, where he burned a (presumably) timber fortress, and ordered thirty-two of the garrison to have their hands and feet chopped off.

§ The name the White Tower refers to the central keep of the Tower of London. The term dates to the thirteenth century, when this central building was whitewashed inside and out.

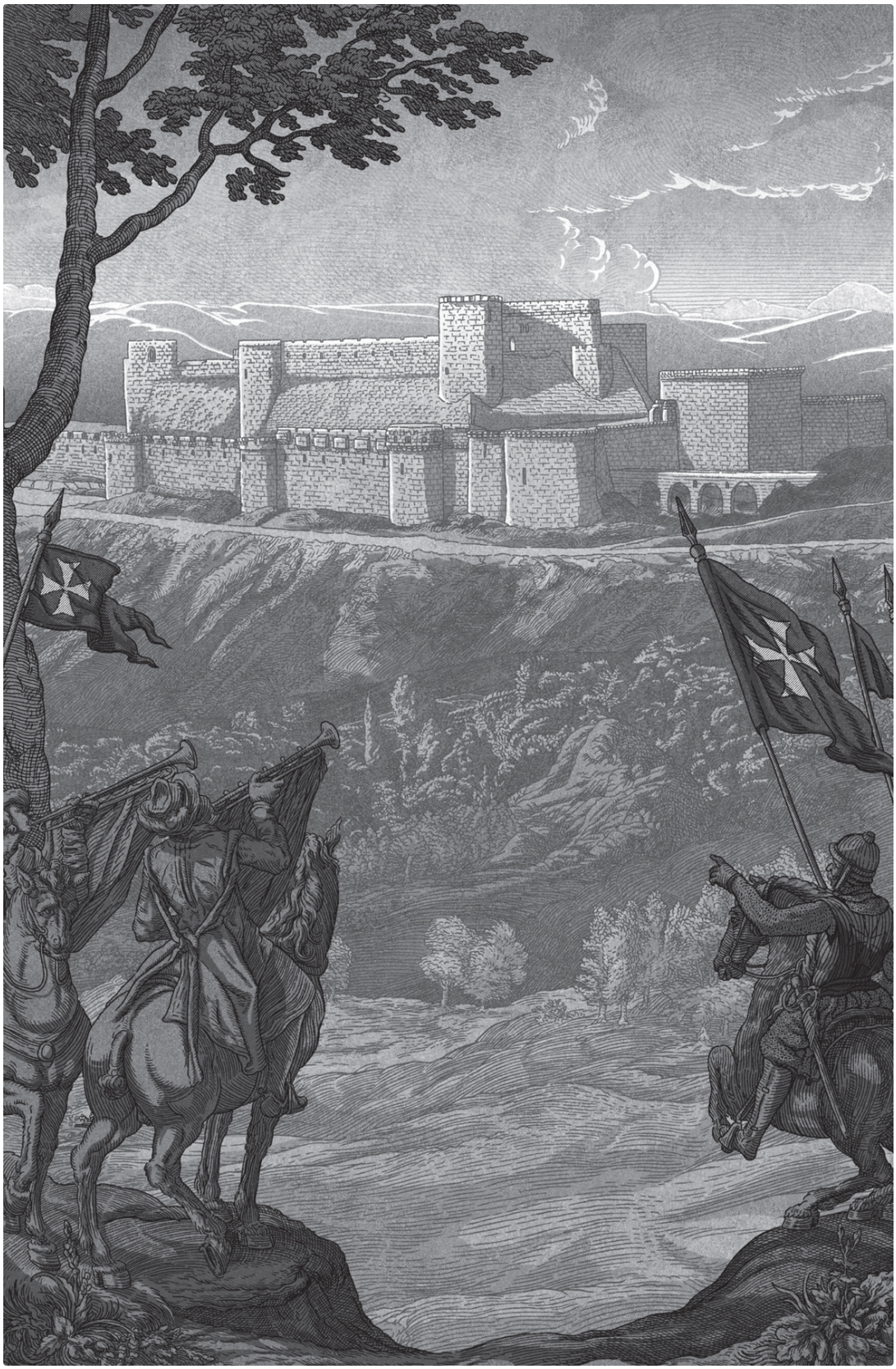
Montfichet's Tower and Baynard's Castle, which stood close together in the south-west corner of the city, where the River Fleet flowed into the Thames, were both gone by the 1270s at the latest. A grand, sometime royal, mansion built on the same site later in the Middle Ages was burned down in the Great Fire of London of 1666.

∫ There was a tale told in the northern lands about Harald Hardrada, an earlier king of Norway, who was outbid for a polar bear trapped in Greenland, which was eventually sold to the king of Denmark for a vast fortune in jewels, ships and money. (Harald Hardrada later tried and failed to invade England in the same year as William the Conqueror.)

Ω An allusion to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1863 ode to Princess Alexandra of Denmark on her arrival in England to be married to the future Edward VII:

> Sea-kings' daughter from over the sea, Alexandra!
> Saxon and Norman and Dane are we,

But all of us Danes in our welcome of thee, Alexandra!
Welcome her, thunders of fort and of fleet!
Welcome her, thundering cheer of the street!
Welcome her, all things youthful and sweet,
Scatter the blossom under her feet!



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6

CRUSADER CASTLES

We who were Occidentals have become Orientals.

. .

FULCHER OF CHARTRES, *A HISTORY OF THE EXPEDITION TO JERUSALEM*

In the autumn of 1178 an army of engineers, stonemasons, carpenters, labourers, knights and soldiers went out to a hill by the west bank of the River Jordan, drove their spades into the earth and set to work on a new castle.

They were digging on holy ground. A week's march from this hill and the river crossing it overlooked lay the city of Jerusalem: home to the Temple Mount, al-Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and since 1099 the capital of a settler kingdom established by Christian crusaders from western Europe. Near the building site was a busy trade road known as the Via Maris, which ran from the Syrian city of Damascus to the Egyptian capital of Cairo.

Hanging over everything was the thick shroud of history. To Muslims of the region, the hill where the builders were working was the site of the House of Lamentations (*Bayt al-Ahzan*): where the prophet Jacob had once been told by his feckless sons that his favourite, Joseph, had been eaten by a wolf.[*] To the Christians, who were building the castle, the spot was where the same Jacob had wrestled an angel, breaking his hip during the bout.[1] They called it *Vadum Iacob*, or Jacob's Ford.

The castle at Jacob's Ford was planned to be huge, controversial and provocative, as was well known to the crusaders who worked there, laying the foundations for walls 'of marvellous thickness and adequate height'.[2] It was planned on a scale larger than anything seen in the region before. What was more, it was in a frontier zone between Muslim-controlled territory and the crusader kingdom; chroniclers of both faiths agreed that it lay on the Muslims' side of the border.

Ostensibly, this fortress was being built so that the Christian authorities had a base from which to patrol the Via Maris, plagued by bandits who 'so beset the highways that none could go to and from the army without peril, neither could travellers pass along any of the ways.'[3] But a castle of this size in the bitterly contested Holy Land was never going to be a mere police station. It was a statement of religious pre-eminence and aggressive intent. Informants working for the Muslim sultan of Syria and Egypt, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub – or, as the Christians called him, Saladin – reported the

matter plainly. ‘If the construction of the castle is achieved,’ they said, ‘it will be possible [for Christians] to raid Muslim territory at very short notice.’[4]

The young crusader king Baldwin IV[†] who had commissioned the castle was aware that it would rile Saladin, and knew the sultan would try to prevent its completion. So the builders worked under military supervision. For every labourer Baldwin sent to Jacob’s Ford, he sent another guard, command of whom was delegated to the elite order of oath-bound religious warriors known as the Knights Templar, who were to hold the finished castle. The cost of the extra manpower was astronomical. But for a time, this strategy seemed to work. By April 1179, after seven months of works, the foundations had been laid. A water cistern was in place. A complete circuit of thick stone walls had been built, accessed by five gates and overlooked by a tower.

Each day Christian labourers and Muslim prisoners of war busied themselves with shovels, picks and hoes. They used wheelbarrows to move pebble, stone and lime from great heaps to the places they were needed. They dug more foundation pits. Soon would come a second defensive wall, a moat and security checkpoints to connect the various parts of the sprawling complex. As they worked, Templar knights and other troops scanned the horizon, watching for trouble.

Saladin and his emirs were also watching and they resented what they saw. They were doubly disturbed by reports that another castle was underway at nearby Hunin, which would dominate another important trade route: the road from Damascus to the Christian port of Tyre. The sultan concluded that one or both of these castles had to be stopped. Saladin would only rest, he said, when ‘[Muslim] pilgrims would be able to travel happily to the holy place of Jacobas they did in the past’. For that to happen, Jacob’s Ford had to be erased from the earth, ‘as one effaces letters from a parchment’.[5]

Saladin knew this would be a big undertaking. Two years earlier, in 1177, a crusader army had defeated him in battle in a place called Montgisard.[‡] So he tried diplomacy. In May 1179 he brought up a small detachment of troops to the construction site, then sent word to the Templars that he wished to buy the castle from them, and would pay up to 100,000 dinars for it.[6] He would then decide whether to hold the fortress for himself or knock

it down. Unsurprisingly the offer was rebuffed. To try and press his point, Saladin had his troops harass the building site. This backfired, when one of the knights guarding Jacob's Ford shot and killed a senior emir with a bow and arrow. Saladin called his men off. Now he knew: the only way to take Jacob's Ford would be to return with overwhelming military force.

By the summer of 1179, with Saladin having retreated, the builders at Jacob's Ford were still busy at work. Their blueprint for the fortress was a popular one in the late twelfth-century crusader kingdom. The castle's main structures were to be two sets of concentric 'curtain' walls, with towers and halls built into them; the spaces within and between the walls formed an inner and outer courtyard. A moat was to run around everything. The first curtain wall, already complete, was the inner one. So there was much more work to be done, and every day carts moved busily around the site, while engineers pondered technical questions and hundreds of labourers grunted under the blazing sun.

On August 24th, Saladin reappeared. This time he brought a huge army, containing thousands of troops summoned from Syria and Egypt. They brought catapults and siege engines, and as they neared Jacob's Ford they cut timber and wove grape vines to make screens to block them from arrowshot. Saladin was flexible in his approach – but he was determined to win. 'Let us taste how [the Christians] fight,' he said. 'If we find them weak, all well and good; if otherwise, there is the option of setting up the trebuchets.'[7] As it turned out, the trebuchets – great stone-hurling machines of war – were not needed.

When Saladin gave the order to attack, his men headed for a small temporary fort that had been set up by the Templars near the main castle-site. The rush was led by an ordinary soldier in the Muslim army – 'one of the common people in a ragged shirt' – who raced to the top of the fort as his comrades overpowered the defenders.[8] When the fort fell, all the Christians retreated behind the completed wall of the main castle, locked the gates and sent riders south to Jerusalem to alert King Baldwin that they were in trouble and needed urgent relief.

For a few days there was a stalemate. The wall of the main castle was a considerable barricade: Muslim chroniclers' estimates of its thickness ranged from three metres to seven. Behind it were hundreds of armed men, more than capable of beating back attempts to scale the wall. Yet Saladin had come prepared for this, and he decided that the best approach was to

bring the wall down. To that end he tasked a team of Syrian miners with digging a tunnel under the wall. Their job was an age-old one: they were to excavate a shaft, propped up with wooden struts, then set the struts on fire, so that the mine, and – ideally – the wall above it, would collapse.

Unfortunately for Saladin, this was easier said than done. The first shaft his miners dug burned for two days but did no damage. ‘Saladin ordered the fire. . . to be extinguished,’ wrote the chronicler Ibn al-Athir. ‘Then the sappers started mining again and broke [further] into the wall.’ This time it worked. ‘They fired the mine and the wall fell.’[9] The main line of crusader resistance was broken.

Even at this point, the crusaders remained hopeful that King Baldwin would arrive from Jerusalem with a relieving army. But Baldwin fell agonisingly short. When the castle wall fell, the king and his troops were just several hours’ ride away near Tiberias. They were too late. Saladin commanded his men to rush the breach they had created in the castle wall, and let them run wild.

In the twenty-first century an archaeological dig on the site of Jacob’s Ford gave a chilling snapshot of what happened on August 29th 1179. Researchers uncovered an 800-year-old building site still scattered with abandoned barrows and shovels, arrows and the butchered remains of the fallen. Skeletons recovered from below a layer of ash from a burned building had armour-piercing arrowheads lodged in their spines, blade wounds to their limbs, heads split open and arms hacked off.[10] Some of those who did not succumb to battle-wounds would have choked or burned to death in the blaze that spread from Saladin’s mine-shaft to the castle’s buildings; the thick smoke that rose from Jacob’s Ford was visible miles away at Tiberias, where Baldwin’s army could only watch in stricken horror.

In the aftermath of the victory at Jacob’s Ford, Saladin’s army took captives and looted the site. Christians were sold into slavery in the markets of Damascus. Muslim workers who had converted to Christianity were thought fit for nothing but death. The plunder included enough armour to kit out 1,000 soldiers, along with donkeys, oxen and other beasts of burden. And after everything valuable was removed, Saladin did as he had promised all along. He ordered his troops to pull the half-built castle to the ground. They destroyed in one week what it had taken the crusaders almost a year to build. The only blight on Saladin’s campaign of erasure came when his men

threw a few crusader corpses down a well and spread deadly disease around their own army.

For the Muslims of the Holy Land the destruction of the castle at Jacob's Ford was a triumph. It hampered the Christians' control of a vital trade road. It revenged Saladin's defeat at Montgisard. And it began what became a pivotal phase in the history of the crusades. Within a decade, Saladin's armies had swept through the rest of the Christian lands. In July 1187 they crushed a huge crusader army in battle on an extinct volcano known as the Horns of Hattin. Three months later Jerusalem fell to a Muslim siege, never to be properly regained.[§] By the second half of the thirteenth century, the crusader states that had once been full feudal lordships modelled on the kingdoms and principalities of Europe had shrunk to a network of castles and fortified towns commanding the small patches of land in their orbit.

Exactly what the crusades were, how they began and what they achieved is a huge historical subject, which touches on the political, military, economic, cultural and religious histories of the Middle Ages. But one useful way to look at it is through the castles the crusaders built: from defensive towers overlooking commercial ports, to fortifications protecting sacred sites, to colossal military compounds such as the Syrian hilltop fortress of Krak des Chevaliers or the Templars' amphibious base of Chateau Pèlerin ('Atlit), a spot still in use by the Israeli military today. And while an important part of this story concerns the crusader castles once held by Latin-speaking Christians in the near east, there were also magnificent crusader fortifications in the kingdoms of Reconquista Spain and Portugal, on Rhodes and Malta, and in the former pagan lands of the Baltic shore. In all these places, concepts of Christian faith, political power and military might combined in a single architectural form: the crusader castle.



The traditional place to locate the start of the crusades is the French town of Clermont, on November 27th 1095. There, on that day, Pope Urban II stood before a mixed crowd of knights, churchmen and ordinary laypeople, and preached one of the most famous – and notorious – sermons in history. In the east, Urban said, an infidel race 'despicable, degenerate and enslaved by demons' had risen up and attacked Christian territories in Anatolia, cutting a path all the way to the gates of the ancient Roman capital of

Constantinople.[11] The Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos had written to Urban, begging western military assistance.[#] The pope had decided to give it to him. Urban called on all able-bodied Christian warriors to take up arms and march together to the east. There they would relieve Constantinople from the 'barbarians', before going on to liberate Jerusalem, where Christ's Sepulchre lay under the control of Muslims. 'The royal city at the centre of the world begs and craves to be free,' Urban declaimed. The crowd, whipped into a frenzy of excitement, yelled their approval. They cried: 'Deus vult! Deus vult!' (*God wills it! God wills it!*).[12]

Urban's call to arms met with a fevered response. His words were spread around western Europe by charismatic crusade preachers, who reported that the pope had offered forgiveness of earthly sins to everyone who made the crusader vows and wore the sign of the cross on their clothes. In 1096, tens of thousands of warriors and pilgrims – Norman, French, Flemish, English, German, Sicilian – set out in waves from western Europe and marched overland to the gates of Constantinople. When the crusaders arrived before the Theodosian Walls – that vast, impregnable double circuit of towers, ditches and ramparts that had shielded the landward side of the city since the fifth century CE – they presented a violent, unruly rabble. The emperor Alexios, realising he should have been careful what he wished for, hustled the crusaders through his capital city to the Asian side of the Bosphorus, and pointed them in the direction of his enemies: the Seljuk Turks of Anatolia.

The march of the first crusaders from Constantinople to Jerusalem was so wildly successful that when writers looked back on it they could only assume that it was a miracle. Between 1097 and 1098 they marched across Anatolia, destroying Turkish armies in battle, then continued down the Levantine coast, besieging fortified cities such as Antioch and Edessa before arriving at Jerusalem in the summer of 1099. After a two-month siege, they breached Jerusalem's walls and put the city to the sword. Contemporaries described the massacre in apocalyptic terms that echoed the Book of Revelation. 'Some of the pagans were mercifully beheaded, others, pierced by arrows, plunged from towers, and yet others, tortured for a long time, were burned to death in searing flames,' wrote a chronicler called Raymond of Aguilers.[13] Others wrote of horses riding in blood up to their bridles. When the news of Jerusalem's fall reached the court of the caliph in

Baghdad, there was widespread shock and public mourning. The western Christians whom Muslims referred to generically as *ifranj* – the Franks – had struck a blow which would take nearly two centuries to avenge.

For the Franks themselves, the First Crusade was a pivotal historical moment. But it posed more questions than it answered. Jerusalem, the city of Christ's ministry and Passion, had been taken, and in the years that followed, a series of commercially valuable cities would follow. Four crusader states – the kingdom of Jerusalem, principality of Antioch, county of Tripoli and county of Edessa – were established along the feudal model of the Latin-speaking west. But now they all had to be maintained. That required a constant flow of people, money and military expertise from the west to the east. It also demanded the urgent establishment of a network of castles.

The first crusader castles to be built in the Holy Land were designed specifically to further the needs of conquest. Coastal cities such as Tyre, Sidon and Acre were heavily fortified and could only be taken into Christian hands after sieges that lasted months or even years. Many of these sieges were such drawn-out operations that the crusaders built new siege towers, or adapted existing stone fortresses at strategic points around their target cities.

A typical example of this kind of castle is the citadel of Tripoli in Lebanon, known as the castle of Mont Pèlerin (the Mount of the Pilgrims). A fortification had been built there in the seventh century CE, two years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, when Arab armies were rampant throughout the Middle East and north Africa. In 1102–03, when the famous crusader Raymond IV of Saint-Gilles began a seven-year military campaign to capture Tripoli from its Muslim rulers, he took over the old Arab fortress, enlarging it and turning it into a checkpoint which cut off the city from inland supply routes.[14] By the time Tripoli fell, Raymond was dead, but his fortress became a permanent guard-post. Adapted and remodelled over the years, it outlived the crusader era entirely; indeed, the castle still stands today, in the centre of Tripoli, though its structure owes much more to Ottoman-era reconstruction than its original crusader design.

This approach to castle-building – adaptive, pragmatic and almost entirely driven by military exigency – continued throughout the early decades of the crusader kingdom. The chronicler William, archbishop of Tyre, explained the purpose of a castle built in Gaza, close to the city of

Ascalon, which was bitterly contested between the crusader kingdom and Egypt. In one sense, wrote William, the castle at Gaza blocked Muslim raids launched out of Ascalon: it was a pillar of crusader border defence. Yet 'from this direction also repeated attacks against that city [i.e. Ascalon] could be made and aggressive warfare carried on without ceasing,' noted William.[15] The fortress at Gaza looked in two directions at once: simultaneously defensive and aggressive.

As time went on, however, and the crusader states became more established entities, crusader castles started to become more than just functional military checkpoints, siege towers or garrisons. The French, German and Flemish crusaders who arrived after 1099, along with the Normans from Normandy, England and Sicily, regarded castles as expressions of prestige and lordly magnificence; in the Holy Land many saw the opportunity to bring this approach east. ('Those who were poor in the Occident, God makes rich in this land,' wrote the chronicler Fulcher of Chartres. 'Those who did not have a villa [at home] possess here by the gift of God a city.')[16]

Yet the castles built in the crusader states were not simply European fortifications transplanted to the east. Those who settled in the new lands were also susceptible to its existing ways. Fulcher of Chartres explained: 'We who were Occidentals have become Orientals,' he wrote. 'He who was a Roman or a Frank has in this land been made into a Galilean or a Palestinian. . . We have already forgotten the places of our birth'.[17] In language, dress and social custom a distinctive crusader culture, which consciously blended elements of east and west, began to emerge.[18] And this cultural identity found architectural form in the castle.

In western Europe early twelfth-century castles still largely followed the Norman plan: a central tower (or keep), often raised on an artificial mound (the motte), was surrounded by a perimeter fence or wall which enclosed a yard with outbuildings known as the bailey. In the east, crusader settlers retained the idea of the keep, but gave the outer defences a bold new twist. The traditional style of fortification before the crusaders arrived tended towards the Roman model of the *castrum*: a square or rectangular stone wall with a tower on each corner and a gatehouse. Into these walls were built 'barrel-vaulted' halls and chambers – rooms with curved, tunnel-like ceilings.

The new crusader castles of the twelfth century combined these two forms: they featured a stone keep, but this was now enclosed with a *castrum*-style wall which incorporated further rooms. Around this a second wall might be built, to form another 'outer' bailey. And in some cases – such as the castles built at Caesarea and Kerak – yet another line of defences would then be built to protect a village or clutch of farmsteads. This was known as a *faubourg*.[19] Over time, these developed into towns, and what had begun as a castle was now an urban citadel.

Robustly built, smartly located, and occupied by warlike Christian settlers, a twelfth-century crusader castle was a military obstacle and a boast of colonial mastery and religious victory. Unsurprisingly they were detestable to those outside the caste of colonising aristocrats. In the 1140s, during the reign of King Fulk of Jerusalem, a massive fortress known as Kerak was built to dominate the key trade route through a region known as the Transjordan. An Egyptian civil servant wrote: 'It is the anguish that grips the throat, the dust that obscures eyesight, the obstacle that strangles hope and waits in ambush to half courageous resolutions. It is the wolf that fortune has posted in the valley.'[20] Kerak was an eyesore and a blasphemous insult, which deserved to be razed to the ground. And it was far from the only one.

So this was the background to events at Jacob's Ford in 1179, when the biggest castle the crusaders had planned to date was underway. The crusaders had now been fortifying the Holy Land for nearly a century, and there was a gathering feeling among their enemies that something ought to be done – if only there was a leader who could unite the Muslims for long enough to do it.

Then along came Saladin. No single figure did more to transform the history of the crusader kingdom in the twelfth century, and it is to the sultan's conquests in the 1170s and 1180s that we owe the next, dramatic phase in the history of crusader castle-building.

When the dust settled over the battlefield on the Horns of Hattin on July 4th 1187, Saladin's jubilant armies led their broken prisoners away in long lines. As the defeated Christian knights shuffled off in their chains they knew what fates awaited them. The most valuable men – like King Guy of

Jerusalem, who had led the army in battle – would be ransomed at ruinous cost. Lesser men would be sold into slavery. Then, there was a third, special category, of knights whom Saladin considered too dangerous to be allowed to live. These were the members of the military orders: the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller. These were the elite troops of Christian armies in the east: highly trained warriors, who lived according to a harsh, monastic-style rule, under which they dedicated their every thought and deed to the defence of the crusader kingdom. The Templars and Hospitallers had fought fiercely at Hattin. They could not be let loose to fight another day.

Not long after Hattin, Saladin assembled more than 200 members of the military orders who had been captured. He lined them up and allowed members of his clerical and religious entourage to behead them. A Templar called Terricus, who had managed to escape the battle (breaking a Templar code which demanded that even in a losing cause each brother fight to the death) reflected on the dreadful blow Saladin had dealt the order. 'Alas, it is impossible,' he wrote, 'to recount the numerous huge calamities that the wrath of God has allowed us to suffer because of our sins.'[21]

Yet despite the devastating losses Saladin inflicted in 1187 and the years that followed, he did not succeed in wiping out either the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem or the military orders that served as its hardest line of defence. From 1189, European armies began to arrive on the Third Crusade, commanded from 1191 by Richard I 'the Lionheart', king of England. Under Richard, the crusaders took back some of what they had lost, although they drew up short of retaking the Holy City itself. Still, within eighteen months, Saladin accepted that he had met his match. A peace treaty ended hostilities, leaving the kingdom of Jerusalem (along with the principality of Antioch and county of Tripoli)[ʃ] as a going concern. This reconstituted kingdom consisted of a shrunken coastal littoral with its capital in Acre, in which wealthy trading ports dominated by foreign merchants were fed by outlying agricultural estates. Responsibility for its security was to fall chiefly on the military orders: Templars, Hospitallers and a new Germanic order set up in the 1190s, known as the Teutonic Knights. They would oversee the kingdom from their castles.

The greatest and most enduring crusader castles of the thirteenth century were the super-fortresses built by the military orders. The Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights all commissioned colossal, technically cutting-edge structures capable of garrisoning hundreds, even thousands, of

knights, infantry, horses and support staff. These typically stood at strategic positions, usually overlooking roads, mountain passes or sea routes. They were funded by the huge networks of patrons and donors the military orders cultivated, and from the profits of their monastic-style ‘commanderies’ (or ‘preceptories’) which managed agricultural estates in western Europe. Charitable giving to the military orders was the bedrock of their enormous institutional wealth, for it represented a way for people who could not (or would not) travel to the Holy Land to fight in the crusades to gain access to the spiritual privileges of the cause, including forgiveness for sins. Paying for the stones laid in a castle wall was a form of penitence second only to laying them in person, and giving money to the military orders was a fashionable way to insure one’s soul against eternal damnation. Seen in this light, crusader castles were the perfect fusion of military purpose and Christian devotion: the end-product of a hustle we might term the ‘military-spiritual complex’.

Perhaps the most famous crusader castle of the thirteenth-century type was the fortress of Krak des Chevaliers, which stood – and still stands – on a plateau some 2,000 feet above the Homs Gap, in Syria. Through the plain below the castle ran the trade road connecting Tripoli with the Muslim-ruled city of Homs. The Hospitallers were not the first people to look at this location and see prime castle-building potential: it had been developed as early as 1031, when a Syrian emir had it fortified by a Kurdish militia, from which it gained the name *Hisn al-Akrad* (Castle of the Kurds). The Hospitallers took over the site since the 1140s, building a ‘courtyard’ or ‘enclosure’ castle in which a thick wall incorporated a number of towers containing chambers and halls. When Saladin swept through the crusader states in the 1180s, he captured Hospitaller castles at Belmont, Belvoir and Bethgibelin. But Krak des Chevaliers proved beyond the sultan’s reach.[22] And in the rebuilding programme that followed the Third Crusade it rose mightier than ever.

Krak des Chevaliers 2.0 was truly state of the art. To its existing defences the Hospitallers added a second huge circuit of walls, which enclosed the original structure, and massively expanded its footprint. The new walls were nine metres high and studded with round towers, fitted with the latest defensive features. Arrow slits allowed archers and crossbowmen to shoot outwards without the risk of being hit. Crenellations – the distinctive stone teeth that feature on every child’s drawing of a castle – gave cover to

defenders on the tops of the walls. Machicolations – small projecting stone boxes, placed high in the walls – served both as sniper positions and vantage points from which to drop boiling liquids, burning objects or heavy rocks on unwelcome visitors.

After its redevelopment Krak des Chevaliers covered seven and a half acres and was large enough to house a permanent staff of sixty Hospitaller knights, along with 2,000 men under their command. Just to accommodate the basic needs of so many people required massive kitchens with industrial-size brick-built ovens, stable blocks, storehouses for grain and other commodities, and sophisticated drainage. Recent studies at Krak des Chevaliers have shown that the order commissioned a complete water management system constructed from lead and ceramic pipes. Cisterns, rainwater tanks and natural springs supplied drinking, washing, cooking and bathing water; waste-water from these activities was used to flush latrines installed all over the castle; sewers finally took this filthy water away.[23]

This was in effect a self-contained military town, and the manpower the Hospitallers could project from within its huge walls allowed them to dominate the area for decades. Not only did they control the Tripoli–Homs trade road; they also extracted tribute payments from the emir of nearby Hama and the Ismaeli sect of mystic terrorists known as the Assassins, who lived in fortresses of their own in the Syrian mountains.[24] Visitors to the crusader kingdom could scarcely believe what they saw. When Andrew II, king of Hungary, arrived in 1218 he described Krak des Chevaliers as ‘the key to the Christian lands’, and agreed to support the Hospitallers’ work with a grant of 100 marks per year.

These sorts of contributions were very welcome, for as well as Krak des Chevaliers, the Hospitallers had a portfolio of other castles on comparable scale, including their palatial urban fortress at Acre and a giant black basalt castle at Margat (near Banyas, in Syria). And Andrew also benefitted from the arrangement. By donating to the Order, the Hungarian king was creating a symbolic and spiritual link between his own realm and that of the crusaders. This sort of mutually beneficial relationship was the key to the Hospitallers’ success, and the reason that they, the Templars and the Teutonic Knights could build at such scale during the thirteenth century. Their castles were at the cutting edge of fortification design and technology, in a place where military buildings also served a pious purpose. During Krak des Chevaliers’ heyday, its occupants seemed to have worried that the

greatest threat to their local supremacy would come from hubris. A Latin verse scratched into one of the walls of the knights' hall in the heart of the castle summed it up: 'Have richness, have wisdom, have beauty, but beware of pride, which spoils all it touches.'[25]



When Andrew II of Hungary visited the Holy Land in 1218, he came as a participant in the Fifth Crusade: an ill-fated expedition in which crusaders from east and west joined forces to attack the city of Damietta in the Nile Delta. In the course of his travels, Andrew would have seen another castle being built by the military orders. This was known as Chateau Pèlerin (Castle Pilgrim) and Castrum filii Dei (the Castle of God's Son), and it was built by the Knights Templar to a specification every bit as advanced as Krak des Chevaliers.

Chateau Pèlerin was located on a rocky spit jutting into the sea at 'Atlit, roughly halfway between Haifa and Caesarea, on what is now the coast of Israel. The Templars had manned one castle near this spot before, named Le Destroit. That, however, was a roadside watchtower on the twelfth century model. Chateau Pèlerin was a fortress for the ages. It had a port at which large ships could dock. A deep ditch controlled access to its peninsula, and its massive inner and outer defences were constructed in part with blocks scavenged from an ancient Phoenician wall. Within them lay a round church, a dining hall big enough to host up to 4,000 soldiers, and staircases wide enough that a knight on horseback could ride around the castle without dismounting, if he chose to. Dungeons were installed to hold prisoners of war taken by the Templars, and brothers who broke the order's strict code of conduct. (The Templars' rule-book contained cautionary tales of the punishments handed down to members of the order who had been caught fighting, dressing in civilian clothes, canoodling, or even committing murder.)[26] Outside the castle, on the mainland, lay a *faubourg*, for labourers who worked the local farmland, fisheries, woods, vineyards and orchards.[27] By the end of the thirteenth century, this was a substantial enough town to require a cemetery containing thousands of dead.

Two things were especially notable about Chateau Pèlerin, besides its size and technological sophistication. The first was its name. As we have

already seen, it was not unknown for crusader castles to be named in tribute to pilgrims – Mont Pèlerin outside Tripoli had set a precedent. But the Templar fortress at ’Atlit was so called because pilgrims arriving for the Fifth Crusade undertook much of the construction. What was more, once it had been built, its church was invested with the body of St Euphemia: a young Christian martyred by the Romans in 303 CE for refusing to give up either her faith or her virginity.[Ω] This relic was said to have been responsible for several miracles among the pilgrims who came to visit Chateau Pèlerin, and in guidebooks compiled for visitors to the Holy Lands during the thirteenth century the castle was named as a stopping point well worth a visit.

The second point of note about Chateau Pèlerin was that – like St Euphemia – it really was impregnable, as was tested in extremis once the reconstructed kingdom of Jerusalem came under renewed attack in the second half of the thirteenth century. In 1250 in Cairo Saladin’s dynastic successors (the Ayyubids) were brutally overthrown in a palace coup by a caste of enslaved soldiers known as the Mamluks. Once they had consolidated power, Mamluk sultans marched their armies out of Egypt into the Levant, altering the whole political dynamic of the crusader kingdom. In the 1260s the sultan Baybars attacked crusader cities and castles, and one by one, they fell beneath his sword. Haifa and Caesarea surrendered in 1265. Antioch followed in 1268. In 1271 the Hospitallers lost Krak des Chevaliers after a month-long siege. In 1289 the county of Tripoli fell to Mamluk armies, and the game was nearly up. By 1291 only Acre remained, and that spring the crusaders made a last stand there. The city was evacuated and finally overrun on May 18th. The survivors took ship for the Christian island of Cyprus, leaving just one bastion of crusader military power on the mainland. That was Chateau Pèlerin.

Earlier in the century, when Chateau Pèlerin was under construction, Saladin’s nephew al-Muazzam (known to the crusaders as ‘Coradin’) had tried and failed to take the fortress; notwithstanding the Mamluks’ success at Krak des Chevaliers and elsewhere, the task looked just as impossible in 1291. Chateau Pèlerin had stood firm, and increasingly alone, while the rest of the crusader kingdom collapsed around it. But after the calamity of Acre’s fall, the Templar garrison concluded there was little point holding a castle which no longer served a viable kingdom. They evacuated their last men by ship in the summer of that year and never went back. From this

point, the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem was a titular state in exile on Cyprus.

When Chateau Pèlerin was abandoned, a contemporary Muslim writer gloated about the completeness of the Mamluks' triumph. 'The sultan enjoyed a felicity that had fallen to no other – the conquest of these great and well-fortified settlements without fighting or trouble,' he wrote. 'He commanded that they were utterly destroyed. By these conquests all the coastlands were brought back to Islam. . .'[28] The latter part of this statement was true. But the notion that all crusader fortifications went the way of Jacob's Ford, flattened back in Saladin's time, was only partially accurate. In fact, as we shall see, many crusader castles still stand today, some in remarkably good condition, considering the instability of the region over the centuries.

What was undeniable, however, was that after 1291 the Holy Land was no longer under Christian command, and that any attempt to win it back would have to take the form of a new expeditionary conquest. This was a significant blow to Christendom's collective prestige. But it did not mean that crusading ended in 1291, nor that the age of the crusader castle was over. In fact, in the two centuries since Urban II had preached his sermon at Clermont, several other theatres of crusading had emerged: some in lands where Christian rulers shared borders with non-believers, and some within the Christian world itself. We cannot leave the subject of crusader castles without taking a view of these, for it is in these secondary crusading realms that some of the most extraordinary castles of the Middle Ages were constructed.



A few weeks before Christmas 1308, Raymond of Guardia, acting master of the Knights Templar in the Spanish kingdom of Aragon, dictated a letter to the king, James II. His situation was dire. For some months, Raymond and around 200 other Templars had barricaded themselves in Miravet, a large castle which sat on a steep limestone spur above the river Ebro, heavily defended and, thanks to the river and the soaring, rocky terrain, almost inaccessible. The castle had been built during the Reconquista: the wars between Christian kings of northern Iberia and the Muslim powers of the

south that predated the crusades to Jerusalem and would rage long beyond them.

The Templars who were garrisoned at Miravet had been deeply involved in these wars: ‘Know well,’ Raymond reminded King James, ‘that when the Saracens come against your realm or your lordship, the brothers of the Temple are the first in the defence of your realm and of the faith of Our Lord.’[29] But now James had turned against them. Across Christendom the Templars stood accused of grotesque crimes – heresy, blasphemy, sodomy and sorcery – cooked up by the French king Philip IV. Every Christian ruler had been commanded by the pope to arrest all the Templars in their territories, impound their property and await further instruction. Although King James doubted the truth of these allegations – rightly, for they were almost entirely baseless – he had to do his duty.[30]

That was why the Aragonese Templars had retreated to Miravet – and others of their network of castles on Aragon’s frontiers. They were not under attack by the Muslims of Granada in southern Iberia – even though they had recently raided the emir of Granada’s lands. Miravet, was being threatened by their own side. In his letter, Raymond tried his best to help King James understand how unjust and absurd this was – and indeed, how damaging to the day-to-day life of ordinary Christians in Aragon. Miravet Castle was a working monument to Christian victories over Islam on the European mainland. It was a keystone in Aragon’s territorial security. The poor came regularly to receive charitable handouts: ‘no brothers of the Temple, nor of the Hospital, nor of any religious order that we have encountered overseas, give such great alms as the brothers who are of your land give,’ said Raymond, noting that during a recent famine the Templar fortress at Gardeny had fed 22,000 people, while their castle at Monzón had fed 6,000. The logic – or illogic – of the situation seemed plain. ‘If all the men in the world should fail us, you ought to sustain us.’[31]

But when James replied to Raymond, he was terse and noncommittal. ‘In many matters the Templars have served our forebears and us well,’ he shrugged. ‘In what we now do against you and the others, we do that which a Catholic prince ought to do.’[32] There was a further exchange of letters: Raymond continued to argue that the Templars were being unfairly maligned and James reserved his right to differ. In the meantime, James deployed enough royal troops to cut off food supplies to Miravet, Monzón

and the other Templar castles that were held against him. This was a slow and painful operation. But eventually, one by one, the Templars were starved into submission. Raymond and the Templars of Miravet finally opened their gates in November 1308. The even more massive and well-equipped castle at Monzón gave up in May 1309.[33]

By that stage, legal proceedings against the Templars across Christendom were at an advanced stage, and there were few if any fortresses holding out against the combined pressure of papal condemnation and secular assault. In 1312, Pope Clement V, the spineless pontiff who had initiated proceedings against the Order for the convenience of King Philip, formally abolished the Templars at a Church council. Two years later their last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, was burned at the stake. After that the order was permanently defunct and many of its members either dead or broken by years of persecution and torture.

The destruction of the Knights Templar created a moment of crisis – and profound rearrangement for the rest of the military orders. But it was not the end for crusader castles. In fact, just as had happened in 1187 when Saladin had stormed Jerusalem, a reckoning produced a revolution. Out of the miserable end of the Templars came a new approach to crusader fortification, which would last until the days of Napoleon Bonaparte in the late eighteenth century.

From the fourteenth century onward there were three principal theatres of crusading, and each developed its own style of fortification. The first was Spain and Portugal, where there remained an active military frontier between Christian kingdoms and the Islamic emirate of Granada until the end of the fifteenth century.[≈] Here, Templar fortresses confiscated when the order was wound up were redistributed to a new set of military orders. In Aragon, castles including Miravet, Monzón and Gardeny, along with many others, were initially taken into the hands of the crown. Miravet and Monzón remained crown possessions for centuries, while Gardeny was granted to the Hospitallers. But many others were granted to a new institution created to fill the void the Templars had left: the Order of Montesa.

A comparable process occurred in the nearby kingdoms of Castile-León and Portugal. In Castile-León the chief recipients of Templar castles were the orders of Calatrava and Santiago, both of which had been founded in the twelfth century but had remained essentially local enterprises. In Portugal,

the Templars' headquarters at Tomar centred on a round church, built in imitation of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and fortified with crenellations: the complete fusion of the religious and military impulses produced by the crusades. This now became the base for the newly instituted Knights of the Order of Christ.

The second great theatre of crusading after 1291 was in the eastern and central Mediterranean. Here, as we have seen, the kingdom of Jerusalem retreated to Cyprus following the Mamluk reconquest of the Levantine mainland. But Cyprus did not remain the beating heart of crusader fortification for very long. As the Templars of Cyprus were being rounded up in 1309, the Hospitallers were nearing the end of a long campaign to conquer the nearby island of Rhodes, then under Byzantine rule. When Rhodes fell in 1310, it presented a timely opportunity: the Hospitallers could move to a secure base where they were subject to no king's authority, but could rule under their own sovereignty, answerable to no one but the pope.

In the decades that followed 1310 the Hospitallers transformed Rhodes town. The island had been fortified since days of the Greeks, when a vast bronze statue of the sun-god Helios – known as the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world – stood overlooking the entrance to its harbour.[∂] The Byzantines had added a fortress to the original walls, and now the Hospitallers added their own stamp. They took over the Byzantine citadel and expanded it to create a fortified inner compound within the walled town, which contained their living quarters, administrative buildings and their master's palace. This was the Collachium, and it spoke to both the military capability of the Hospitallers and their understandably heightened concern for their own security.[34]

As the Hospitallers developed their naval capabilities, effectively transforming themselves into the religious police of the eastern Mediterranean, they also developed the fortifications in Rhodes' harbour, adding a sea wall and a defensive chain, which they could raise in times of emergency to block access from the open sea. During the artillery revolution in the fifteenth century, the Hospitallers thickened their walls and added towers which were the responsibility of individual 'langues' – national groups within the order. When Rhodes was tested by an Ottoman siege in 1480, it held out; only when the Ottomon sultan Suleiman the Magnificent threw 100,000 troops at the island, outnumbering the defenders

by around fifteen to one, did the Hospitallers have to admit defeat and abandon the fortress island that had been their headquarters for more than two centuries. And even then the order kept faith in their blueprint for their holy mission: in the 1530s they moved to the impoverished, arid archipelago of Malta, which they turned into the most heavily defended place in the Mediterranean, with a network of castles surrounding the Grand Harbour, which came to be dominated by the fortified city of Valetta. Here the order remained for another two and a half centuries until the French, who had long ago set in train the destruction of the Templars, finally turned on the Hospitallers. In June 1798 a fleet under the orders of Napoleon Bonaparte seized Malta, expelling the master and the knights. French soldiers looted Malta's many beautiful churches, and a number of the order's prized relics were lost when the French ship on which they had been removed from the island was blown up by the British.

All of this left just one further crusading theatre: quite different in character and climate from either Reconquista Iberia or the islands of the Mediterranean. That was the Baltic, where crusades had been launched against the pagans of that region since the 1140s, and where they would continue to be fought until the region had been finally Christianised in the fifteenth century. Here, the drivers of crusading – and castle-building – after the fall of Acre in 1291 were the third of the great military orders: the Order of Brothers of the German House of Saint Mary in Jerusalem, better known as the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights were founded in Acre during the Third Crusade, but in the Holy Land never achieved the fame, nor the architectural prominence, of the Templars or Hospitallers. Instead, they focused their fighting and fortification on Europe, where during the thirteenth century they were involved in conflicts in Hungary and the lands of Prussia and Livonia (modern Latvia and Estonia). From the middle of the century the Teutonic Knights were engaged on a grand mission to conquer and colonise the Baltic frontier in the name of Christ: a task that demanded a massive and systematic building programme arguably more challenging than anything the crusaders of the Holy Land ever faced. The knights destroyed pagan settlements and hillforts, sent out missionaries to convert pagans to Christianity, creating a network of towns connected by secure roads, imposed taxation and maintained a state stable and attractive enough to

encourage Christian settlers to move there from within the German states of the Holy Roman Empire.[35]

Achieving this could only be done by an extensive fortification programme, in which castles performed many roles at once. The standard Teutonic fortification was known as an *Ordensburg*, and it consisted of a fortified monastery, with storehouses, dormitories, stables, cloisters, administrative buildings and a chapel. *Ordensburgen* were built to a standard plan around a courtyard, usually from fired brick, since there was a lack of workable stone in the region to make fortresses comparable with those of Iberia or the Levant. They were defensive outposts built to resist the guerrilla attacks of pagan tribes. They served as supply centres for yearly campaigns (sometimes called Reisen), which attracted seasonal knightly participants from all over Christendom. And though they looked different from crusader fortresses like Chateau Pèlerin, Krak des Chevaliers or Monzón, they nevertheless served as a symbol of Christianisation, Germanic culture and crusader authority in a Teutonic settler state.

The greatest of all the Ordensburgen by far was the fortress of Malbork (Marienburg), which was begun on the banks of the Nogat river in the 1270s. Its earliest part, known as the Hochburg (‘high castle’), was a three-storey brick-built fortified monastery, fit for a permanent community of a few dozen knights. By the end of the century it was already the most sophisticated brick-built structure in the region. But this was only the beginning.

In 1309, as the papacy moved against the Knights Templar, the Teutonic Knights’ grand master, Siegfried von Feuchtwangen, took the pragmatic decision to move the order’s headquarters from Venice to Malbork, thereby transforming the castle into a de facto capital. Now a second castle – the Mittelsburg – was added to the first. Here were luxurious five-storeyed quarters fit for a head of state, a huge refectory that was one of the biggest great halls in Europe, a treasury and mint, and every appurtenance fitting to a state-of the-art government palace.

By the end of the fourteenth century, with the addition of the Vorburg, or outer castle, Malbork was effectively a fortress city, fifty acres in size, surrounded by a soaring curtain wall. It was also self-consciously and deliberately magnificent, from the fourteen-metre-high north gate fit for ceremonial parade entrances to the stunningly decorated Golden Gate that led into the chapel dedicated to St Mary, to the five bathhouses with steam

rooms, bathing tubs and toilets, as well as rooms where bath attendants could furnish visitors to the chilly northern lands with hot towels, and bleed them if they were feeling unwell.[36]

By the dawn of the fifteenth century, Malbork was at its zenith – unquestionably one of the greatest castles in Christendom, and the capital of a state which reached from Gdansk (Danzig) to modern Estonia. But in 1410 the Teutonic Order suffered a calamitous defeat to a Polish–Lithuanian army at the battle of Tannenberg. The Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen was killed and the order's field army effectively destroyed. This began a precipitous decline in fortunes for the order, and for the castle that had been the capital of its crusader state for a century. By the 1460s Malbork had been taken over by the Polish crown and converted into the royal residence for King Casimir IV. But in a sense, it had lost its original function long ago: since the turn of the century the Christianisation of the Baltic had been more or less complete; the Teutonic Knights had been so successful that there was precious little crusading left to do.[π]



On August 16th 1909 an Oxford University undergraduate called Thomas Edward Lawrence stood before the great edifice of Krak des Chevaliers with a notebook and camera, and admired what he saw.

Lawrence turned twenty-one years old that day, and there could have been no better way for him to celebrate. From his youth, he had been keenly interested in historical architecture and possessed by a need for meaningful adventures. At fifteen he and a friend had bicycled around southern England, visiting every parish church in three counties and taking rubbings of their tomb-brasses. During the subsequent three summers he had taken his bicycle to France, travelling thousands of miles to study, document and photograph French castles.

Now that he was an Oxford man with ambitions either to join the British Army or become an archaeologist, Lawrence had struck out even further: spending two months on a walking tour of Ottoman-ruled Syria, deepening his knowledge of crusader fortifications. His researches were to form the basis of a thesis, which he intended to submit in fulfilment of his degree. That thesis would, many years later, produce a book, entitled *Crusader*

Castles.[37] In it he elaborated a theory of two parallel types of crusader castle: those that followed a French model and those that owed more to Greek influence. Scholars have since rejected this argument, but no matter: Lawrence's phrases still ring with the deep admiration for the works the crusaders had left on the Syrian landscape.

He spent three days studying Krak des Chevaliers, and at the end concluded that it was 'perhaps the best preserved and most wholly admirable castle in the world.' Its defences were surpassed in technical craft by the great chivalric castles of Coucy, in France, and Caerphilly, in Wales, 'but it is more impressive than both since it is neither ruin nor showpiece. . . were Baybars to reappear he would think it as formidable as of old.'[38] In letters home Lawrence rhapsodised further: Krak was 'certainly the most picturesque [castle] I have seen – quite marvellous'. What he saw in this castle was what he considered the perfect synthesis of western architectural form in a foreign context. 'All the best of the Latin fortifications of the Middle Ages in the East was informed with the spirit of the architects of central and southern France.'[39]

In later life, Lawrence would become famous for developing his west-meets-east sensibility into a career and a full-blown cult of personality. During the First World War 'Lawrence of Arabia' was a key liaison, field operative and advisor providing British expertise to the leaders of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. He had a complex personal attitude towards the empire that had forged him and the Arab world whose values and desire for freedom he had come to embrace. It is not too farfetched to see this mindset as having its earliest genesis in his studies of crusader castles, where western military expertise was brought to bear on the deserts and valleys of the Middle East.

Nor was he the only person of his age to experience such a conflict – shaped at least in part by the memory of the crusades. That tension was explicitly felt in 1917, when, towards the end of war, the British general Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem to take possession of the city after its surrender by the Ottomans. British officials were acutely sensitive to the impression that would be given by Allenby's entry, during which he would pass through the city's Jaffa Gate, and past the Citadel known as David's Tower – a fortification that had been the subject of vicious fighting during the crusades. To avoid the appearances of neo-medieval triumphalism, Allenby walked rather than riding on horseback, while British official

statements about his arrival emphasised that he came to liberate and not to conquer; to safeguard religious plurality rather than to impose revived Christian rule.

Nevertheless, in the capitals of the Christian west, Jerusalem's 'fall' was reported in as jingoistic a fashion as could have been imagined. The *New York Times* reported that 'a new crusade, to recover the Holy Sepulchre and all that it materially and symbolically stands for [has been] conceived, put into execution, and carried out.'[40] *Punch* magazine ran a cartoon of Richard the Lionheart, looking down on the smouldering ruins of Jerusalem, declaring 'My dream comes true.' The bishop of London had spent much of the conflict declaiming from his pulpit that the First World War was a 'crusade to defend the weak from the strong'. Now it seemed his words had been borne out.

And perhaps it is not surprising that the memories of the crusades lived long – and live on – in a land where colossal monuments to the crusader era remain on the landscape in the form of castles. Indeed, some of the fortifications the crusaders built still find themselves pulled into military service. During the early stages of the Syrian civil war that lasted from 2011 to 2024, Krak des Chevaliers was taken over by anti-government rebels, who used it as a defensive position. In response, the Syrian government attacked the castle with artillery shells and air strikes. Columns and staircases were reduced to rubble, and the damage was compounded by a strong earthquake that struck Syria in 2023. At the time of writing, international tourism is trickling back into Syria, and Krak des Chevaliers' historic status has been recognised in its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. But its active service as a fortification lies well within living memory.

In time, Krak des Chevaliers may be restored to the condition it was in before the Syrian civil war. In the meantime, one of the best preserved crusader castles to be seen lies in Acre, in northern Israel, close to the Lebanese border. It is known as the Knights' Hall, though it was once called the Commandery of St John.

On the drive north to Acre, along the coast road from Tel Aviv, there are occasional glimpses of the remains of crusader castles: the Templars' amphibious base of Chateau Pèlerin, at 'Atlit, is just about visible, although the area is now reserved for the Israeli military, who have a naval base near the ruins of the old castle. But Acre is different. The surviving crusader

fortress there was once the property of the Hospitallers. Much of it survived Acre's fall to the Mamluks, and when the city came under the rule of the Ottomans in the sixteenth century, the substantial fabric of fortress was neglected and slowly buried beneath collapsed masonry, flood deposits and debris. It was built over during Ottoman rule of Acre, so that by the twentieth century the castle was obscured and forgotten.

Thanks to large-scale excavations in the twentieth century, however, Acre's Hospitaller fortress has begun to re-emerge, and in almost pristine condition. Courtyards, the refectory, kitchens, latrine blocks and store-rooms can today be explored as though the Hospitallers had only just abandoned them. The vaulted ceilings, vast halls, elegant pointed Gothic arches, courtyards and broad stone staircases are more or less exactly as the crusader warriors who built the place designed them. And the fortress is presented to tourists as a museum to crusading times. Large modern flags and wall hangings display the square cross pattée associated with the military orders. In the refectory hall, a whole wall is draped with a vivid red flag, bearing the heraldic leopards of England, which were once the symbol of Richard the Lionheart, leader of the Third Crusade.

In the twelfth century, Richard was a firm friend of the military orders, and when he led the siege of Acre and subsequent clashes with Saladin during that crusade he made good use of Hospitallers in his army. But his is also a controversial memory. During that same crusade, Richard gave a since-notorious order that nearly 3,000 Muslim prisoners of war be taken outside the city of Acre and massacred. That his flag has been rehung on the fortress walls, more than 800 years after the fact, in a land where religious tensions are forever bubbling close to the surface, is a reminder of Faulkner's old maxim about history – perhaps truer in crusader country than anywhere else: 'the past isn't dead. It isn't even past.'

* As related in the Qur'an (Surah 12.1–17). Joseph's brothers, jealous of their sibling, threw him down a well, then presented their father with a bloodstained shirt and said a wolf had devoured him.

† Baldwin IV, born 1161, became king of Jerusalem in 1174, when he was thirteen years old. He was a capable, thoughtful crusader king but his life was cruelly blighted by leprosy, which increasingly impaired him as a ruler. He died of his miserable condition in 1185.

‡ Possibly modern Gezer, near Ramla in central Israel.

§ Between 1228 and 1244 the crusaders shared power in Jerusalem, under a diplomatic agreement between the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen and the Egyptian

sultan al-Kamil. It was not the same.

It was, of course, not the first time Muslim armies had attacked Constantinople. See chapter 3.

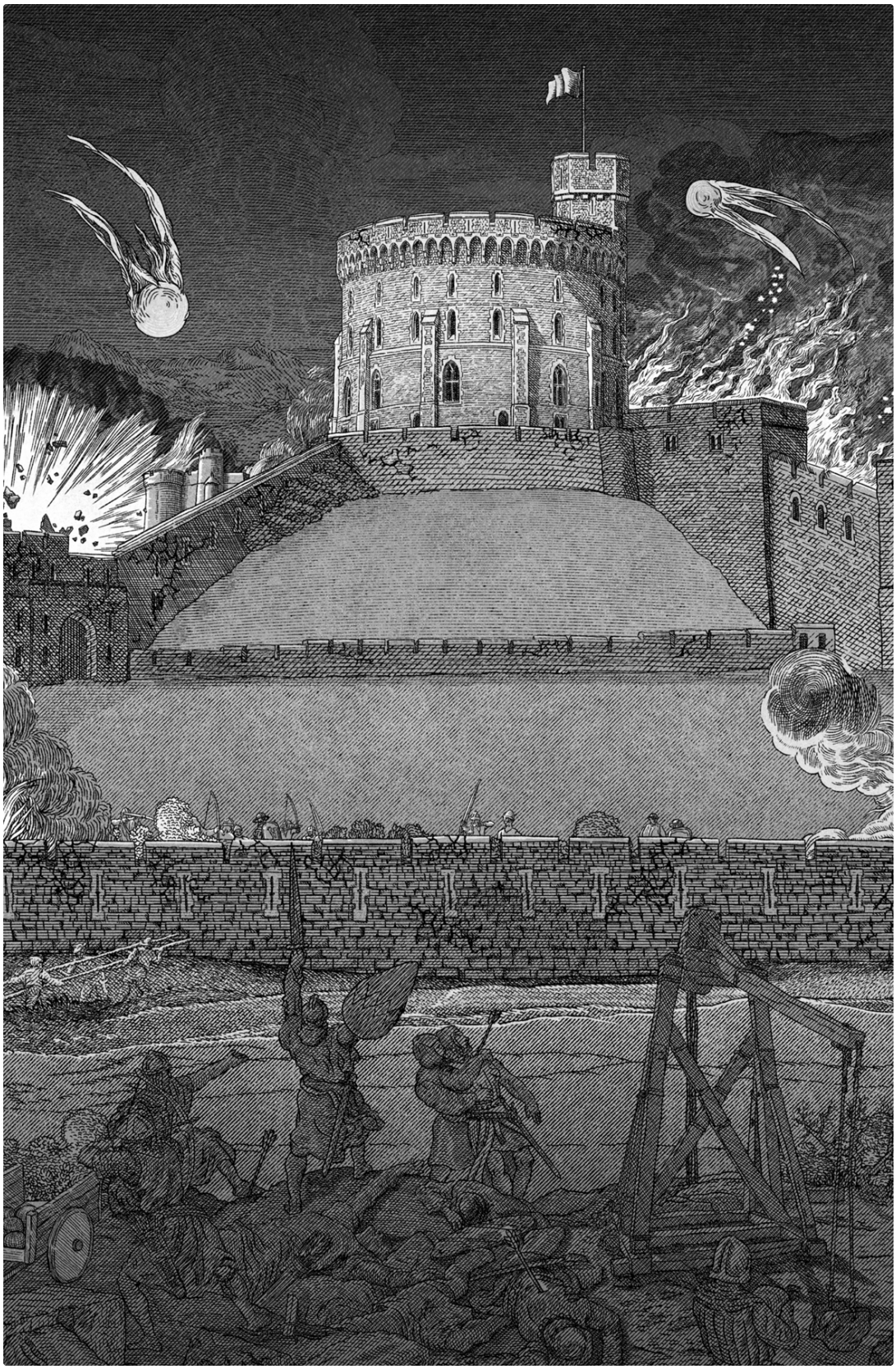
∫ The county of Edessa had been overrun in the 1140s by an earlier Muslim general, Imad al-Din Zengi, a psychopathic alcoholic who was eventually murdered by one of his own servants. The Second Crusade of 1147–49 had failed to win Edessa back.

Ω According to legend, St Euphemia was killed in Constantinople in 303 CE for refusing to make sacrifices to pagan gods. She survived being beaten up, burned on a wheel, hung up by her hair, starved, pressed beneath great stones, gang raped and even beheaded. When she was thrown to lions, the beasts lay down and let her sit on them. Anyone who tried to harm her was afflicted with violent illness, or worse. The soldier who eventually ran Euphemia through with his sword in the lion pit was himself then torn to death by wild animals. The judge who condemned the holy virgin to die went mad and ate himself.

≈ See chapter 3.

∂ The Colossus of Rhodes was built in 280 BCE and stood for a little over half a century before it fell down in an earthquake in 226 BCE. Respecting the gods' decision to cast the statue down, the archaic Rhodians did not rebuild it, but left it lying in the harbour. By the time the Hospitallers arrived, the Colossus was gone entirely, the bronze having apparently been removed for scrap by Arab invaders around 653 CE.

π Today Malbork is a magnificent castle, one of the most spectacular tourist sites in Europe. What stands, however, is substantially the product of restoration work begun in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1945 the castle was severely damaged during the advance of the Soviet Red Army into territory occupied by Nazi Germany. (During that advance around 1,800 inhabitants of the local town were killed, many murdered, and thrown in a mass grave discovered in 2009.) Subsequent damage was sustained during a fire in 1959. Rebuilding is still underway: in 2016 the castle's principal church was completed and opened to the public.



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7

CHIVALRIC CASTLES

Look, the hall our lord saw in his dream!

THE DREAM OF MACSEN WLEDIG,
THE MABINOGION

One day during the 1230s, in a writer's workshop near a church in the busy French market town of Provins, a poet sat before his stacks of parchment and copied out a tale. Guiot de Provins had been many places during his long life, and he had seen many marvellous things. As a young *trouvère*[*] he had wandered France entertaining kings, dukes and counts: men who prided themselves on their power and good taste. In the 1180s he had stayed at the shimmering court of the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa. The following decade he had gone to the Holy Land, where the armies of Christendom were fighting the sultan Saladin on the Third Crusade.[1] On returning to France he became a monk. There were many aspects of life in the cloisters that left Guiot cold, but it gave him time to write. So now he spent his hours transcribing stories, his neat, even handwriting arranged in columns adorned with illuminated letters, set on bright squares of blue, red and gold.[2]

Some of the stories Guiot wrote down were of his own devising, but on this particular day he was copying out one by a poet of the generation before his own, known as Chrétien de Troyes. It was the tale of Yvain, a Welsh prince and knight errant from the days of King Arthur, who was also known as the Knight of the Lion, since he was followed everywhere by a big, savage cat he had once rescued from a dragon. The lion was docile towards Yvain but would rip the guts out of anyone who threatened to do his master harm. Yvain was one of at least five Arthurian romances that Chrétien had composed, mining old Breton ballads and the pseudo-histories of writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth; the others Guiot collected were *Erec and Enide*, *Cligès*, *The Knight of the Cart* (a tale about Lancelot) and *The Story of the Grail* (led by Perceval). All were exciting, action-packed epics, featuring kings and sorcerers, warriors and damsels, magic forests and horrible monsters. Beneath pounding plotlines swirled a rich blend of ideas about faith, love, truth, virtue and power. The lifestyle and moral code they sought to capture could be summed up by one word: chivalry. It was a model of behaviour founded on strength in arms, bravery, loyalty, courtesy and respectful conduct – especially towards women – and enlivened by a dash of derring-do.

In *Yvain*, the concept of chivalry is explored through the hero's journey to a series of castles. Yvain begins his adventures by travelling to a magical fountain, guarded by a knight called Esclados the Red, who has previously humiliated one of Yvain's cousins. To avenge the insult, Yvain fights Escaldos, mortally wounds him, then chases him back to his nearby castle, where Esclados dies. Trapped in the castle, Yvain is saved from the righteous fury of Esclados' friends by a quick-thinking damsel called Lunete. He then falls in love with the dead knight's widow, Laudine, and Lunete arranges for them to meet and marry.[3]

For a time all is well, but soon Yvain is caught in a classic chivalric quandary. He has promised his friend Gawain that they will go off and fight in tournaments together, which means abandoning his new wife. Having secured from her a year's permission to travel around the world winning glory in combat, Yvain loses track of the months, and once the year is up, Laudine sends word that she now hates him: he is banished from her castle and will never see her again.

Yvain's journey to win back his wife in the Fountain Castle takes him on a series of character-proving trials, most of which involve fortifications. After rescuing his lion from the dragon, he must defeat a giant who has besieged a walled town, fight a judicial battle against three knights to save Lunete from being burned at the stake, and survive an ordeal in the Castle of Dire Adventure (*Pesme Aventure*), a sweatshop where poor maidens, 'their faces pale from the hunger and deprivation they had known', are forced to toil at needlework for a pittance.[4]

Having liberated the Castle of Dire Adventure and its shabby seamstresses by killing its guardians, a pair of demon knights, Yvain moves on to his final challenge at a last castle, where he must prove the right in a land dispute between two sisters by battling a brilliant knight who turns out to be none other than Gawain. Not recognising one another, Yvain and Gawain fight to a glorious, bloody standstill, whereupon King Arthur steps in and settles the case fairly. Yvain's honour is now restored and he is free to return to the Fountain Castle, where he persuades Laudine to forgive him. And so, concludes the story, 'my lord Yvain is reconciled, and you can be sure he had never before been so happy for anything.'[5]

In this tale, and others like it, the castle is a powerful motif. Yvain's quest begins and ends behind the Fountain Castle's fortified walls, and at each critical moment in Yvain's triumph, fall, recover and rehabilitation, a castle

is the stage for some materially important act in the plot. He is at his maddest and least chivalrous when he strays from castles, and at his best when he is near one. The castle is a stand-in for chivalry: its romantic stage and its proxy. Yet the castle is also, in a sense, a real thing. When Yvain chases Esclados and comes for the first time to the Fountain Castle, it is vividly rendered as a believable – if hostile – place:

> The gate was very high and wide, but had such a narrow entry-way that two men or two horses could not pass through together or meet one another. . . without crowding or difficulty; for it was built just like the trap that awaits the rat on its furtive scavenging: it had a blade poised above, ready to fall, strike and pin, and triggered to be released and to fall at the slightest touch. Similarly, beneath the gate were two fulcrums connected to a portcullis of sharp, cutting iron; if anything stepped on these devices, the portcullis overhead dropped and whoever was struck by the gate would be slashed entirely to pieces. And precisely in the middle, the passageway was as narrow as a forest trail.[6]

This was not a literal description of any known portcullis-guillotine system. But it was only one fantastical twist away from the truth; great medieval portcullises like those that survive today at the Tower of London and Hever Castle in England could easily be imagined into knight-killing booby traps.[†] And this entertaining exaggeration spoke to a deep truth about how medieval castles were understood by those who lived within their walls or beneath their shadows. Castles were military buildings – fitted with state-of-the-art defence technology. They could be luxurious residences, too. But besides this, they spoke to the shared imagination of the chivalrous world: they were temples to a group consciousness, expressing in stone, timber and metal the hopes, fears, ambitions and dreams of an entire social class.



As Guiot toiled in his scriptorium in Provins, copying out stories like *Yvain*, he could see a castle every time he stood up and walked outside to stretch his legs. Provins was the capital of the French county of Brie – and within the city walls there stood a large and impressive square-keeped fortress set on a motte, today known as César Tower. Built in the twelfth century, likely by the mighty Henry I, count of Champagne, it was instrumental to the administrative structure of the town and county beyond. Prisoners languished in its dungeons. Watchmen prowled the battlements. Provins

itself was a hub of commercial activity, which hosted trade fairs three times a year, and the sight of overworked labourers, or weary seamstresses with pin-hardened fingertips and grubby clothes, would have been quite normal. As Guiot wrote, he could have reflected that the Castle of Dire Adventure was hardly an impossible flight of poetic fantasy.

Yet Provins was not exceptional. By the early thirteenth century western Europe was peppered with castles just like it. They were built to guard their lords' lands, but also to manifest stories of those same lords' sense of self. Nowhere was this made plainer than at a castle that was built around 200 kilometres north-west of Provins, on the edge of Normandy. Its construction in the late 1190s was one of the era's bravura acts of castle-building – and a perfect illustration of what happened when chivalric self-assurance met soldierly intent. The castle was called Chateau Gaillard and its chief architect was a wandering warrior, who possessed a lion's spirit, if not the animal itself. He was Richard 'the Lionheart', king of England.

Richard was born on September 8th 1157, so was of the same generation as Guiot. (Given the course of their lives it is quite possible that their paths crossed.) As a young man he received an intensive training in the arts of warfare and lordly rule at the hands of his tempestuously married parents King Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. In his teens and twenties he fought wars against his father and brothers, proving himself the pre-eminent knightly warrior of his day. After he became king in 1189, he dramatically abandoned his kingdom to lead the armies of the Third Crusade, taking with him a sword reputed to be King Arthur's blade Excalibur.[‡] Having battled Saladin in the Holy Land, he returned to Europe, but was shipwrecked, then imprisoned in a remote German castle, in revenge for insulting another lord's honour. Having been kept imprisoned for months, thanks to the connivance of his dastardly brother John, Richard finally secured his release, forgave John, then set about reconquering all the lands he had lost during his absence.

Given the bare facts of his career, it is not surprising that Richard impressed writers of his time as a hero who appeared to have stepped off the pages of an Arthurian ballad. When he was locked in a cell in Trifels Castle – a mountaintop stronghold in the middle of a forest in what is today the Rhineland-Palatinate region of Germany – Richard composed a ballad lamenting his plight:

> No prisoner can state his case

> Rightly, unless it be sorrowfully;
> Yet for his own comfort he may make a song.
> I have many friends, but poor are the gifts they give.
> Shame will be on them if for my ransom
> I remain these two winters captive.[§]

This was pure Arthurian melancholy, and it captured Richard's spirit: that of a man who existed in a liminal space between life and legend. Later writers developed the story of his imprisonment: his location had been a mystery until a wandering minstrel heard him singing; a lion had been thrown into his cell to kill him but Richard ripped its heart out and ate it with salt. This was pure myth – but myth had an important place in medieval politics. Richard cultivated a reputation, and played up to it when it suited him. This was the philosophy behind Chateau Gaillard.

The point of Chateau Gaillard was, ostensibly, strategic. Besides being king of England, Richard was also duke of Normandy, and in this role he clashed often with the king of France, Philip II Augustus, who was his feudal overlord and next-door neighbour. The borderlands between the French king's personal lands and the duchy of Normandy was known as the Vexin, and in the 1190s it was supposed to be a demilitarised zone. But in 1196 Richard decided to build a huge forward fortification on the river Seine between Rouen and Paris. This was a flagrant breach of the peace, but it would give Richard military advantage and reputational bragging rights.[7]

The name Chateau Gaillard (the 'Saucy Castle') summed up exactly what Richard meant to convey: it was a thumb to the nose in the direction of Paris and an illustration of his personal prowess. And it was truly magnificent. Even today, Chateau Gaillard's ruins suggest the splendour of its heyday – especially when approached in the bright light of spring by riverboat. It was built on a 90m limestone crag above a long bend in the river Seine above a settlement called Andeli (Les Andelys), some 40km (25 miles) upriver from Rouen and 95km (60 miles) downstream from Paris. Richard appears to have overseen the building himself, and its defences were the best that money could buy. The fortress had a strong, tall keep which backed onto the river-cliff at such an angle that it seemed to merge into the rock-face. An oval surrounding wall consisted of rounded towers packed tightly together like flower petals, presenting no weak angle at which to aim trebuchet shot. A second enclosure stood beside the main compound, defended by five towers and a deep ditch carved out of the rock.

The whole fortress was connected to the river, along with a walled new town and a manor house, by a series of bridges, guarded by towers with crossbow-slits.

The overall effect was captured by a contemporary chronicler known as William the Breton:

> Overlooking the town [of Andeli] was a lofty rock, bordered on one side by the River Seine, and on the other sides by hills of almost equal height, with valleys lying between. On that very high rock [Richard] built a citadel and surrounded it with a very tall wall and very deep ditches cut into the living rock; and beyond those ditches he levelled the hill and enclosed it with very high walls and towers. He also enclosed a third hill, with deep ditches set between, and fortified the whole with a very high stone wall and ditches on every side. He called that whole fortification 'Gaillard,' which in French means boldness or impudence. From there, proceeding four miles, he built another fortification on the bank of the Seine, which he called 'Boutavant,' which means 'striking forward,' as though to say: 'To recover my land I push myself onward.'[8]

Unlike in the Fountain Castle of Chrétien de Troyes' imagination, there was no booby-trapped portcullis. But Chateau Gaillard was one of the first castles in Europe to feature machicolations – the overhanging sentry posts from which defenders could drop missiles on attackers at the base of the walls. It was at least fairytale-adjacent.

And it cost truly vast sum of money. During Richard's nine-and-a-half-year reign as king he spent a total of £7,000 on castles in England. Chateau Gaillard alone cost £12,000 and Richard forced the pace of building so hard that it went up in just two years. But what this outrageous sum bought Richard was a castle that struck contemporaries as quasi-mythical from its inception. One day during its building it was said that a storm of blood-rain fell over the site, which terrified everyone there – except Richard. 'He delighted in [the castle] so much that even if an angel from heaven had told him to abandon it, he would have cursed that angel,' wrote the chronicler William of Newburgh.[9]

When Richard was told that his rival Philip Augustus had been to see the castle under construction and scornfully said that he wished it were built of iron, for it would be all the more satisfying to conquer it, Richard responded with one of his most famous chivalric quips. 'By God's throat,' he said, 'if that castle were made entirely of butter,[#] never mind iron or stone, I would have no doubt at all that I would be able to defend it stoutly against him and all his forces.'[10]

As it turned out, Richard never had the chance to do so. When Chateau Gaillard was complete in 1198 it served its purpose very well: Richard had strategic advantage in the Vexin, and had reminded anyone who took an interest in such things that he, the Lionheart, was unmatched for personal valour. But the next year, the Lionheart was dead, poisoned by gangrene after he was shot with a crossbow bolt while besieging the castle of Châlus-Chabrol in the Limousin. He was succeeded as king of England and lord of the Plantagenet continental lands by his brother John, who promptly lost huge tranches of what Richard had spent his short career defending.

In 1203–4, John lost the duchy of Normandy to Philip Augustus, who did as he had promised a few years earlier and besieged Chateau Gaillard. It took six months for Philip to find a way through the defences, but eventually he did, when an intrepid soldier crawled up the sewage chute and broke into the fortress via the latrines. On March 6th 1204 the castle surrendered. By that time John had fled Normandy altogether, his reputation as a great lord in tatters. Here, then, was another important lesson about the nature of chivalric castles. Towers and machicolations were all well and good, but ultimately a fortress was as strong as the character of the great lord that held it. In the words of Chrétien de Troyes, as copied out by Guiot de Provins: ‘One must love and cherish a valiant man, whenever he is found.’[11]



Chateau Gaillard was one of the most extravagant castles built in the golden age of chivalry, but it was by no means the only one to blend advanced military technology with the architectural performance of lordship. A vast hilltop fortress in Picardy erected by Enguerrand III, lord of Coucy, in the 1220s was built with much the same intent. The Chateau de Coucy had the largest keep or donjon in Europe, given the effect of a lion ready to pounce by four surrounding towers which resembled paws. Above the door to the donjon was a carving of the lord of the castle fighting with a lion, which one twentieth century art historian memorably described as ‘a kind of metaphor of epic poetry translated into stone’.[12] If the carving was the idea in miniature, the castle itself was chivalry on a gigantic, monumental scale, built deliberately to dwarf anything the king of France – or any other ruler of western Christendom – had attempted. The motto of the Coucy lords

was: ‘Neither king, nor prince, nor duke, nor count am I. I am the lord of Coucy.”[ʃ]

This was quite some claim – and the Chateau de Coucy was quite some castle, which stood in its medieval splendour until the end of the First World War, when in March 1917 it was blown up with twenty-eight tonnes of dynamite by the retreating German general Erich Ludendorff (see Epilogue). But it still did not represent the high point of chivalric performance through fortification. The lord who built most colossally on Richard the Lionheart’s achievement – and whose castles surpassed even the ambition of Chateau Gaillard – was his great-nephew Edward I. Known as Longshanks (for his height) and the Hammer of the Scots (for his ferocity), Edward became king of England in 1272, and over the next thirty-five years he set about reshaping the political geography of the British Isles. He did so with Arthurian tropes close to his heart, and castle-building high in his mind.[13]

Edward’s character was an overlapping mesh of qualities which could only be reconciled under the banner of medieval chivalry. He was violent and pious, thoughtful but impulsive, high-minded but given to low deceit when it suited him. As king, he made his love of Arthuriana more explicit than any king before him – and, with the exception of his grandson Edward III, any who followed. Edward held Round Table tournaments for the knights of his realm, and almost certainly commissioned the large Round Table which today hangs on display in the Great Hall of Winchester Castle.[Ω] Like Richard the Lionheart, legends of his personal prowess abounded: Edward was said once to have scared a servant to death by shouting at him. But his crowning achievement was the network of castles he built in Wales following a ferocious war of conquest in the 1270s and 1280s.

Relations between the English and the Welsh during the Middle Ages were seldom better than hostile. The Welsh believed themselves to be the lineal descendants of the ancient Britons and, before that, the Trojans. According to the twelfth-century writer Gerald of Wales (who was of mixed English and Welsh descent), the reason these people had lost first the Trojan War and then mastery over the British Isles was ‘because of their sins and more particularly the wicked and detestable vice of homosexuality’. Gerald reported that the Welsh believed atonement for this lapse was almost complete and ‘according to the prophecies of Merlin, the foreign [i.e.

English] occupation of the island will come to an end and the foreigners themselves will be destroyed.'[14]

For all this, however, the 'foreigners' – the Saxons, Normans and Plantagenets who had for centuries ruled England and therefore dominated Britain – had never quite been able to beat the love of independence out of the Welsh. This was not for want of effort or expense. Gerald recalled how 'King Offa shut the Welsh off from the English by his long dyke on the frontier', how the Saxon king Aethelfrith of Northumbria burned the Welsh fortified town of Chester, and how king Harald Godwinson 'advanced into Wales on foot, at the head of his lightly clad infantry, lived on the country, and marched up and down and round and about the whole of Wales with such energy than he "left not one that pisseth against a wall".'[≈] [15] Yet when Edward I came to power in 1272, the Welsh were still strongly inclined towards freedom, and much of the land was in the hands of native rulers, the chief of whom was the ruler of Gwynedd, who claimed the title of Prince of Wales.

Edward had many reasons to be interested in attacking the Welsh. At least one concerned a castle. Near Llandrindod Wells in the Anglo-Welsh borderlands (known as the marches) was a fortress called Cefnllys, held by an English baron called Roger Mortimer. During fighting in the 1260s an old castle on the site had been ruined, and when Mortimer rebuilt it in the early 1270s to a much more advanced design, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd,[∂] Prince of Wales, took offence.[16] Adding this grievance to a long list of others, Llywelyn broke off diplomatic relations with the English court. In 1275 it was discovered that Llywelyn was planning to marry a woman called Eleanor de Montfort, the daughter of an arch-rebel against the English crown.[π] This was enough to convince Edward to launch a punitive invasion of Wales. He sent his first troops in at the start of 1277, and that summer advanced an army of thousands into the mountainous country of north Wales: not just mounted knights and infantry, but a corps of engineers, stonemasons, woodcutters, carpenters and labourers. Edward had decided not only to punish Llywelyn, but to crush him, and then score the mark of his victory indelibly on the land.

That meant building castles. Ninety years before Edward's armies first entered Wales, Gerald of Wales had described the habits of the native folk, and the methods required to subdue them. The mountains, valleys, forests

and rivers of Wales made for exceptionally difficult fighting terrain, and the Welsh made the most of their natural advantage by preferring guerrilla raiding tactics. No ruler ‘can ever hope to conquer in one single battle a people which will never draw up its forces to engage an enemy army in the field and will never allow itself to be besieged inside fortified strong-points,’ he wrote.[17] The best strategy was to harass the Welsh with light infantry deep into the countryside, bribe them to fight one another and blockade their sea trade routes; then, ‘certain carefully chosen localities in the interior must be fortified with castles.’[18]

Edward put Gerald’s advice into effect. In the summer of 1277 he set his diggers to work on the foundations of a new fortress at Flint – a rocky spur near the mouth of the River Dee; at the same time, much further south, his brother Edmund founded an English royal castle at Aberystwyth. The same summer, Edward commissioned a castle at Rhuddlan, and scouted another location on the banks of the River Conwy.[19] Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Llywelyn sued for peace and agreed a truce in the autumn of 1277. But it was neither the end of the war nor the end of Edward’s castle-building programme. Both, in fact, had only just begun.



At Easter 1278, a few months after his first campaign to Wales, Edward left his men working on Flint and Rhuddlan castles and went to Glastonbury Abbey to witness an extraordinary sight: the translation to new tombs of the remains of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. The alleged bodies of these legendary figures had been discovered at the abbey in the aftermath of a catastrophic fire around a century earlier. This had (very conveniently) allowed the monks of Glastonbury to rebuild their burned abbey on the proceeds of the tourist trade. Now Edward and his queen, Eleanor of Castile, took part in a dramatic ceremony by which the skeletons were inspected, then removed to storage, to await the building of even more impressive monuments.

In the context of Edward’s Welsh wars, this event in south-west England had great political significance. For Arthur, as all readers of his romances knew, had been an ancient Briton – or, as the Welsh would have it, Welsh.[Δ] That Edward was laying his hands on Arthur’s mortal remains while, in

Gwynedd, his men laboured to build castles on Arthur's native land was a clear statement of intent. As well as being king of England, Edward was co-opting the old Welsh claim to be king of Britain. And he wanted everyone to know it.

Four years later his chance to make his Arthurian dreams a permanent architectural reality arrived. In 1282 a spasm of violence in north and west Wales led by Llywelyn's brother Dafydd ap Gruffudd sparked anti-English rebellion all across Wales. Edward, with his dream of Arthurian mastery blazing as brightly as ever, launched a three-pronged invasion which aimed to extinguish Welsh self-rule and annex the claim to British kingship. He and his nobles led armies into north, south and mid-Wales, and though at first they encountered stiff resistance, by 1283 Llywelyn had been killed in battle, Dafydd had been executed and the Welsh resistance was in tatters. The Statute of Rhuddlan (proclaimed at Edward's new castle there) 'wholly and entirely transferred under our proper dominion the Land of Wales with its Inhabitants'. It organised Wales into English-style counties and imposed English criminal law.[20] Edward then turned his thoughts to building the castles he had decided were essential to keeping the Welsh in their place. He intended to build a ring of fortresses that would not just dominate the Welsh landscape, but haunt its people's dreams.

The architect-engineer responsible for building Edward's new castles was among the most brilliant that ever set foot in the British Isles. His name was Master James of St George, and during the 1260s and 1270s he had learned his trade as a mason working in the county of Savoy, a county that stretched from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean Sea. The ruler of this territory, Edward's cousin Peter of Savoy, was a discerning builder who spent heavily on fortifying his lands. The finest of his works was the castle of St Georges d'Espéranche, which Edward visited it in 1273 while returning to England from a crusade.

The castle of St Georges d'Espéranche was a luxurious compound attached to a fortified town, set in hunting country on a wooded hillside just a few hours' ride from the city of Lyon.[21] It had stout, octagonal corner towers joined by thick walls into which chambers had been built; the inner ward that the walls enclosed was accessed by a gatehouse and a bridge over a wide moat. The castle was in the final stages of construction when Edward visited, but it was already a magnificent stronghold, which a few months later was considered fit to host the pope.[**] Of course, St Georges

D’Espéranche was not the only striking castle Edward had seen in that phase of his life: his time in the Holy Land had acquainted him with the huge fortresses occupied by the Templars and Hospitallers. But crucially, Edward saw St Georges D’Espéranche when it was under construction, and he was struck by the quality of the building team. When the time came to start works in Wales, Edward cast his mind back to his time in Savoy, and sent for the man who had been in charge.

Master James of St George arrived in England at the time of the first Welsh war in 1277 and was involved in the projects at Flint and Rhuddlan. From 1283 he was Edward’s leading engineer-architect, assuming the post of ‘master of the king’s works in Wales’. This gave him day-to-day charge of sites at Conwy, Harlech, Ruthin, Aberystwyth and Beaumaris on the island of Anglesey. In each of these a major castle was either being redeveloped or built from scratch. All were to serve as troop barracks and centres for local administration, to enforce the sweeping changes that the Statute of Rhuddlan imposed on the Welsh. Collectively, they symbolised the neo-Arthurian might of Edward’s crown, studded into the landscape as if with the blows of a giant’s hammer.

The effect and the aspect of Edward’s castle-building programme is still plain to see for anyone who drives the road leading west from Chester through north Wales, hugging the coast between mountains and sea. One by one the castles loom out of the landscape: the jagged, toothlike ruins of Flint; Rhuddlan’s diamond-shaped enclosure surrounded by its long perimeter wall; the eight majestic towers of Conwy, fitted seamlessly into both the town walls and the castle’s own rocky outcrop which juts into the sea; the unfinished, symmetrical majesty of Beaumaris, with its long walls, hundreds of arrow-slits, complex gatehouses and wide moat.

A cursory glance through the accounts kept by Edward’s clerks gives a snapshot of the immense labour that went into building them. There are entries for hundreds of trees felled for timber that was ferried by water on specially made rafts, for stones quarried 10,000 at a time, wages for hundreds of diggers, carpenters, smiths, masons, carters, plumbers and roofers, along with guards posted to watch the most valuable building supplies, such as the tonnes of lead needed to seal tower roofs.[22] The overall budget for the works came to around £100,000 – the equivalent of two and a half years’ royal revenue.[††]

What is also obvious to anyone who travels around Edward's castles is that one stands head and shoulders above the rest. Beaumaris and Conwy are mightily impressive, as is Harlech, further round the coast. But Edward and James of St George's masterpiece is the castle of Caernarfon, which stands on the south side of the Menai Strait, the sea-channel separating mainland Wales from Anglesey. Caernarfon is a giddyingly brilliant fortress, and it allows us to access the heroic, chivalric filter through which Edward saw his war of conquest in Wales.

Erecting a castle of any sort at Caernarfon was a pointed nod towards some of Britain's most ancient historical lore. The Romans who occupied Britannia between the first and fifth centuries CE had maintained a settlement there, known as Segontium, which had been associated with the emperors themselves, and especially with Magnus Maximus, who was proclaimed emperor by the army in Britannia in 383 CE and was sometimes (erroneously) said to have been the father of the first Christian emperor, Constantine. Magnus was known to the Welsh as Macsen Wledig, and he was the subject of a romantic pseudohistory, part of the collection of traditional Welsh writings known as the *Mabinogion*. In Macsen Wledig's story, the Roman emperor falls into a deep sleep and dreams that he travels to a fine city amid lush mountainous countryside, where a beautiful maiden lives in 'a great fortress, the handsomest ever'.[23] On waking Macsen becomes obsessed with finding the castle and the girl, and sets out on a quest that leads him to Caernarfon, 'a great city at the mouth of the river [Seiont], and within a great fortress with many tall towers of various colours'. When he and his companions arrive, Macsen's servants are astonished. They say: 'Look, the hall our lord saw in his dream.'[24] More adventures ensue, in which Macsen sleeps with the maiden, Elen, and builds her new fortresses at Caernarfon, Caerleon and Carmarthen, which are joined together by a network of fine roads. Elen's brothers then help Macsen return to Rome and – using advanced siegecraft tactics – depose a pretender emperor.

There is no doubt that Edward knew about the pseudohistory of Macsen Wledig, for in 1283, exactly nine centuries after the real Macsen/Magnus had been proclaimed Roman emperor in Britannia, Edward staged a ceremony in which that ancient conqueror's 'real' body was discovered, Arthur-like, in Caernarfon, and reburied in a church.[25] This was a mere prelude, however, for the works that followed under Master James of St

George's supervision. At the mouth of the Seiont, Master James built for the king a fortress that was the realisation of the Macsen Wledig's dream castle. Huge and aggressively imperial, Caernarfon was a striking variation on all the other Welsh strongholds Master James oversaw. True, it shared elemental components: towers, chambers built into the walls, complex gatehouses, a moat, and a harbour integrated with the town that lay beside it. But the towers were polygonal, and the walls were built with bands of different-coloured stone running through them. In building angled towers, Master James drew on his experience of working on St Georges d'Espéranche – but there was another model, too: the Theodosian walls of Constantinople. These had been memorably described by a French crusader in the early thirteenth century, in a rapturous passage that would not have disappointed Macsen Wledig himself:

> Now you should know that they gazed for a long time upon Constantinople—those who had never before seen it—for they could hardly believe that so rich a city could exist anywhere in the world, when they saw its high walls and its splendid towers, with which it was entirely enclosed in a circle; and its magnificent palaces, and its lofty churches, of which there were so many that no one could believe it unless he saw it with his own eyes; and the great length and breadth of the city, which surpassed all others.[26]

Caernarfon was to mimic these fortifications, and in doing so, tie up all the strands of Welsh legend that Edward was so keen to borrow for himself. He had laid claim to Arthur's ancient British legacy, and now added to that Macsen Wledig's imperial credentials. It would be a 'great fortress, the handsomest ever'. Works began in 1283, with plans for a massive, multi-turreted fortress divided into two wards, with banded stone walls punctuated with arrow-slits, two great gatehouses and a walled new town at its side. An 'Eagle Tower' would be crested with imperial insignia. There were to be double portcullises and drawbridges; a well to provide water in case of siege and heavy artillery in the form of a 'ballista' catapult; a great hall and luxurious living apartments for the constable; glass windows and gardens; a millpond with a nesting box for swans in the middle of it. A statue of the king would be erected over the King's Gate and an ironmonger called Hova was paid to make spikes that would stop birds from sitting on the statue's stone head.[27]

Building on this scale was, even by Edward's standards, expensive. It was also time consuming, partly since the resources available to Master James of St George in Wales were spread across half a dozen sites, and

partly because from the late 1290s Edward was also spending heavily on wars in Scotland and Gascony. And it was provocative: in September 1294 the Welsh rebelled against Edward's rule and captured Caernarfon for six months, during which time they demolished walls and burned everything they could. Ultimately, it was over-ambitious and never finished: building was still going on at Caernarfon half a century after ground was struck, by which time Edward and Master James were long dead.

Yet for all this, Caernarfon served its purpose, which was to rip away Welsh independence, co-opt mythology, and bolt it onto the chivalrous self-image of the English crown. In the spring of 1284, when Caernarfon was in the first stages of construction and cannot have been much more than a hole in the ground, Edward's queen Eleanor of Castile arrived there, heavily pregnant. The previous year Eleanor had given birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, at Rhuddlan castle. Now she was to bring forth her next child – her fourteenth and, as it transpired, her last – in Caernarfon. The baby who was born on April 25th was known as Edward of Caernarfon: an heir to the English crown born in an imperial fortress in Wales.

In 1301 Edward I had young Edward of Caernarfon invested in the castle of his birth as Prince of Wales. Following this, the eight-year-old went on tour of his new principality, during which he was apparently presented with a collection of old Welsh poetry.[28] Exactly what the collection contained is no longer known, and it is unlikely that the younger Edward could have read the stories untranslated. But neither he nor anyone else could miss or escape the point that his father had spent so much time, money and resources trying to make. Wales had been conquered, and its history stolen. Edward I died in 1307 and Edward of Caernarfon now became King Edward II. During his turbulent, unhappy reign he enjoyed a rare degree of loyalty from the Welsh. They seemed to view him as one of their own: recognising, if only for a passing phase, that politics lay downstream of history.



In January 1344 King Edward III of England held a tournament at Windsor Castle, on the River Thames in Berkshire. Windsor was thought by some to have been built by Arthur himself, though historians now recognise that it was founded by William the Conqueror.[‡‡] It had long been one of the most

heavily used royal castles, and for Edward III – the son of the ill-fated Edward of Caernarfon – it had a special place in his rounds of royal pageantry. The tournament of 1344 featured jousting, feasting and merrymaking, and it was attended by a large number of Edward's noble friends, with whom he had a much more harmonious relationship than his father.

On the last day of the tournament, Edward announced a plan to tighten the chivalric bonds between his leading men still further. After holding a mass in the castle's chapel, he laid a hand on the Gospels and swore to revive the Order of the Round Table as it had existed (it was supposed) in King Arthur's time. Edward then asked his leading courtiers to make oaths in support of him and invited them to return to Windsor Castle at Pentecost, which fell that year on May 23rd. By then he intended to have added a new building to the already large castle: a House of the Round Table, which would serve as the headquarters for a new, elite club of 300 knights, who would do heroic deeds together in pursuit of collective glory – for themselves, for God, for England.

Edward's announcement was in keeping with the spirit of his reign. This had begun in dismal fashion in 1327 with his father's deposition, which was followed by a three-year tyranny during which England was misruled by Edward's mother and her lover. But in 1330 Edward, aged seventeen, had seized power in his own right. From that point onwards he had made it a matter of guiding principle to see that the political realm could take collective pride – excitement even – in their relationship with the king. He held several tournaments every year, at which his leading subjects could meet, joust, fraternise and show off. And he leaned on Arthurian tropes, which were as popular in his day as they had been in the age of Richard the Lionheart. It made sense for Edward III to use his royal castles as the stages for these theatrical political gatherings – and during his long reign he would favour Windsor Castle in particular. In doing so, he transformed the fabric of the building, but also, unwittingly, the future of the English monarchy.

Yet he did not do this immediately, for in 1344 his attempt to institute a new Round Table society fell apart. It was not that the idea was bad. The concept of the Round Table had become increasingly important in Arthurian legends as they had developed during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; romantic tradition now connected the 'original' Round Table to the Last Supper,[§§] and celebrated it as the perfect piece of furniture around

which to gather elite warriors, since once seated, none would have precedence above the other.[29] Edward's announcement that he was going to create his own Round Table society inspired international admiration and envy: Edward's rival Philip VI of France attempted to spoil the party by holding a Round Table of his own; Edward's brother-in-law William count of Hainault also held one in The Hague.[30]

But the ambitious timetable, which required an immense amount of work to be done at Windsor to install a chapter house big enough for 300 knights in the space of just four months, proved impossible. Hundreds of labourers, carpenters and masons set to work within weeks of the king's announcement. Stone quarried in Kent and Normandy was shipped to Windsor, along with timber from dozens of felled oaks. But there was no hope of completing a circular building with an internal diameter of 200 feet across, and a crenelated outer wall, in so short a time. So Pentecost came, and Windsor was a building site. By November, work on the Round Table house had ceased completely. The king's attention was diverted to a conflict he had begun with France, which was to become the Hundred Years War. For the next four years, this would consume all his attention. The Round Table society was set aside. The membership of the proposed society was never announced. The building was left, half-finished, a white elephant in the grounds of Windsor Castle in what is now the area known as the Upper Ward. In the 1350s, it was pulled down.

In other circumstances, under other kings, the aborted Round Table project might have been faintly embarrassing. But Edward III was not easily defeated. Four years later, in June 1348, he was back at Windsor to establish a new knightly fraternity, instituted to commemorate a string of victories in his war with France, including the battle of Crécy (1346) and siege of Calais (1347). This new society was not explicitly Arthurian, and its membership was tightly restricted to just twenty-four knights. But it was utterly chivalric all the same. It was known as the Order of the Garter.

The Order of the Garter, established as the catastrophic pandemic known as the Black Death was ravaging Europe, would have a lasting place in the royal history of England, and it would be central to the history of Windsor Castle. Just as with the stillborn Round Table society, the Order of the Garter demanded material changes to the fabric of the castle. This time the focus was the royal chapel. Here, a permanent staff of lay canons and retired ('poor') knights was established to sing religious services year-

round for the benefit of those Garter Knights who died – be it peacefully or violently – in the course of their chivalric adventures. To ensure that these canons and veterans had a fine place to sing their masses, in 1349 Edward had the existing royal chapel of Edward the Confessor pulled down and a new chapel put up in its place, dedicated jointly to the Confessor, the Virgin Mary and St George.[31] Inside were placed Garter Stalls – seats within the chapel choir which were assigned for life to individual Garter Knights. Outside the chapel, an extensive further programme of renovation began in the 1350s, with a complete new suite of buildings for the Garter canons and poor knights.

From this point on, Edward held regular meetings of the Order of the Garter at Windsor, including a Garter Feast on St George's Day (April 23rd), presided over by himself and his eldest son, Edward 'the Black Prince'. Strict penalties were levied on knights who failed to attend and wear their striking Garter robes, emblazoned with the order's motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense* ('Shame on he who thinks ill of it'). And as membership of the Order of the Garter grew in fame as the pinnacle of chivalric achievement, so Windsor became the heartland of Edward's courtly monarchy. Once works on the new chapel were underway, Edward also began to renovate other areas of the castle, funded by a massive influx of cash into the royal treasury as a result of his continued successes in the Hundred Years War.

In the cylindrical stone keep known then as the High Tower (today the Round Tower) he installed England's first mechanical striking clock.[32] In the castle's upper ward almost all the royal lodgings were torn down (along with the unfinished Round Table building) and, as one chronicler put it, 'others more beautiful and sumptuous [were] set up.'[33] These included new gatehouses, chambers, halls, kitchens, with suites of apartments for the king and queen. The castle had not seen such extensive works since the reign of Henry III, 100 years earlier, and the scale of the building programme astonished contemporaries. One chronicler claimed that 'almost all the masons and carpenters throughout the whole of England brought to [Windsor], so that hardly anyone could have any good mason or carpenter, except in secret, on account of the king's prohibition.'[34] The cost amounted a year and half's royal income. But, as with Richard the Lionheart's construction of Chateau Gaillard and Edward I's building of Caernarfon

Castle, these monstrous sums were spent in the pursuit of a clear political goal. A single castle was to embody a grand vision of monarchy, which itself stood for the pinnacle of a social-cultural code: chivalry.

And indeed, whereas Chateau Gaillard was lost to the French within five years of its completion, and Caernarfon Castle was to slip quietly towards peripheral insignificance once Edward's wars with Wales were complete, Windsor Castle's central place in English royal history was destined to outlive its kingly architect by centuries. In the fifteenth century King Edward IV enlarged and expanded the chapel of St George, and when he died in 1483 he became the first king to be buried there – a habit which was followed, more often than not, by the monarchs who succeeded him. Following the civil wars of the seventeenth century, during which the castle was abused and ransacked by parliamentarians, Charles II carried out his own remodelling, installing extravagant baroque interiors and a large collection of art. In the nineteenth century the castle would once more be transformed under the instruction of George IV, who raised the height of the Round Tower, refurbished the interiors, and reinvented the shell of the castle to give it a fairytale Gothic appearance, by which the English monarchy could reassert its ancient connection to a chivalric, heroic medieval past.[##] And in the twentieth century, when the British royal House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha wished to rebrand, burying their German ancestry after the First World War, the name King George V settled on a name that spoke most obviously to the romantic, heroic aspects of English royal history: Windsor.



On a grey summer's day, July 1st 1969, Charles Philip Arthur George Mountbatten Windsor, twenty-one years old, knelt on a scarlet cushion on a slate dais in the upper ward of Caernarfon Castle and had a gold coronet placed on his head. He was being invested by his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, as Prince of Wales. Inside the castle an audience of 4,000 people watched on. Outside, television and radio broadcast the ceremony to a global audience of more than half a billion. To receive his principality, Charles rendered formal homage to his mother, solemnly promising that: 'I, Charles, Prince of Wales, do become your liege man of life and limb and of earthly worship and faith and truth I will bear unto thee to live and die

against all manner of folks.' After the ceremony was over, the prince embarked on a four-day tour of Wales by car, yacht and helicopter, which was designed to foster good relations between the crown and the Welsh people, and to support a broader drive to boost Welsh tourism, through a campaign known as Croeso ('Welcome') '69.

In common with other moments of British royal pageantry in the twentieth century, Charles' investiture as Prince of Wales captured worldwide attention. Charles himself said, 'For me, it's a way of officially dedicating one's life, or part of one's life, to Wales. And the Welsh people after all wanted it.' But not all the Welsh people were happy. Indeed, there were many in Wales who felt the investiture was a revival of historic abuses against the Welsh people perpetrated by Charles' long-dead ancestors, which its medieval overtones did little to dispel. Opposition to the ceremony extended to demonstrations, hunger strikes and even terrorist bombings. The concern for public safety was such that the Royal Engineers were put on stand-by in case protestors blew up railway lines or roads around Caernarfon.

A satirical anti-investiture song, *Carlo*, written by a young songwriter, Dafydd Iwan (later president of the Welsh nationalist political party Plaid Cymru), poked bitter fun at 'Carlo Windsor' and his phoney claim to Welshness. The song rose high in the charts in Wales, and became an unofficial anthem of the anti-investiture movement. And although no harm was done, and Charles served diligently as Prince of Wales for fifty-three years, until he became King Charles III in 2022, it was notable that his successor as Prince of Wales, his eldest son William, has not (at the time of writing) chosen to be ceremonially invested with the title and its attendant regalia.

Nevertheless, the association between great medieval castles and the chivalric image of monarchy has not been entirely abandoned, in the United Kingdom at least. The Order of the Garter remains an important institution of monarchy, and its members continue to parade at Windsor on St George's Day. State banquets for visiting dignitaries, including the president of the United States, have recently returned to Windsor Castle from Buckingham Palace. And on any given summer's afternoon one may see crowds of tourists lining the streets of Windsor, following a route around and inside the castle that emphasises its long tradition and symbolic importance in expressing the ancient values of monarchy. The high aim of the lords who

built chivalric castles was to advertise and in a sense immortalise their claim to power, virtue and nobility. To walk around Windsor Castle, as with many others of these grand fortresses of the age of chivalry in the twenty-first century is to feel that in a few cases, at least, that mission has been accomplished.

* A *trouvère* was a travelling poet-minstrel, who travelled around aristocratic courts, telling entertaining or improving tales in the dialect of the French north, known as the *langue d'Oïl*. The southern French equivalent, who would recount courtly romances in the *langue d'Oc*, was known as a *troubadour*.

† An analogy: when Star Wars was released in 1977, no cinemagoer had ever been aboard a ship like the *Millennium Falcon*. But its cockpit would have felt familiar to anyone who had seen a Second World War-era B-29 Superfortress bomber, from which director George Lucas borrowed its design aesthetic.

‡ Richard gave away this sword when he was in Sicily, en route to the Holy Land. So perhaps it was not Excalibur after all.

§ Ja nus hons pris ne dira sa raison
Adroitement, se dolantement non
Mais par confort puet il faire de chançon.
Moult ai amis, mes povre sont li don.
Honte en auront, se por ma reançon
Sui ces deus yvers pris.

It is worth noting that this quip of Richard's was recorded by the chronicler Gerald of Wales as an anecdote *against* the king. Gerald noted that Richard's blasphemy ('By God's throat') and his arrogance in claiming that he alone could defend it, without asking for the Lord's help or approval in doing so, would come back around. Chateau Gaillard was lost by Richard's brother John in 1203–4 and Gerald seems to imply that at least some of this was down to Richard's moral lapse rather than John's military incompetence.

∫ The rhyme is infinitely better in Old French: 'Roi ne suis, / Ne prince, ne duc, ne comte aussi, / Je suis le sire de Coucy'.

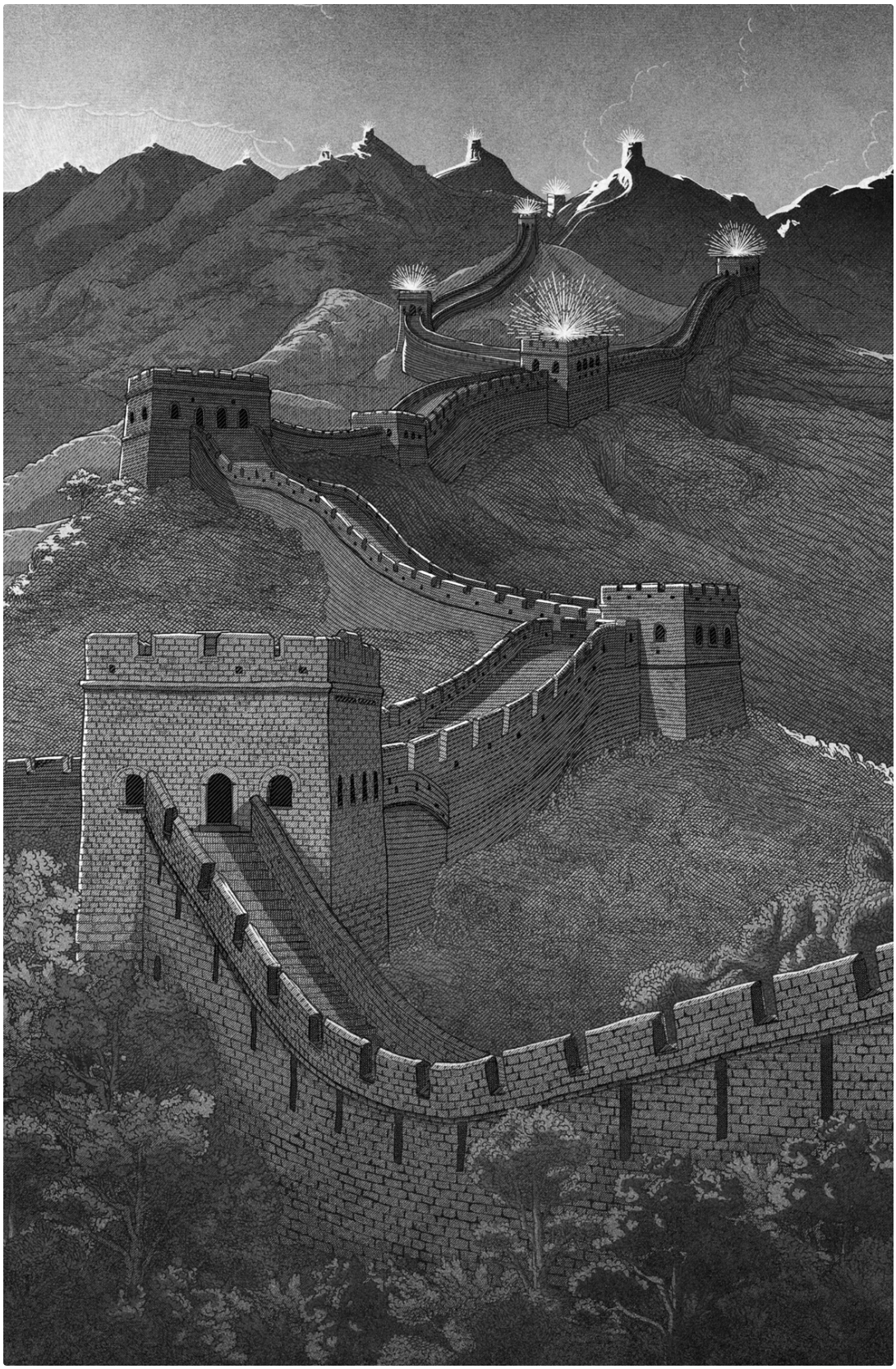
Ω The Winchester Round Table is 5.5m in diameter, and weighs considerably more than a tonne. Dendrochronology has dated its timbers to the years 1250–80, overlapping with Edward's political career as heir to Henry III and, subsequently, king in his own right. The exquisite decoration, featuring a portrait of King Arthur, a large Tudor rose and green-and-white segments bearing the names of knights from Arthurian legend, dates to the reign of King Henry VIII. See Martin Biddle, *King Arthur's Round Table: an archaeological investigation* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000).

≈ This colourful phrase, alluding to the massacring of a family or a people in the male line, is biblical. It appears six times in the books of Samuel and Kings (see, for example, 1 Kings 16.11) and is an English rendering of an old Hebrew idiom. Most modern English translations of the Bible tend to gloss it more politely.

∂ Also known as (spoiler alert) Llywelyn the Last.

π Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, led a rebellion against Henry III and Edward during the 1260s which convulsed England and parts of Wales in a vicious civil war. He was killed at the battle of Evesham on August 4th 1265.

Δ As we have seen, this was a matter on which reasonable people could differ. In the sixteenth century writers like John Leland believed the ancient Briton Arthur inhabited south-west England, rather than Wales. See chapter 2.
** Gregory X stayed at St George's d'Espéranche in November 1273.
†† How much was this really? A lot. Adjusted for inflation (via www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator) £100,000 in the late thirteenth century would be £117,500,000 (US $156,500,000) in 2025. But inflation hardly gives the full picture. The UK's annual revenue at the time of writing was a little over £1 trillion. Should we multiply this by 2.5? That seems too high. Another way would be to think about this in terms of wages. In 1290, £100,000 was the equivalent of roughly 10 million paid worker-days (via www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result).
‡‡ See chapter 5.
§§ The concept of the Round Table developed somewhat in parallel to that of the Holy Grail. Neither were ever real physical objects – they were invented and given pseudo-Christian backstories within multiverse of medieval Arthurian tradition. But both were so popular that people came to forget that they were entirely made up.
On Gothic fantasy castles, see chapter 11.



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8

GREAT WALLS

If the garden's walls are pulled down
Then there would be no difference between it and
the wilderness

KHUSROW I

In the late summer of 1211, Wanyan Chengyu, a senior commander of the Jin imperial armies, stood and scanned the rugged country of northern China. The jagged ridges and valleys of the Yan Mountains marked the northern frontier between the Jurchen-ruled Jin Empire[*] and the tribal steppe beyond. Here was the threshold between civilisation and the wilderness: a military, political and cultural crossing point.[1] The landscape was strongly defended. Its natural obstacles – peaks, gorges, narrow passes and rivers – were augmented by a network of manmade moats and rammed-earth walls, overlooked by watchtowers and signal posts, and strengthened with parapets, battlements and semi-circular platforms jutting out from the walls, which would become known as *ma-mien*, or 'horse faces'.

This defensive system, known to historians as the *Jiehao Jin* (Jin boundary trench) or Jin Great Wall, ran in two parallel lines of disconnected segments for hundreds of kilometres through these borderlands. It was not a single, continuous, architecturally elegant barrier.[2] But it reflected an approach to border fortification that was already thousands of years old. Since the days of the Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) – long before even the age of Confucius[†] – rulers in China had been building walls to keep their nomadic enemies from the steppe at bay.[3] Although the Jurchen were originally tribal invaders themselves, and had been in power in northern China for less than a century, they had become enthusiastic followers of tradition, committing huge sums and much labour to their own barrier-building project. Political wisdom held that when faced with such sophisticated defences the typical nomadic raiding party, whose main interest was likely to be extracting small-scale plunder, would lose heart and turn away. The imperial official who had been most enthusiastic about the policy had acknowledged the vast expense, but promised that once built, 'the benefits will be everlasting.'[4]

The point in the defensive system at which Wanyan Chungyu now stood was called Yehuling, or Wild Fox Ridge; a pass that ran through it was nicknamed Badger's Snout. The names likely reflected local wildlife. But the area's chief point of interest in the summer of 1211 was not its fauna. Wild Fox Ridge protected one of the main approaches to the Jin capital of

Zhongdu (modern-day Beijing).[5] And since the spring of that year, Zhongdu had been a target for one of the most fearsome military leaders the steppe had ever seen. He was a man of freakish physical stature, even as he approached his fiftieth birthday. He was described by one Chinese observer as having 'a big and strong body. . . a broad forehead and a long beard.'[6] His personal name was Temüjin, but he was better known as Genghis Khan.[‡]

Genghis Khan had risen to power among the nomads of the Mongolian steppe and Gobi Desert through a combination of great personal charisma and military skill amounting to genius. Five years earlier, in 1206, he had united all the Mongol clans under his own leadership. He had then set about abolishing the tribal hierarchies within Mongol society, and creating a swift-moving, horse-mounted army organised on a meritocratic decimal system, which cut across clan loyalties and was subject to severe discipline. This proved to be a more dangerous force than any that had emerged from the steppe before it: as an official Mongol historian later wrote, 'its military strength could be called vigorous and strong'; the army 'exterminated' its enemies 'in the manner of thunder pealing and wind blowing.'[7] Genghis nursed a particular grievance against the Jin, whose emperor had once insulted him and – it was said – crucified his great-uncle on a wooden donkey.[8]

Nevertheless, as Wanyan Chengyu contemplated Wild Fox Ridge he could fairly assume that military advantage still lay on his side. Since the spring of 1211, the Mongol army had been testing the Jin wall, with Genghis sending his sons and lieutenants on raids against fortresses along the border: some riding around the far ends of the walls, others picking off individual garrisons and outposts along it. But so far they had landed no truly decisive blow, and it had to be assumed that the Jin defences were strong enough to hold. Quite besides the military obstacles, there was a massive disparity in manpower. The Jin dynasty maintained an army of around 600,000 men. Genghis could call on barely 65,000.[9] If the ditches and walls were breached, sheer numbers would tell. And if the numbers did not tell, and the raiders somehow bypassed the borderline, they would find Zhongdu and other fortified cities well-defended and impossible to besiege.[10]

It took vanishingly little time for these assumptions to be shattered. In September 1211 Wanyan Chengyu and his fellow commanders received reports that Genghis and a large number of Mongol troops were approaching Wild Fox Ridge. To stall their approach, envoys were despatched to the Mongol camp to offer a parlay. Genghis ignored the delaying tactic and advanced towards the pass.

Rather than falling back and relying on the landscape and fortifications, the Jin leaders decided to stand their ground. It was a disastrous error. Using the narrowness of the pass at Wild Fox Ridge to their advantage, Mongol archers overwhelmed the Jin troops before Genghis' lieutenant Muqali launched devastating cavalry charges that sent the defenders fleeing.[11] 'They became dispersed, and were slain, and made captive,' wrote one chronicler.[12] The Mongols gave chase, and when the Jin troops regrouped, defeated them twice more, leaving bodies strewn like rotting logs far across the countryside.[13] They had punched a hole right through the middle of the Jin boundary line, leaving the land and cities that lay behind it disastrously exposed to raiders who advanced, in a matter of weeks, to within twenty miles of Zhongdu. Worse, they had dealt a catastrophic psychological blow to the Jin, who had assumed that their wall would keep them safe.

Once the ditches and watchtowers failed, and the mountain passes were punctured, morale collapsed across the whole northern sector of the Jin Empire. The imperial court issued edicts forbidding ordinary people from discussing border affairs.[14] These were ignored. Increasingly, Mongol raiders only had to show their faces and garrison commander would give up without a fight. Non-Jurchen allies of the Jin dynasty were especially prone to defecting to the Mongol side. Dreadful rumours began to spread about the invaders' tactics: it was said that when approaching one town, Genghis demanded all the residents' animals as ransom; but once the beasts were turned out, his men tied burning torches to their tails and sent them back inside the town, causing deadly fires.[§]

Although at the end of 1211 Genghis ordered a retreat from Jin territories, so his men could take their plunder home, the damage the Mongols had inflicted would prove fatal. The great Jin wall network had been broken: not physically destroyed, but proven redundant as a defensive concept when faced with an onslaught unlike anything that had come sweeping down from the steppe before.

Now the Mongols smelled blood. They returned to the Jin Empire every year thereafter, slaughtering, raiding and kidnapping. ‘They made off with everything they could get their hands on: gold, silk, boys, girls, cattle, horses and sheep,’ wrote one observer. ‘Houses and cottages were burned to the ground and the inner and outer city walls were heaps of ruins.’[15] Jin morale dissolved even further, until the malaise reached the imperial palace itself. In 1213 the Jin emperor was assassinated; the following year his replacement concluded that resistance was futile. He moved the imperial capital to Kaifeng (in modern-day Henan province), several hundred kilometres south of Zhongdu. In response, Genghis blockaded Zhongdu and starved the city into submission. In 1215 it fell. The Mongols burned huge sections of the greatest city in northern China to the ground, lighting such an inferno that for long after the earth was said to be slick with human fat.

By the time the Jin Empire was fully overrun by the Mongols in 1234, Genghis Khan was dead, but his son Ögödei was continuing his conquests, and the Mongol federation was on its way to becoming the largest contiguous land empire the world had ever known, reaching from the Korean peninsula to the Black Sea. Many other proud rulers would tremble before the thunder of Mongol hooves, and plenty more great cities would suffer the dreadful fate of Zhongdu. Their fortifications usually failed in the way that the ramparts and ditches of the Jin frontier failed: succumbing not as a result of overwhelming bombardment, but from being exposed as irrelevant when approached by an enemy whose ferocity and evil reputation melted the defenders’ resolve.

Yet, curiously, there was one thing the Mongols could not totally destroy: the belief that great walls worked. Both in China and beyond, faith in border fortifications would continue undimmed long after the Mongol Empire had crumbled. The most famous fortified wall of all was built by the Ming dynasty who ruled China between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is the iconic section of the Great Wall of China: much visited, photographed and mythologised; hailed as a wonder of the modern world, allegedly visible from space. But there have been great walls outside China, too, all of them examples of humankind’s urge to build border fortifications on an epic scale. These walls, designed to mark boundaries, tell stories, keep enemies out and civilians in – are usually more powerful as symbols than military blockades. But they deserve consideration here, for each can be thought of as an attempt to make a castle of an entire realm.

During the fifth century BCE, early in a time known in Chinese history as the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), the philosopher Mozi and his followers (known as Mohists) composed a text that summed up their beliefs. This was a flourishing era for Chinese philosophy, which produced Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism, as the great thinkers of the age turned their minds to matters fundamental to civilisation itself.

In their text, known simply as the *Mozi*, the Mohists gave practical advice on how to defend a city under siege. In a passage presented as a dialogue between Mozi and one of his acolytes, the master stated: 'If my city walls are well repaired, the defensive equipment complete, firewood and grain sufficient; if superiors and inferiors are united and affectionate; and if aid can be obtained from neighbouring lords—this is how defence is sustained.'

Mozi declared that successful resistance also depended on terrain, civic morale, and ancestral pride. He stressed the importance of 'deep resentment against the enemy and great merit toward their own ruler. . . rewards that are clear and trustworthy, and punishments severe enough to inspire fear.'[16] He explained how to secure gatehouses, deploy arrows, firetraps, stones and take countermeasures against tunnelling. Time and again, however, Mozi returned to psychology. In resisting assault, he said, 'treachery arises from negligence'. By the same reasoning, 'when the enemy is fearful and uncertain, confusion will cause them to withdraw.'[17]

That Mozi should have focused his war treatise on the city siege was natural. By the Warring States period, walled settlements had been a feature of Chinese society for nearly 3,000 years,[#] and the rulers of the civilisations that dominated the Yellow and Yangtze river basins had long been building at enormous scale. In 2000 BCE, for instance, the walled city of Shimao covered nearly 1,000 acres, surrounded with a double circuit of soaring rammed earth walls 2.5m thick and decorated with shimmering shards of jade.[18]

Yet it was not only cities that were fortified at such scale. Chinese rulers also pumped resources into defensive walls. As we have seen, sections of rammed-earth boundary wall in Shandong province on China's eastern coast were under construction as early as the Western Zhou era (1046–771

BCE). The first written reference to a standalone wall dates to 656 BCE, and describes a long fortification in Henan province, which was then part of the kingdom of Chu.[19] When the Warring States period began around 475 BCE, wall-building became a matter of general policy: walls built by the states of Chi, Yen and Chao have all left traces on the landscape that can still be seen today. These are not considered part of the sprawling structure that became the Great Wall of China – but they demonstrated that in times of conflict, there was a consistent instinct to throw up blockades.

In 221 BCE the Warring States period ended with victory for the Qin kingdom, whose ruler Qin Shi Huang became China's first emperor. On seizing power he set about a whirlwind programme of reform designed to create a centralised, unified state out of the chaos that had preceded his triumph. The Qin dynasty he founded lasted only fourteen years. Yet it was of foundational importance in Chinese history.

At the root of the first emperor's policy was control. Heavily influenced by the pessimistic teachings of a Legalist philosopher and politician named Shang Yang, the first emperor worked from the assumption that human beings were given to wickedness and needed to be kept in hand. To that end he abolished feudal nobility in favour of bureaucratic rule, imposed strict laws with vicious penalties, standardised weights, measures, coins, written script and even vehicle-axle width, censored political opinions and scholarship, and promoted a cult of semi-sacred imperial majesty centred on himself. He ordered the destruction of many of the fortifications that had been erected by the Warring States. And in or around 214 BCE he sent out a workforce, numbered by one chronicler at 300,000 men, mostly peasants and convicts, to build 'a Long Wall, constructing its defiles and passes in accordance with the configuration of the terrain.'[20]

The Qin Long Wall, which stretched some 3,000 miles from the Liaodong peninsula in the east to Lintao (Gansu) in the west and was served by thousands more miles of new roads, plotted a rough northern border for the new empire. In all likelihood it was rather drab to behold: a long snake of rammed earth and rubble, often incorporating bits of earlier fortification and accommodating natural features such as mountain ridges where convenient. Yet the sheer scale of the enterprise was impressive: stunned observers in later generations would say that it could not have been made by human hands, but that a huge dragon must have fallen from the sky and turned into the wall where it lay.[21]

All the same, it was not always obvious what immediate strategic purpose it served. The fledgling Qin empire had reason to regard the nomads of the northern steppe with suspicion, but they hardly represented the existential threat that the Mongols under Genghis later would. Building the wall was torture for workers forced to toil on it, which may have been part of the purpose: make-work for captives taken during the wars, and miscreants who fell afoul of the new imperial law-code. But the most likely explanation is that the Long Wall was simply an advertisement of the first emperor's limitless power and the totality of his vast imperium. Viewed that way, it was less a functional fortification and more a companion-piece to the emperor's other great building project: his elaborate mausoleum at the foot of Mount Li (near Xi'an), in which he was entombed when he died in 210 BCE guarded by the estimated 8,000 life-size model soldiers of the Terracotta Army.



Once the Qin dynasty Long Wall was built, a precedent was set that would be repeated by many future Chinese dynasties. But China was not the only place in the world where huge fortified walls were built. From the Romans in Europe to the Sasanians of Iran, and from the ancient city of Benin to the modern city of Berlin, great powers have turned to great walls to fortify their territory for thousands of years. It is worth pausing here to consider a few of them.

After the Great Wall of China, the world's best-known boundary fortifications is Hadrian's Wall, a 117km (73 mile) barrier that was constructed across northern England by Roman legionaries in the second century CE. Named after the Roman emperor who ordered its construction, Hadrian's Wall was a high-specification piece of Roman engineering: a stone and turf barrier with forward ditch, which extended from Britannia's east coast to its west, cutting the mainland in two. Every mile[ʃ] it broke into a fortified gatehouse which could house a small garrison of soldiers, and between each of these gatehouses lay two watchtowers.[22] Ostensibly, Hadrian's Wall was built to defend lands subject to Roman rule from the tribes of Caledonia (Scotland), who remained obstinately resistant to the Roman yoke. Yet there was more to it than that.

To walk along a segment of Hadrian's Wall today can be a beautiful or bracing experience – largely depending on the weather. When the sun shines, the line of rough but regular blocks of sandstone bonded with lime mortar seems to stretch out to infinity. But on a wintry day, when a north-easterly wind bites and snow swirls across the open, rolling landscape of Northumberland, it is easy to imagine the isolation that could have gripped a Roman legionary stationed on the frontier 1,900 years ago, when its hill-crests represented the precipice of imperial civilisation. In the bleakness beyond roamed the savages, with 'red hair and large limbs', who 'inhabit wild and waterless mountains and desolate and swampy plains, and possess neither walls, cities, nor tilled fields, but live on their flocks, wild game, and certain fruits. . . [who] dwell in tents, naked and unshod. . . and they are very fond of plundering'.[23]

The Caledonians were more than capable of causing the Romans trouble. Yet Hadrian's Wall (and a short-lived barrier known as the Antonine Wall, built 145km (90 miles) further north a few decades later) was about more than just marking the frontier of Roman rule and protecting it from raiders. The wall was a demonstration of the massive superiority of Roman power over its subservient peoples. It was also a means of maintaining imperial standards – from the centre of the empire to its outer limits.

Hadrian commissioned his wall when he visited Britannia in person around 122 CE. The Roman Empire was then at its maximum historical extent, and since taking power Hadrian had decided to see as much of it as he could. He spent his first years as emperor suppressing a Jewish revolt in Judea, then came west to the borderlands between Roman Gaul and Germania. There, the empire's boundary – known as the *Limes Germanicus* – ran some 568km (353 miles), connecting the natural boundaries of the Rhine and Danube rivers with a line of forts, watchtowers and wooden palisades.

Walls had always played some part in Roman military strategy – Julius Caesar used fortified walls as a siege tactic, while many of the tribes the Roman armies encountered during the Gallic Wars deployed earthworks to protect their military positions.[24] But when Hadrian travelled along the fortifications of the Germanic frontier, he noticed – with displeasure – that discipline among his soldiers was slack. Troops were unfit, money was spent carelessly, and camps were made luxurious with 'banqueting rooms, porticoes, grottos, and ornamental gardens'.[25] During his visit, Hadrian

tried to set a personal example, marching up to twenty miles a day in full armour, cheerfully eating the simple camp rations of bacon and cheese, and visiting wounded troops in field hospitals. But he began to suspect he had a general problem with border discipline, and when he arrived in Britannia his suspicion was confirmed. In the words of his late Roman biographer, Hadrian 'set out for Britain, and corrected many abuses there; he was the first to construct a wall, eighty miles [sic] in length, to separate the barbarians from the Romans.'[26] The juxtaposition of Hadrian's correction of abuses and his commissioning of the wall cannot be accidental.

Building Hadrian's Wall required immense effort. It took around 20,000 men ten years to construct. They used 1 million cubic metres of locally quarried stone and almost the same amount of turf. Diggers removed 5 million cubic metres of spoil from the accompanying ditch.[27] Even though the dimensions of the wall were scaled back during construction, this was still engineering on a literally colossal scale. (The Colosseum, built in Rome fifty years earlier under Vespasian, employed a comparable workforce and used only a fifth of the raw materials.) Yet it was an effort that was wildly out of proportion with the practical threat posed by the tribes of Caledonia, who – like the steppe nomads in the days of China's first emperor – were troublesome, but hardly likely to bring the empire to its knees.

Like the Qin Long Wall, Hadrian's Wall was more than a defensive barrier. It was also a symbol. The notion of 'separating' Romans from barbarians was all well and good; officials posted to the forts and checkpoints could collect taxes, restrict freedom of movement and exercise tactical advantage during inevitable periods of violence. But these objectives could have been served by a far simpler fortification network. Hadrian's Wall was a statement of Roman power and capacity, made by an emperor whose other grand projects included rebuilding the Pantheon in Rome, still one of the marvels of the Eternal City.

What was more, by virtue of its size and sophistication, Hadrian's Wall also served to – as the emperor's biographer put it – 'correct abuses'. By flooding imperial attention and resources into furthest limits of his empire, Hadrian was making a statement not only to the 'barbarians' but to the troops who would find themselves stationed there: they were Romans, defending Rome, and were expected to comport themselves accordingly.

While Hadrian's Wall was a staggering feat of engineering, within a few generations it was slipping towards strategic redundancy. From the middle of the third century CE, the most serious threat to Britannia's security was no longer raiding from the north, but seaborne attacks along what became known as the Saxon Shore. A new system of defence, focused on the coasts, took priority over the frontier. Then, in the early fifth century, the Roman legions evacuated Britannia and did not come back. They left not because they failed to hold the north, but because the empire itself was collapsing at its centre. Shorn of the power of the empire that had commissioned it, Hadrian's Wall was soon no fortification at all, but merely a curious feature of the Northumbrian landscape.



After the Romans left Britannia, a few rulers did try their hand at border fortification: Offa, the Anglo-Saxon king of Mercia, gave his name to the Offa's Dyke, an eighty-two-mile early medieval earthwork that runs along the modern border between England and Wales; the Wansdyke, a shorter structure in two parts, set boundaries in Wiltshire and Somerset; Devil's Dyke in Cambridgeshire marks an ancient borderline through the Fenlands. But these were the works of petty rulers. For truly great walls we must look further afield.

To be exact, we must look to early medieval Persia, where in the fifth and sixth centuries the rulers of the Sasanian Empire[Ω] built controlling fortifications on either side of the Caspian Sea – the land passages known as the Caspian Gates. In the west, in modern Dagestan, stood the Derbent wall: in fact, two long walls and the huge fortress of Naryn-Kala, which regulated north–south movement between the Caucasus Mountains and the Caspian Sea. On the eastern bank of the sea, on the Iranian side of today's border with Turkmenistan, was the even larger Great Wall of Gorgān. This huge fortification ran 195km (121 miles), emerging in the Pishkamar Mountains and following a route parallel to the northern bank of the Gorgan river, ending at the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea. Together these walls blocked the major routes between the northern steppe and the Sasanian imperial lands below.

They did so in style. The Great Wall of Gorgān, nicknamed the Red Snake, was made from millions of red bricks, which were fired in situ

during the building process in kilns placed at intervals of thirty to one hundred metres along its length. These were fed water by a purpose built canal-and-aqueduct system and they were operated by huge teams of engineers and troops, billeted close by the wall in massive tent barracks, the largest of them covering 100 acres.[28] The wall was protected on the northern side by a large ditch, and guarded by thirty forts along its course. It was one of the most technologically advanced fortifications of its age, and it was so impressive to later observers that many assumed it must have been the work of Alexander the Great, who swept through Persia in 334–330 BCE.

Modern archaeologists have pieced together a different story. Alexander had nothing to do with a brick wall erected some eight centuries after his death. Rather, it seems the Sassanians built it in the late fifth or early sixth century CE to counter the threat of attack from the White Huns (Hephthalites) – a tribal federation from Central Asia who commanded a huge swathe of the lands to the north-east of the Sassanian empire. The White Huns have left little documentary trace on the historical record. But they had raided towards the wealthy Silk Roads city of Merv in 425 CE, and massacred an imperial army that marched on Hun strongholds in 483 CE, despite that army being led by a heavy cavalry of five hundred war elephants.[29] Evidently, they were considered enough of a threat to Sasanian imperial security – and prestige – to warrant a massive display of power in the borderlands.

The Great Wall of Gorgān was probably built, therefore, to create a forward defensive line against further White Hun attacks. On another level it was also a display of imperium per se – a reminder to the upstart White Huns that there was only one regional superpower, and that the Sasanians did not intend to be replaced. But it also spoke to a longstanding conception of Iran as a walled garden – a paradise to be protected at all costs, in the name of civilisation itself. The great sixth-century Sasanian ruler Khosrow I once gave a speech in which he claimed (as a later poet recorded) that: ‘Iran is like a lush Spring garden/ Where Roses ever bloom/ The army and weapons are the garden’s walls/ And lances its wall of thorns/ If the garden’s walls are pulled down/ Then there would be no difference between it and the wilderness [beyond].’[30] Building a Great Wall against the White Huns was an act, in that sense, of preserving the Iranian soul.

As it transpired, however, the Great Wall of Gorgān was built facing the wrong direction. The White Huns were a powerful presence on the northern

steppe, but their menace paled in comparison another enemy, which arose on the south-west fringes of the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century CE. In 633 Arab armies, led by the pioneers of the Muslim faith founded by the late Prophet Muhammad, pushed into Sasanian territory.[≈] Within four years they had captured Ctesiphon, and in 651 the last Shahanshah, Yazdegerd III, was murdered while fleeing a marauding Arab army. The Great Wall of Gorgān, conceived with the White Huns in mind, was of no use whatever against the armies of Islam. It was abandoned with the fall of the Sasanian Empire and has never gained widespread historical renown, though perhaps it deserves to.[∂]



When Genghis Khan and his successors invaded China in the thirteenth century, destroying the Jurchen Jin, later crushing the Song dynasty who ruled the south, they passed by the Jin Great Wall and never looked back. For the Mongols, walls were not fortifications to be prized or admired, but simply obstacles to crash through on their way to fresh conquests. Even when Genghis' grandson Kublai Khan proclaimed himself the first emperor of the Yuan dynasty and established an imperial headquarters in Zhongdu – renamed Khanbaliq or Dadu – he was not gripped by a yearning to refortify the northern frontier over which his grandfather had long ago careened. The Mongol world empire was founded on freedom of movement, not walling off whole kingdoms. It was popularly said that under the *Pax Mongolica* a virgin with a pot of gold on her head could walk from one end of the empire to the other without being molested. The Venetian adventurer Marco Polo, who wrote an exotic, partly fantastical description of the wonders of the Khan's court, had nothing to say about any great walls. The rise of the Mongols seemed to have consigned them to the dustbin of history.

In 1368, however, the Yuan dynasty was overthrown, when, following decades of creeping impoverishment, natural disasters, epidemic disease and civil unrest, a rebellion known as the revolt of the Red Turbans swept through China. A poor farmer's son called Zhu Yuanzhang, who grew up as a beggar before becoming a Buddhist monk, led a popular movement against the Yuan, captured Khanbaliq and proclaimed a new dynasty: the Ming. It was the first ruling house in 450 years to be led by ethnic Han

Chinese, and it ushered in a step-change in political culture and military architecture.

One of the first targets for Ming refurbishment was Khanbaliq, which was renamed Beijing, and refashioned during the early decades of Ming rule with defences that soared intimidatingly over the population. By the 1420s the city was surrounded with a 10m wall, while inside it was constructed a gigantic triple-walled palace complex known as the Forbidden City. Everything about the Ming approach to imperial building was concerned with grandeur and exclusivity. Its capital city was closed off. The emperor was to be hidden from popular gaze, within circuits of walls expanding ever outwards, from the palace to the city to the edge of the empire itself. This urge to throw up barriers and hold the world at arm's length, so that outsiders might marvel at China's majestic inscrutability within, would be the hallmark of Ming rule.[31] In that context, a revived Great Wall policy was not just logical – it was inevitable.

Zhu Yuanzhang chose as his imperial name Hongwu, meaning 'overwhelming military force', and his political rhetoric was formed accordingly. He hated foreigners and reserved special loathing for the Mongols. 'I fear the heartland has long been stained with the stink of mutton,' he once said. 'My aim is to chase out the Mongol slaves. . . to cleanse China of shame.'[32] Yet for someone so repulsed by the Mongols, he seemed strangely unable to let them alone. Having decreed that the Ming capital would be in Beijing – which history had proven emphatically to be within easy preying distance of Mongolia – he then pursued an active policy of fortress-building on the steppe frontier. Under Hongwu and his successor Yonghe, fortresses were established in strategic locations, surrounded by farms on which the workers were all expected to keep up martial training. This was supposed to have the effect of creating a militarised zone between Ming China and the Mongol lands of the north. But it did not take very long for the system to fail.[33]

In 1449, Ming–Mongol hostilities flared after a series of disputes connected to the tribute system, by which outsiders came to pay formal political homage to the emperor and were given gifts of valuable trading goods. Led by his chief eunuch to believe that the Mongols were defrauding the Ming, the young Zhengtong emperor declared war and led an army half a million strong into the Mongol steppe, with the aim of delivering a beating. The expedition achieved no such thing. The emperor was captured

and his army humiliated at the battle of Tumu. The Ming clung to power, but their border policy had been shattered. In 1473, they turned back to the ancient policy of wall building.

The first section of the Ming Great Wall, built rapidly and urgently over a few months in 1474, was more than 900km (566 miles) long, a meandering packed-earth blockade defended every mile or so with a garrison house, sentry post or beacon tower. The wall was bolstered with banks and ditches, and behind it, farms were created to support the large numbers of guards who would be permanently stationed there. It was dubbed the 'great border' and proved almost immediately to be effective: in 1482 a Mongol raiding party was trapped within a section of it and suffered a serious defeat. From this point on the Ming would return repeatedly to wall-building as the solution to military crises – at virtually any length and cost.

The emergency that prompted the Ming to upgrade their wall from packed earth to stone began in the middle of the sixteenth century when the Mongols were led by a formidable ruler known as Altan Khan. During a period of drought and starvation on the steppe, Altan Khan requested tribute; when this was refused, he raided extensively into Chinese territory, bypassing poorly maintained walls and threatening to advance on Beijing itself. In response, in 1547, walls of unprecedented size and thickness were built in an 850km (528 mile) arc to the north and west of the capital – sometimes in triple or quadruple ranks. Forts built into the walls were given provocative names such as 'Overawing the Goat-Like Barbarians'.[34]

But overawing the goat-like barbarians was easier said than done, and in 1550 they were quite literally knocking on the gates of Beijing, having simply ridden around the end of the wall-lines and doubled back once inside the defensive zone. Just as had been the case when Genghis Khan took aim at the Jin Empire, even the mightiest wall, with the heaviest imaginable fortifications, were only as strong as its weakest points. Despite all the centuries of wall-building that the various Chinese dynasties since the Qin had undertaken, and the deep loathing the Ming in particular reserved for the Mongols, there were still long gaps in the boundary-line that faced the northern steppe. Even where the wall was intact, rammed earth structures could be destroyed by teams of men with pickaxes if they had time and military protection. This reality was summed up by a political axiom stating that if even a single horseman could break through a border wall, then it was not secure.[35] If a wall really was the answer to the Mongol

problem, it would have to be conceived on a scale vastly greater than anything that had been seen before.

From this point on, the Ming were fully committed to cutting themselves off from the world to the north. Between the 1570s and the dynasty's demise in 1644, more than 6,000km (3,720 miles) of wall was renovated or constructed afresh – no longer from packed soil but out of brick and stone, held together with a form of lime-based concrete called *sanhetu*. Now the wall consisted of solid, crenallated stretches of barrier, often six or seven metres high, with walkways wide enough to gallop horses along joining towers that soared up to thirty metres over the landscape. Watchtowers stood every few hundred metres. Fire beacons and semaphore enabled rapid communication along the wall. Artillery platforms allowed cannon to be aimed outwards, and the wall was fitted with arrow-slits and firearm holes. *Ma-mien* ('horse faces') were installed to resist scaling.

The wall was built even across hostile terrain previously considered to be fortified by nature. In areas agreeable to agriculture, garrison towns were founded to sustain the hundreds of thousands of troops who would be assigned to guard duty. Troops could be rotated along the wall by walking or riding along its top: as well as a frontier defence, it was also a military highway. The Ming Great Wall was conceived and built on a scale that exceeded even the vision of the first Qin emperor eighteen centuries earlier. And its costs were proportionally exorbitant. The wall consumed as much as half of the empire's military spending, which, as the seventeenth century dawned, was spiralling far beyond what the imperial treasury could afford.

By the 1620s the Ming Great Wall was one of the most significant pieces of military architecture ever built by human hands. One seventeenth-century western observer wrote that 'the seven wonders of the [ancient] world put together are not comparable to this work.'[36] Yet behind the wall, the Ming state was in a state of terminal decay. Chronic silver shortages, an outmoded tax system, crop failures and famines, factionalism at court and a succession of emperors more comfortable lavishing wealth on palaces and indulging the countless princelings of the huge imperial family all combined to weaken the resilience of the empire at large and the army on the northern border in particular. Unpaid soldiers prepared to mutiny. Among the ordinary people a new mood of revolution swelled.

In 1643, amid a growing sense of crisis, a former postman called Li Zicheng led a band of rebels against to capture Xi'an – the city where the

first Qin emperor lay guarded by his Terracotta Army – and declared a new imperial dynasty, the Shun. By the next year, Li Zicheng had 1 million rebels at his back, and when he advanced on Beijing in April 1644, it became evident that the city walls were chronically undermanned, and the treasury empty. In the early hours of the morning of April 25th, the last Ming ruler, the Chongzhen emperor, hanged himself, and the city opened its gates to Li Zicheng.

The last hope of the Ming dynasty in resisting the upstart Shun now rested on the fortification which had been in part responsible for its slow-burn fiscal and political collapse. While Li Zicheng had been on the march inside China, beyond the Great Wall another enemy had also been gathering its strength. In Manchuria, a Jurchen imperial dynasty descended from the medieval Jin had been proclaimed, and its leaders were offering themselves as the legitimate successors to the Ming. As news of the Chongzhen emperor's suicide and the Shun revolution sped north, the Manchus approached the wall and readied themselves to break through.

They did so with the smallest possible effort. More appalled by the rise of the Shun than the prospect of yet another barbarian invasion, a loyal Ming general, Wu Sangui, sent orders that the gates of the Great Wall at the garrison town of Shanhaiguan should be opened to the Manchus. Here, where the wall controlled a narrow coastal corridor between the Yan Mountains and the Bohai Gulf, one of the gates bore the inscription 'First Pass Under Heaven'. This, along with the rest of the gates, was thrown open on May 27th 1644, and the Manchus poured through. Around a week later Li Zicheng abandoned Beijing, setting fire to the Forbidden City as he went. Thus it was not the Shun dynasty that succeeded the Ming, but the Manchus, who on June 6th 1644 formally established the Qing dynasty, which would rule in China until the empire itself was abolished in 1912. The Great Wall, built to keep out the despised barbarians from the north, had been precisely the portal through which another barbarian people had come to rule China. And like the Mongol Yuan before them, the Manchu Qing emperors thought better of wasting their time and money building any more of it.



Despite what is often said, the Great Wall of China is not visible from space. Yet in the centuries since it was shown for the last time to be a futile means of defending an empire, it has become one of the world's most popular tourist attractions. To walk along the Ming fortifications – even with an appreciation of just how redundant they proved – is an awe-inspiring experience. As a means of border defence the Great Wall represented an act of grandiose folly. Yet as an expression of the dynasty's self-image, its imagined cultural superiority to the despised northerners, and its divine right to draw China in the shape it pleased, the Great Wall was something of a triumph.

Given its vastness, its beauty in the landscape and its ultimate worthlessness as a fortification, the Great Wall can strike observers as dazzling and appalling, often at the same time. In his *Philosophical Dictionary*, the eighteenth-century French writer-philosopher Voltaire compared the Great Wall to the pyramids of Egypt, and seemed faintly baffled by both: 'The Chinese, more than two hundred years before our era, constructed that great wall which was not able to save them from the invasion of the Tartars. The Egyptians, 3,000 years before, had overloaded the earth with their astonishing pyramids. . . The great wall of China is a monument to fear; the pyramids are monuments to vanity and superstition. Both bear witness to a great patience in the peoples, but to no superior genius.'[37] His compatriot, Ludovic Hébert, likewise torn between admiration and scorn, called the wall 'a supremely wonderful sight' and a 'fantastic serpent of stone', yet almost in the same pen-stroke, wrote that 'if one stops to think after admiring such a magnificent view, how easy it is to see in it the work of a people of overgrown children led by despots.'[38]

These are not only the views of patronising Europeans: many Chinese observers have seen the wall in similar terms, ever since the seventeenth-century historian Wan Sitong railed against the parade of imperial dynasties who 'built walls endlessly, without ever pausing for breath,' deluding themselves into thinking that this was ever the solution to the problem of the barbarians.[39]

Over the years many more Chinese writers would express variations on the same thought, although today perhaps the best-known aphorism concerning the wall is the line of poetry written by Mao Zedong during the Long March in 1935, when he led Communist forces on a 9,000-kilometre retreat from their Nationalist enemies. 'If we fail to reach the Great Wall we

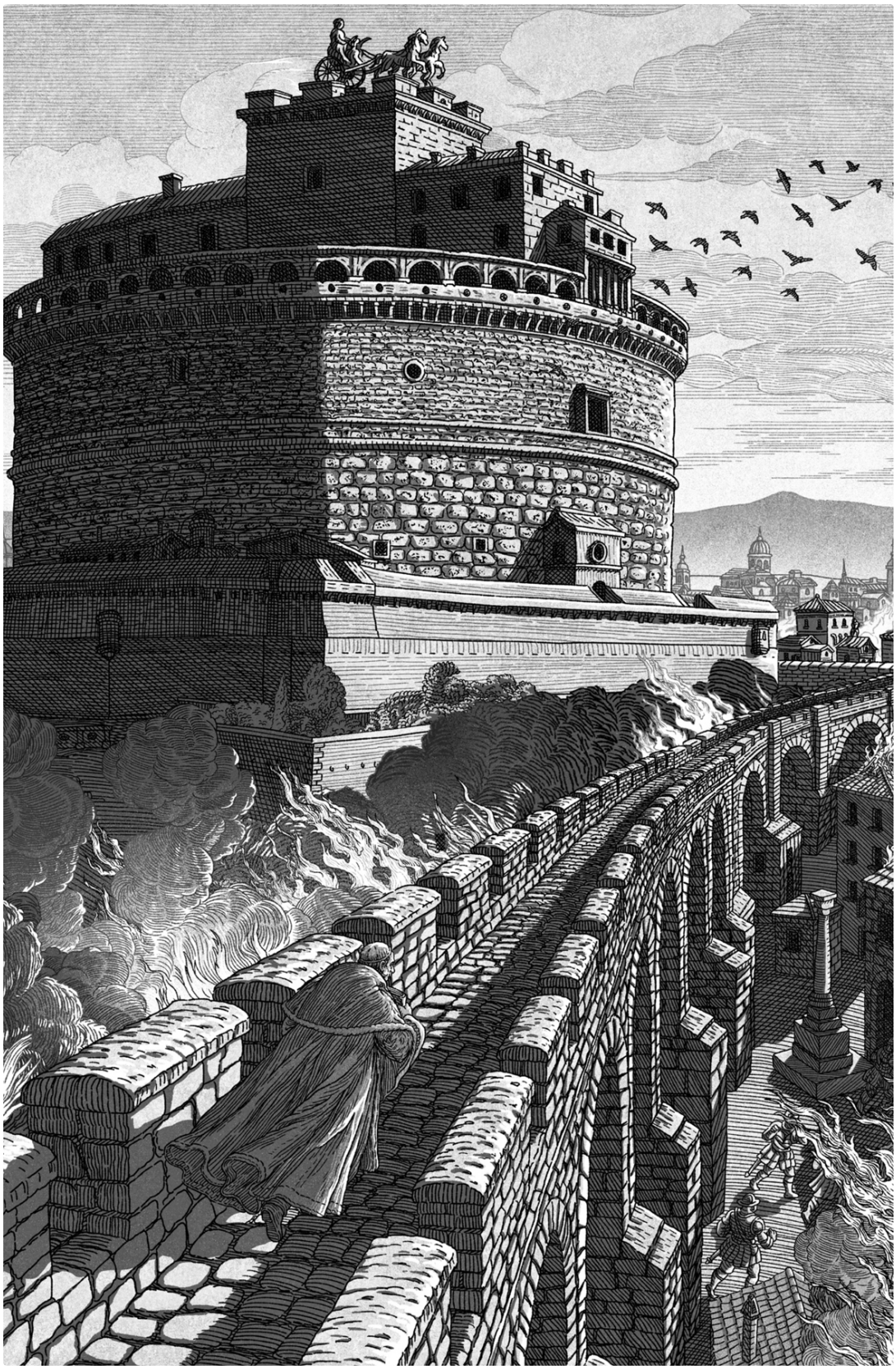
are not real men,' wrote Mao – a line that has been recast since in variations on the idea that 'he who has never been to the Great Wall is not a true hero'.

That such ancestor-worship would have been quite at odds with Mao's general view of history is an irony that has mostly been lost as his quote has become a meme. And in recent years, the Chinese Communist Party has cautiously embraced the Great Wall as a proxy for Chinese achievement past, present and future. In 2024, President Xi Jinping visited a part of the Ming Great Wall near Beijing and declared it a potent symbol of Chinese civilisation, praising the villagers living near the wall for taking care of its upkeep. 'It is our common responsibility to protect and pass on this historical and cultural heritage,' he said.[40] In his effort to promote China as a world superpower, Xi has also spoken of the Chinese military as a Great Wall of Steel. 'Fortress China' is a phrase often used to describe Xi's pursuit of energy and technological independence.

Yet as we have seen, the instinct to trust great walls to protect an entire realm has never been a quirk of Chinese history. It is an idea that has appealed throughout history to the leaders of great empires, who love the symbolism of walls as much as their function, and delude themsleves that whatever history shows about the effectiveness of wall-building, this time they will make a success of it.

This has been as true in the modern world as it was in the ancient and medieval. After the devastation wrought on France during the First World War, the French government built a wall – the Maginot Line – that would keep the German hordes from sweeping once again across their eastern borders.[π] After the Second World War, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev directed the government of East Germany to build the Berlin Wall: a physical manifestation of the Iron Curtain which divided the eastern world from the west. And from the 1990s, as nations across the west struggled with the common problem of mass migration – a significant part of it illegal – successive presidents of the United States all commissioned fences and walls along the southern border of the USA. The effectiveness of a wall alone to combat one of the most pressing problems facing developed countries in the twenty-first century is a divisive political issue. It may – or may not – be comforting for readers to know that although the pursuit of security by turning an entire realm into a castle is a proven fantasy, it is one that has been shared by many generations before us.

* In 1115 the Manchurian Jurchen tribe overthrew the Liao rulers of northern China and established the Jin dynasty. Jurchen refers to the ethnic and cultural origins of the ruling elite, while Jin (meaning ‘Gold’) denotes the imperial state they governed. The Jurchen Jin Empire stretched from Manchuria to the Qinling-Huaihe line that traditionally divides northern and southern China.
† The oldest known section of the Great Wall of China, discovered in 2024, is in the Shandong Province of eastern China, and has been dated to the Western Zhou. See: www.globaltimes.cn/page/202502/1328512.shtml
‡ There are many variations on the spelling of Genghis Khan, including Chinggis Qan. I have opted here for the most familiar. The meaning of the title has been vigorously debated – but a loose translation is Universal or Unshakeable Ruler.
§ This feels apocryphal – and similar stories have been attributed to other larger-than-life characters, beginning with the biblical hero Samson. Amid a broader campaign of cartoonish ultraviolence – which included tearing a lion apart with his bare hands and beating 1,000 men to death with an ass’s jawbone – Samson was said to have tied firebrands to foxes’ tails to burn the Philistines’ crops (Judges, 14:5-6).
See chapter 1.
∫ A Roman mile was 1,000 paces, equivalent to 0.92 modern miles or 1.48km.
Ω The Sasanian dynasty ruled Iran from 224 to 651 CE with a capital in Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad). During its heyday under the Shahanshah (King of Kings) Khosrow II, the empire controlled what is today Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, much of the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf, northern Egypt, Syria and parts of Turkey.
≈ See chapter 3.
∂ The same could be said for two more of the other Great Walls built in the first millennium CE. The Ch’ŏlli changsŏng, or Great Wall of Korea, was a 400km (250 mile) line of forts, earthworks, walls and other barriers initially erected in the seventh century on the borderlands between the Korean kingdom of Goguryeo and the Chinese Sui kingdom; parts of it were still functional in the twelfth century CE. Just as complex was the vast system of earthwork defences built far away in the Middle Ages in the African kingdom of Benin (modern Nigeria). Begun in around 700 CE to keep elephants from trampling crops, the Benin earthworks were improved and expanded well into the fourteenth century, evolving military functions as well as cultural meaning. Often cited as longest earthworks ever carried out prior to the mechanical era, they stretched 16,000km (10,000 miles) in total.
π See Epilogue.



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9

RENAISSANCE CASTLES

The prince must diligently provide for the walls, towers, and fortifications of the city, strengthening them not only with stones, but also with morals.

GUIDO DA VIGEVANO

In the last days of May 1481 a rumour swept around Rome that a great enemy of Christendom was dead. It began as a whisper, passing along the Eternal City's newly widened streets and sparkling piazzas. It gathered pace and bounced between the building sites where ancient churches were being restored to their former glories and public buildings raised, including a magnificent new Vatican Library.[1] Soon it was the talk of passers-by who strolled beside the grand palazzos at either end of the Ponte Sisto: the bridge erected the previous decade to ease pilgrim traffic across the Tiber, and the first river crossing to have been built in Rome since antiquity.[2]

Then, as the sun rose early on the morning of Saturday June 2nd, the official news arrived in lead-sealed letters from the Venetian Senate, addressed to Pope Sixtus IV. The letters confirmed what all the 40,000 residents of Rome yearned to believe. One month earlier, the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II 'the Conqueror' had died. For three decades Mehmed had been scourge of the Christian world: crushing crusader armies, attacking Catholic kingdoms, and, in 1453, conquering Constantinople, ending the Byzantine Empire and impertinently claiming for himself the title of Caesar of Rome (qaysar-i-rum). But now Mehmed was no more, and the whole Christian world could rejoice.

As crowds in Rome's streets shouted '*La grande aquila è morta*' (the great eagle is dead), the sixty-six-year-old Pope Sixtus[*] led a three-day round of thanksgiving.[3] Surrounded by cardinals he processed to Santa Maria del Popolo, a church founded over the grave of the tyrant Nero and latterly rebuilt with an elegant modern façade and daring octagonal dome. During the following days there were further parades around the city. An eyewitness saw the pope 'proceeding from the forecourt of [Old St Peter's basilica] and returning by the Via Sacra, which had recently been paved through the beneficence of Sixtus, while ambassadors and nobles continually carried a canopy above [him].'[4]

But the most spectacular – and loudest – celebrations took place after dusk on the terrace of the papal fortress known as the Castel Sant'Angelo. According to the same observer: 'As darkness fell over the whole city, fires were lit especially in the higher places; the bells too were rung more

frequently in celebration. . . there were heard not only the sound of trumpets and pipes, but also the crackle of bombards and hand-guns, by day and by night, without interruption, until satiety.'[5] As gunpowder blasts emitted from its terraces, the Castel Sant'Angelo was transformed into a beacon of triumph. Each flash that burst from the muzzles of its cannons was like a cry of thanks to God for his people's deliverance. Christendom was saved.

This crude pyrotechnic display was a show befitting the city's relief. It spoke to the importance of gunpowder, a substance that was transforming everything about warfare in the later Middle Ages.[†] And it captured the broader themes of the times: scientific invention, artistic extravagance, Christian triumphalism and veneration of the ancient world. Castel Sant'Angelo had originally been known as Hadrian's Mausoleum, for it was the burial place of the famous second-century CE Roman emperor who had also given his name to a long fortified wall in Britannia.[‡] Over the years it had been repurposed, strengthened, integrated into Rome's city walls, and Christianised, and now served as the chief military stronghold of popes.

In centuries to come, this raucous display of firepower from the terrace of the Castel Sant'Angelo would birth a legend. Given the castle's prominence on Rome's skyline, and the Church's fondness for marking high occasions, it grew customary for popes to celebrate feast days[§] with fireworks shows, in which rockets and spinning flares were launched from a high platform known as the Terrace of the Angel. *La Girandola* (the pinwheel), as it was known, became a longstanding fixture in Rome's civic-religious calendar – as well as a once-in-a-lifetime experience for generations of tourists. In the eighteenth century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe visited Rome and described the nightly illuminations as 'a spectacle from the fabulous world of fairy-tales. . . even the light of the moon appear[s] to be quenched.'[6] In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens was equally dazzled: 'The show began with a tremendous discharge of cannon; and then, for half an hour, the whole Castle was one incessant sheet of fire, and labyrinth of blazing wheels of every colour, size and speed: white rockets streamed into the sky, not by ones or twos, or scores, but hundreds at a time. The concluding burst. . . was like the blowing up into the air of the whole Castle, without smoke or dust.'[7]

In time, collective memory mangled the circumstances under which this fantastical light-show had begun. Mehmet's role was forgotten, and the first

Girandola was said to have begun as a tribute to Pope Sixtus himself, either to announce his accession as pontiff in 1471, or else to mark his tenth anniversary in office. Neither was the first show remembered as a barrage from the castle's guns, backed up with the squawk of military music. Rather, it was said to have been a fireworks display from the outset, designed by one of Renaissance Italy's greatest geniuses, Michelangelo Buonarroti.

In fact, Michelangelo, born in 1475, was six years old when the news of Mehmet's death reached Rome. Yet when we consider the history of the Castel Sant'Angelo, and other military strongholds of the Renaissance in Italy and beyond, it is easy to understand how the tale arose. For one thing, an adult Michelangelo did contribute to the architecture of the Castel Sant'Angelo, by designing the marble façade of the Chapel of Leo X on the Courtyard of the Angel. For another, his and Sixtus' names are eternally entwined in the grand history of Roman art, for in 1508 Michelangelo painted the iconic ceiling fresco of the Sistine Chapel,[#] showing scenes from the Creation. But more than anything, designing a fireworks display to illuminate a papal castle simply feels like the sort of thing Michelangelo could have done, since his was one of the greatest minds of the Italian Renaissance, and the Castel Sant'Angelo was one of its most remarkable landmarks.

Between the dawn of the Renaissance in the early fourteenth century and its waning in the late sixteenth, Italy produced artists whose work went beyond the canvas to touch on the fabric of fortifications, too. They included Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Filippo Brunelleschi, Antonio da Sangallo and Francesco di Giorgio Martini. Although most are now better remembered for painting, sculptures and frescoes, or religious architecture, they all worked on military defences that were called into service in the wars that convulsed Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Renaissance was an age in which beauty and brutality, creativity and cruelty swirled together, as a new world was founded in self-conscious tribute to the past. Many of its themes found monumental form in the towers, terraces and palatial apartments of the castle – nowhere more so than the Castel Sant'Angelo, a resting-place for Roman emperors, which became the last refuge of more than one pope.

By the fifteenth century castles in Europe had long been a matter of interest not only for warrior elites, but also for the intellectuals who fell into their orbits. This was only natural. Castles – and fortified cities – were military hubs, aristocratic homes, and places for political discourse, justice, punishment, tax collection, commerce, religious worship, agriculture and courtly celebration. The great thinkers of the late medieval world could hardly ignore them. Castles were megastructures that presented intriguing design challenges and opportunities to show off, particularly once gunpowder reached Europe and posed new technical challenges for building walls that could withstand cannon blasts. They were also embedded in all the areas of society and culture that interested thoughtful people.

Long before the Renaissance, therefore, scholars across Europe were engaging with the castle both as an idea and as a reality. Sometimes they used the castle as an analogy. In the eleventh century, the Anglo-Norman churchman Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, composed a homily on the gospel of St Luke, in which he framed the body of the Virgin Mary as a castle, which at the moment of the immaculate conception provided a walled haven for Christ.[8] The following century another English cleric developed the same theme: 'Brothers, let us prepare a kind of spiritual castle, so that our Lord may come to us. For I say boldly: unless blessed Mary had prepared this castle within herself, the Lord Jesus would not have entered her womb, nor her mind.'[9] In this scheme, the basic features of a castle – the ditch, wall and tower – were said to correspond to the Christian virtues of humility, chastity and charity.

One of the most significant writers on the practical aspects of castle-building and defence was the late thirteenth century Augustinian friar and theologian Giles of Rome, archbishop of Bourges. Giles worked in an age when Christian academics were re-engaging with writers from the ancient and classical worlds – and he mined these authorities for their best advice. In the 1270s Giles was hired by King Philip III of France to write a handbook on leadership for his son, the future Philip IV. The result was *De regimine principum* ('On the Rule of Princes') which became one of the most widely read books in medieval Europe. In it, Giles counselled the younger Philip on all aspects of rule, laying out the virtues a prince should embrace and the vices he should avoid; suggesting effective ways to manage a family and large aristocratic household; and discoursing on political theory and the tensions between kingship and tyranny.[10]

Naturally, given its brief, *De regimine* dealt with castles and fortifications. Giles was no soldier – he had spent more time in the cloisters than on the ramparts. But he had studied the Roman military commentator Vegetius' *De Re Militari*, and Giles used it to advise young Philip of France on siegecraft, defensive architecture and battlefield tactics. Some of his advice was technical: 'In front of any gate of the fortification at which there is fear that besiegers may approach, towers and battlements must be constructed; and in front of such a gate there must be placed a portcullis, hanging from iron rings and entirely reinforced with iron, preventing the entry of enemies and the attack of fire. . .'[11] Elsewhere, he leaned into psychology. 'There are three ways of overcoming fortifications, namely by hunger, thirst, and fighting,' he wrote. 'Besieged fortifications must be defended in such a way that they cannot be overcome by any of these means.'[12]

Giles of Rome's writings were popular and widely imitated. The Provençal monk Honoré Bonet wrote extensively on chivalry and the laws of war. The German military engineering genius and astrology obsessive Konrad Kyeser composed a book called *Bellifortis*, featuring sections on siege machines, carriages, elevators, hydraulic machines, firearms and pyrotechnics – as well as designs for a diving suit and a chastity belt.

The mid-fourteenth century Italian physician Guido da Vigevano of Pavia was best known for his medical and medicinal textbooks, but he could also turn his hand to warfare. He designed war machines including armoured chariots and elaborate siege engines, and his book *Texarus regis francie* included the design for a mobile siege tower with a crane arm, which could reach across the moats and battlements of a castle. Guido also dealt with military ethics. Beside his siege engine design he wrote: 'the prince must diligently provide for the walls, towers, and fortifications of the city, strengthening them not only with stones, but also with morals. And just as an outer wall keeps out the enemy, so inner discipline keeps out corruption.'[13]

Then there was the first Renaissance woman: Christine de Pizan. Born in Venice in 1364, Christine de Pizan grew up at the French royal court, where her father was Charles V's resident astrologer and physician. When he died in 1388 (followed the next year by her husband, Etienne du Castel)[ʃ] Christine did not remarry. Instead, she lived by her pen, which she laid at

the service of any wealthy patron who could afford her. She was familiar with a wide range of ancient texts, and drew on them to write poetry, books of advice for rulers (known as mirrors for princes), works on political theory and treatises defending women from the sexist scorn of male writers.

In several of her most famous works, Christine dealt with castles and fortifications. For Christine, the castle was both an object and a concept. In *The Book of the City of Ladies* (c.1405), an extended meditation on female virtue, she used the fortified city as a central allegorical motif. The book begins with Christine sitting in her study, surrounded by books, feeling depressed at the thought that 'so many men, both clerks and others, have said and continue to say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways. . .'[14] Then she receives a visit from the three Virtues, whose leader, Lady Reason, explains that women are constantly abused not for any deep fault, but because they lack brave defenders. Lady Reason likens the idle sexism of 'slanderers and vicious traitors' to a siege against womankind. 'Even the strongest city will fall if there is no one to defend it,' she warns.

This is not idle chatter: Lady Reason charges Christine to stand up for her sex by building a literary super-fortress. 'You are to construct a building in the shape of a walled city, sturdy and impregnable,' she says. 'These walls should have huge high towers, solid bastions surrounded by moats and outer forts with both natural and manmade defences.'[15] This fortress – her book – will be populated with inspiring heroines whose excellent characters can together save the dignity of all womankind. 'In the manner of a true sibyl, I prophesy to you that this city which you're going to build. . . will never fall or be taken,' Lady Reason says. 'Rather, it will prosper always, in spite of its enemies who are racked by envy.'[16]

Christine embraces her task. She takes 'the spade of [her] intelligence' and starts digging a trench to run around her defensive walls. She lifts the 'trowel' of her pen and sets 'good, strong stone' as foundations. Then she erects a 'high enclosure wall the whole way round.' Then she gets to work populating her fortified city.

The Book of the City of Ladies has remarkable historical range. Christine's heroines include Greeks and Amazons, Romans and Franks. Odysseus' wife, Penelope, is slotted in alongside the patriarch Isaac's wife, Rebecca. The Amazons are called to arms alongside the early Christian martyrs. Christine writes of Minerva, who (she says) invented Greek

writing, olive oil, wheeled transport and ‘the art of forging armour for knights to protect themselves in battle’. She presents Queen Ceres of Sicily ‘who was responsible for inventing both the science and the techniques of agriculture’; Xanthippe, the ‘very wise and virtuous’ wife of Socrates, who narrowly failed to save him from his execution by drinking poison; and the ‘blessed virgin Euphrosyna’ who loved God so much that she lived secretly as a man for thirty-eight years so she might serve the lord as a monk. She also includes, for contrast, tales of men behaving badly: the depraved Roman emperor Nero, and ‘Denis, the foul tyrant of Sicily,[Ω] whose life was so despicable that it’s too disgusting to read about.’ Judging by the history books, Christine writes, ‘you would never find a handful of women who were anything like as perverse as these vast numbers of men.’[≈]

The Book of the City of Ladies is a robust defence of female virtue, which remains justly famous today. It succeeds in part because of Christine de Pizan’s witty prose and broad learning. But her decision to cast womanly virtue in the form of the fortified city is especially inspired: co-opting a masculine form to argue that strength is rooted in noble character, not sex, high birth or deeds of arms. The idea that virtue, rather than brute force, is at the root of all good politics would become an article of scholarly faith for later Renaissance writers.[17] Whether they knew it or not, many were standing on Christine de Pizan’s shoulders.

Later in her career, Christine de Pizan would address the business of fortification literally. In 1411 she was paid the handsome sum of 200 livres from the French royal treasury for producing *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*: a combination of military manual and moral treatise, written for Charles VI’s son Louis of Guyenne. Invoking the goddess Minerva (as she had in *The Book of the City of Ladies*), Christine explained that while it was unusual for a woman to write about ‘the most honorable office of arms and chivalry’, she knew her way around all the relevant texts. And in the end, writing was writing. ‘Just as the builder who has already put up several strongholds is bold enough to construct a castle or fortress when he feels he has the materials to accomplish the work. . . so to this end I have gathered together facts and subject matter from various books to produce this present volume.’[18]

To read Christine de Pizan’s chapters on castles in *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, one might think that she was a veteran of dozens of

bitterly fought sieges. She parses Christian theories of just war dating back to St Augustine. She offers extensive practical advice on military education and training drawn – inevitably – from Vegetius. She explains topics ranging from spycraft to fording rivers, battle orders and the ethics of escape for prisoners of war. And she holds forth in detail on castles: where and how to build them, how to defend them and how to attack them. She discusses barbicans, gatehouses, portcullises and moats. She itemises exactly what is needed in a frontier castle kitchen and store cupboard. ('Wheat, flour, sea biscuits, wine, vinegar, sour grapes, salt, oil salted butter, peas, dried beans, barley oats, poultry, wood, coal, beef, mutton, salted fish with onions. . . tallow, candles, lanterns, wicks, linen, beds and covers, stretchers, water buckets, cauldrons, vats for water, casks, a great many planks. . .'[19]) Drawing on examples from Roman history, she explains why 'the matter of placing loyal people in castles and cities. . . should be given careful attention. . . they should not be unduly greedy.'[20] And she brings Vegetius' advice on siegecraft up to date for the age of gunpowder: to reduce a well defended castle with firepower, she writes, it is best to have 248 cannon, 30,000 pounds of gunpowder, thousands of stones and lead pellets, dozens of shields, barges, carts and an engineering corps comprising thousands of workmen, labourers, carpenters, common soldiers, knights, squires and cannoneers.

Christine's advice on defending a besieged stronghold is no less detailed: she holds forth on destroying siege towers, frustrating sappers by countermining, and reinforcing doors against battering rams. She asks her readers to remember that defending the high walls of a castle is easier than assaulting them thanks, if nothing else, to gravity: 'regarding what is thrown from above – whether stones or arrows shot from ballistae, or stones from mangonels or other catapults – the greater height from which they are thrown, the more they injure.[∂] Nothing can protect the attackers against such objects, if they are skilfully thrown, any more than against lightning.'[21] But like countless other writers before her, Christine acknowledges that the vital part of siege defence is morale. 'It is necessary for all who engage in battle for the defence of their country or city to have great faith in God that they will be victorious because their cause is right, for otherwise they will not be able to fight bravely.'[22]

Christine de Pizan lived a long life, through the turbulent decades of France's Burgundian-Armagnac wars and a particularly destructive era of the Hundred Years War between France and England. After her death in around 1430, her writing remained popular – her works could be found in the best libraries in Europe, sometimes translated from French into the local vernacular. She is usually considered most remarkable for her status as a professional female writer in the later Middle Ages, and her lively defence of women's virtue against the general misogyny of the times. But Christine's interest in castles and fortifications mattered too. As the Renaissance spread from Italy across Europe, many of its other celebrated figures would turn their attention to the castle. To illustrate this point we may now return from France to Rome, and the Castel Sant'Angelo.



In 134 CE the Roman Emperor Hadrian returned to Rome from a five-year tour of his imperial provinces, which had taken him to Greece, Palestine, Egypt and Syria. The restless emperor was now fifty-eight years old, his health was failing and he was mourning his lover Antinous, who, in display of mad passion, had drowned himself in the Nile. Hadrian's travelling days were over; he would live out the last years of his life in Rome, dedicating himself to creative pursuits.[23]

He had already created a good deal. Works were already nearing completion on his Temple of Venus and Roma, which was now the largest in Rome. Outside the city, at Tivoli, Hadrian had commissioned the most luxurious imperial villa ever built. As legacy projects these might have satisfied some emperors. But Hadrian wanted more. ('His ambition was insatiable,' wrote the historian Cassius Dio.)[24] His masterpiece was to be a mausoleum fit for himself and future members of the Antonine imperial dynasty.

Even by Hadrian's elevated standards, the mausoleum was magnificent. Its body was a huge, marble-clad cylinder nearly 50m high, decorated with flattened columns (known as pilasters) and colossal statues of gods and emperors. Below was a great square masonry podium, 85m along its sides, while on top of everything stood a temple, surrounded by a garden of cypress trees and crowned with a triumphant bronze statue of Hadrian in the guise of a sun god driving a chariot pulled by four horses. Inside the

cylinder was a helical ramp leading between the temple and the burial chamber, where the imperial ashes were to be deposited when the time came.

The monumental grandeur of the structure drew on sights Hadrian had seen in the east: the original Mausoleum at Halicarnassus and the Egyptian pyramids. Now it transformed the Roman skyline. A new bridge known as the Pons Aelius joined the building with the city centre. But one did not need to cross the bridge to see the mausoleum: it towered over everything: a monument to the eternal glory of empire.[25]

Following Hadrian's death in 138 CE, every emperor until Caracalla in 217 CE was buried in the mausoleum, where beside their cinerary urns was an inscription attributed to Hadrian himself, reading, 'Little soul, gentle and drifting, guest and companion of my body, now you will dwell below in pallid places, stark and bare; there you will abandon your play of yore.' But in the third century imperial burial practices changed. Some emperors built their own tombs. After Constantine I converted to Christianity in 312 CE, many were buried in churches, or in the new capitals of Constantinople and Milan. A few emperors, disgraced and assassinated, were simply thrown in the Tiber.

Soon, not even the mausoleum's original inhabitants remained. When Rome was sacked by the Goths in 410 CE, the urns were smashed and their ashes scattered; a century later, when the Goths came again, Hadrian's bronze sun-god statue was torn down. Later, the marble was pillaged for new buildings, and the pilasters and statues were broken up: during the second Goth invasion, chunks of stone emperor were used to bombard the barbarians at the gates.[π] It would have been unsurprising if, nine centuries later, during the flourishing of the Renaissance, the mausoleum had been nothing more than a ruin.

Yet in the later Middle Ages the mausoleum was transformed, for it was now no longer a tomb for the dead, but an integral part of Rome's military landscape. In the fifth century CE it was incorporated into the city's Aurelian walls, which gave it a practical role in the city's boundary defences. In 590 CE, after plague had been ravaging the city's population for many weeks, a vision of the Archangel Michael was seen at the top of the mausoleum, sheathing his sword as an indication that God had decreed the pestilence was to end. (This was the incident from which the name Castel Sant'Angelo sprang.) After this, possession of the mausoleum conferred both status and

tactical advantage in Rome – and it was strengthened and maintained accordingly. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, when it was held by the Crescentii family (and known briefly as the Castellum Crescentii) the Castel Sant'Angelo became notorious as a prison, where in 974 Pope Benedict VI was incarcerated and strangled in the course of a power-struggle between popes, emperors and the Roman aristocracy.[Δ] Following the fall of the Crescentii, the castle passed into the hands of two more Roman families: the Pierleoni, then the Orsini. Then, in 1277, Giovanni Gaetano Orsini was elected as Pope Nicholas III, and the former Mausoleum of Hadrian became a papal fortress. It would remain one until the dawn of the twentieth century.

Although in the late Middle Ages popes were the supreme spiritual authorities in the Catholic Church, they dabbled heavily in secular politics, and therefore lived under regular threat of violence and even assassination – as Benedict VI's experience at the hands of the Crescentii had shown. That made it essential not only for popes to keep a secure fortress in Rome but to have emergency access to it at all times. Soon after the Castel Sant'Angelo fell into papal possession, therefore, an 800m escape tunnel was fitted into a fortification wall leading from the papal compound at the Vatican to the castle. Known as the Passetto (or the Passetto di Borgo), it would be called into use on more than one occasion.

The Passetto, a connecting artery between palace and castle, established the Castel Sant'Angelo as a linchpin of papal security, and although there was a hiatus in the fortress's development between 1309 and 1377 (when popes were resident in Avignon) from the late fourteenth century it underwent major structural works. Under Pope Boniface IX, who held office from 1389–1404, the internal ramp that had been a feature of the mausoleum since Hadrian's day was rebuilt to improve movement around the fortress. Later in the century, under Sixtus IV, new streets connected it to the most attractive parts of the pope's redeveloped city, including the Vatican palace, with its stunning new papal library. Sixtus had an inscription mounted near the castle, proclaiming his own role in returning Rome to the glory of its ancient past. ('To preserve is no lesser achievement than to create,' it read.)[26] Yet Sixtus never got around to transforming the basic fabric of the Castel Sant'Angelo. That would fall to a pope who made even the louche-living Sixtus look genuinely monastic. He was Alexander VI.

A member of the Borgia family from the Spanish kingdom of Aragon, Alexander VI was a veteran of papal politics when, in 1492, he was elected to St Peter's throne. As a long-serving, high-ranking cardinal he had developed a talent for Church diplomacy and a reputation for administrative competence. He had a refined artistic taste. But Alexander also courted danger. He was given to sexual incontinence, worldliness and nepotism – which combined in his fathering and furthering the careers of ten children by several mistresses. He embroiled himself compulsively in foreign intrigue, which meant that under him Rome existed in a near-constant turmoil. Thugs loyal to rival factions fought running battles in the streets, lawlessness was rife and the possibility of invasion never seemed far away. If ever there was a moment when a pope needed the security of a modern fortress, this was it.

Just how important the Castel Sant'Angelo would be was revealed two years after Alexander became pope, in 1494. That year, the French king Charles VIII invaded Italy in an attempt to enforce his own claim to the kingdom of Naples. Alexander threw the weight of the papacy behind a coalition of opposing powers which would become known as the Holy League (or League of Venice). Charles marched his armies into the Italian peninsula, occupying Florence and then closing in on Rome. As the French descended in December 1494, Alexander was forced to use the Passetto for the purpose it was intended, fleeing the Vatican palace with his favourite possessions bundled up for safekeeping, and scampering for the greater safety of the Castel Sant'Angelo. He remained there for several weeks, until a settlement could be brokered.

The shock of foreign occupation, although it had been brief, was considerable, and during his enforced stay in the Castel Sant'Angelo, the pope had grown convinced that its defences would not hold out against a sustained artillery assault. Alexander's renovation of the Castel Sant'Angelo therefore began as soon as the French had withdrawn from Rome in the spring of 1495. It started with the construction of newly raised walls and guardhouses. Four great bastions – angled, protruding towers from which guns could be fired in any direction, including along the walls behind them – were placed at each corner of the old mausoleum's square base. They were named after the four evangelists: Matteo, Marco, Luca and Giovanni. These cannons and handguns were placed in every tower, and 1133kg (25,000lbs) of gunpowder was stockpiled to make sure they stayed

serviceable. On the river side the castle's defences were extended outwards to connect with the Ponte Sant'Angelo (Hadrian's old Pons Aelius). Around the base a moat was dug, in which ancient Roman statues, destroyed during the barbarian assaults 1,000 years earlier, were pulled out of the ground. These included a fine bust of Hadrian himself, with his tousled hair pushed forward and a thick, neatly clipped beard covering his slightly weak chin.

Delighted by these discoveries, the pope presented the builders he had hired with a contract obliging them to turn over all 'marbles, travertines, statues, iron, lead' – anything except for the raw concrete – to him.[27] He planned to use the finest artefacts to decorate the residential apartments in the castle, should he or any of his successors be forced into another lengthy stay there.

In fact, whatever the threat level, the interiors of the Castel Sant'Angelo were – like any Renaissance fortress – just as important as the outward defences. They needed to be functional – and beautiful. Thus the ramp inside the mausoleum's great cylinder was reinforced again and secured with a wooden door with slits through which arquebuses could be fired. Tanks were installed to store the two liquids vital to Italian life: water and olive oil. Several new prison cells were built, dark and cramped. Alexander also had a hanging fruit garden built in the south-east corner of the castle compound, where members of the papal court could exercise. But the finest work was done on the apartments and state-rooms in the upper parts of the castle.

Although the decorations Alexander commissioned in the private rooms of the Castel Sant'Angelo are today lost, they must have been of the highest quality, since the work was entrusted to one of the star artists working in the city: Bernardino di Betto, better known as Pinturicchio ('The Little Painter'). Short, ugly and possessed of a rare genius, Pinturicchio had worked on some of the most glorious papal buildings of the age: the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican Library and the church of Santa Maria del Popolo. He had just finished work on the frescoes in the Borgia Apartments at the Vatican when Alexander summoned him across the Ponte Sant'Angelo to paint the papal castle.

The subject Pinturicchio was given was extremely recent history. Although later artists working in the fortress would be given classical figures to paint – the apartments built for the sixteenth-century Pope Paul III featured large frescoes of Hadrian and the Archangel Michael, painted

by Perino del Vaga – Pinturrichio was ordered to compose six scenes featuring Alexander and King Charles.[28] The frescoes he produced showed a tale of the French invasion of Rome – and subsequent withdrawal – with a highly partisan spin. Far from an unwelcome assault, it seemed as though Charles had come to visit Alexander and receive his blessing, and then departed with the two men best of friends. Although this was revisionist fantasy, it provided a much more agreeable backdrop for entertaining, which was what Alexander liked to do best.

Just after Pinturicchio had finished his work, in 1497 the Castel Sant'Angelo was struck by lightning, which ignited one of the many gunpowder kegs that were stored there, causing an explosion that blew the statue of the archangel Michael from its roof and injured more than a dozen men. The damage was extensive, but Alexander VI survived. When he did eventually die in 1503, at the age of seventy-two – some said from malaria, others from poison – he left behind a bloated corpse, a large, troublesome family, and a reputation for depravity and scheming quite unbecoming of his holy office. But he also left a papal fortress that was suited to its times.

Thanks to Alexander, the Castel Sant'Angelo shone with artistic decoration and bristled with guns. That it was fit for its defensive purpose was evidenced in 1527 when another pope, Clement VII, was forced to retreat behind its walls for six months, as Rome was overrun and pillaged by forces in the service of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Clement was able to escape with his life and a punitive 400,000 ducat ransom, chiefly thanks to the strength of the barricades and gun embrasures that his predecessor Alexander had erected during his own tempestuous papacy.

Stoutly defended outside and stunningly decorated inside, by the early sixteenth century, the Castel Sant'Angelo was among the most storied fortresses in western Europe. But it was only one of many great fortifications built in an age in which state-of-the-art defences fit to withstand cannon-fire were politically vital, and there was no shortage of geniuses lining up to beautify them. On both sides of the Alps, the Renaissance saw castles and fortifications grow bigger, more complex and more artistically ambitious. Those who turned their minds to their design and decoration included the man who is often considered the greatest figure of the entire Renaissance – perhaps the most brilliant polymath in history: Leonardo da Vinci.

In 1482 Leonardo da Vinci wrote what became a famous letter to Ludovico Sforza, acting duke of Milan. The thirty-year-old artist had recently arrived in the city from Florence and was seeking a patron. Ludovico was the most likely candidate: he was the most powerful man in the city-state, a ruthless politician, but with an artistic sensibility developed under the tutelage of Leonardo's late cousin Francesco Filelfo. He was known to spend generously on creative projects, and his interests were not limited to art and interior decorations: he had high ambitions for Milan, which lay at the junction between the Italian states south of the Alps and the great European kingdoms to the north. With some careful direction, the duchy might be transformed into a major European power.

It was with Ludovico's presumed geopolitical aims in mind that Leonardo made his approach. 'Most illustrious lord,' he began. 'Having now sufficiently studied the proofs of all those who count themselves masters and inventors of instruments of war, and finding that their invention and working of the said instruments do not differ in any respect from those in common use, I shall endeavour. . . to explain myself to your Excellency, showing your Lordship my secrets. . .'[29]

These secrets were ten categories of military hardware: 'bridges, very light and strong'; machines for siege defence and assault, including 'plans for destroying every fortress or other stronghold even if it were founded on rock'; mortars for use on land or sea; underground tunnelling methods; armoured cars; 'light ordnance of very useful and beautiful shapes', as well as 'catapults, mangonels, trebuchets and other engines of wonderful efficacy'. In time of war, Leonardo wrote, 'I shall contrive various and endless means of attack and defence'. In peacetime, he was also available for 'architecture and the construction of buildings both private and public. . . sculpture in marble, bronze or clay, and also I can do in painting whatever can be done, as well as any other, be he who he may.'[30]

That the man who would paint *Mona Lisa*, the *Virgin of the Rocks* and *La Belle Ferronnière* presented his brushwork as an afterthought to his military engineering says a good deal about how Leonardo regarded his own universal genius – as well as what he considered the true priorities of great Renaissance patrons like Ludovico Sforza of Milan. It also spoke to a

curious tension within Leonardo's brilliant mind. In many ways gentle and peaceable, Leonardo was vegetarian and regarded war as bestial madness. Yet insatiable curiosity allied to pragmatism drew him towards work on weapons, fortresses and machines of war.

When Leonardo wrote to Ludovico he had studied a great deal – reading deeply and absorbing the insights of ancient authorities such as Euclid and Archimedes. But he had never built a siege engine, nor even seen a battle.[31] So despite his confident sales pitch, his work was theoretical – sketches in his notebooks, rather than proven prototypes. Some of his designs were truly ingenious: a cannon that used steam, rather than gunpowder, as a propellant; a rotating blade that could be installed on a castle's battlements to hack to pieces any enemies who tried to scale the walls. But vanishingly few made it to the workshop, let alone the battlefield. Ludovico hired Leonardo, but during the seventeen years the latter spent in Milan, his artistic achievements outshone his engineering work. He painted *Lady with an Ermine*, designed the clay model for a huge equestrian monument to the Sforza dynasty, and decorated the refectory of the Basilica di Santa Maria delle Grazie with his famous fresco of the *Last Supper*. Only occasionally was Leonardo handed a military project. Still, when the opportunity arose, he tried to leave his mark.

One chance came when Ludovico decided to redecorate a suite of rooms in the Sforza Castle known as the *camerini*. The imposing Sforza stronghold was every inch a Renaissance castle: it had been founded in the fourteenth century during the reign of the Visconti dukes of Milan. Its square walls, 200m long, were 7m thick in places. When the Sforza dukes replaced the Visconti, they developed it considerably, adding a massive central tower designed by the Florentine architect Filarete, and another named after the duchess and regent Bona of Savoy.

Shortly after arriving in Milan, Leonardo had been tasked with surveying the Sforza Castle's walls, and analysing weak points. He did this effectively, but it was not the most glamorous of tasks. So in 1495, when he was assigned to the work on the *camerini*, he let his talent speak. In one of the rooms, the Sala delle Asse, Leonardo decorated the walls with *trompe-l'œil* paintings of mulberry trees, their roots emerging from rocks and their branches bursting into life across the vaulted ceiling, the entwined foliage laced with golden thread. Though it was neither Leonardo's greatest work nor his happiest time – he was frustrated at being distracted from his *Last*

Supper, bickered with Ludovico over money and occasionally stormed out of the castle in a fit of temper – Leonardo nonetheless made a contribution to the castle, which (despite heavy-handed restoration attempts) is still appreciable today.

More meaningful forays into military engineering came only after Leonardo left Milan in 1499. In 1502 he was hired by Cesare Borgia, the violent and amoral son of Pope Alexander VI, who had command of the papal armies and at the turn of the sixteenth century was using them to terrorise large swathes of the Italian peninsula with the aim of building a principality for himself. Leonardo was probably recommended to Cesare by his fellow Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli, and once contracted, he was given the serious job of inspecting the castles and fortifications that flew the Borgia arms. His note of safe-conduct, issued by Cesare's office, explained that he had been commissioned 'to inspect all the strongpoints and fortresses in our dominion, so that he may, according to their needs, provide for their maintenance.'[32]

The job was stimulating, and Leonardo made notes analysing the best shape to build castle walls to deflect cannonballs, on the placement of secret escape tunnels, on bridge construction and harbour maintenance. At Imola in the autumn of 1502 he produced an exactly proportioned military plan of the city, as a preliminary to its fortification. The scientific precision with which he approached such projects, along with his skill as a draughtsman, was beyond anything that had been achieved in Europe before him. Yet his time in Cesare Borgia's orbit was brief and he did not stay long enough to put any of his ambitious projects into effect. He returned to Florence, then Milan, and focused on painting, anatomy and scientific study. It was more than a decade before he again thought seriously about fortifications.

Leonardo's final involvement with castle design came during what was effectively his retirement. In 1516, when he was sixty-four, he crossed the Alps and went to work for King Francis I of France, a bright, charismatic, barrel-chested twenty-one-year-old Renaissance prince who had come to the French throne the previous year. Francis kept a dazzlingly cultured court and yearned to surround himself with brilliant and famous friends. On this basis, Leonardo became Francis' 'First Painter, Engineer and Architect', an unofficial tutor and a good friend to the king, in a relationship explicitly modelled on the supposed partnership of Aristotle and Alexander the Great. Francis gave Leonardo a house in the grounds of the royal castle known as

the Chateau d'Amboise, in the Loire Valley, and allowed him the freedom to pursue his interests at his leisure.

There were, however, some royal requests, and these touched on castle-building of various sorts. Francis liked to put on extravagant pageants and entertainments for his courtiers, particularly to celebrate family occasions. In the spring of 1518, to the delight of revellers gathered to mark the baptism of the king's first son, Leonardo designed a replica fortress in the village square in Amboise, over which a theatrical siege was contested, with stage smoke and balloons shot from trebuchets.[33]

At the same time as dreaming up play-forts for courtly pageants, however, Leonardo was also working on what he hoped might be a castle of the future. Francis had suggested that he might design a new palace and town to be built at Romorantin, a couple of days' ride from Amboise. Leonardo took to the task enthusiastically, and poured into his plans a lifetime of thinking about urban planning, along with architectural concepts which expressed deep mathematical forms. He produced several different designs for the castle-city, all of which placed elegance and ingenuity of design above stoutness of defence: Romorantin was to be a lightly fortified palace settlement, which would scarcely have lasted a day if subjected to a gunpowder barrage. But perhaps this was only natural. Leonardo was feeling his age, and a lifetime spent in war-torn Renaissance Italy had likely dimmed the enthusiasm he once felt for armoured cars and battlements fitted with slashing blades. Now his thoughts were all of irrigation systems and mills, and staircases that twisted around each other like creeping vines. Rather than designing artillery positions, a typical entry in his notebook read 'there should be fountains made in every piazza.'[34]

Leonardo died before Romorantin could be built, and once he was gone, Francis' attention shifted to a new location: Chambord, which was closer to Amboise. Here, between 1519 and 1547, the French king built one of the most spectacular palaces in European history, and a masterpiece of French Renaissance architecture. The Chateau de Chambord was conceived as a hunting lodge, and constructed (under the supervision of another Gallicised Italian, Domenico da Cortona) with more than 400 rooms, spread across an asymmetrical mass of gleaming round towers, topped with a jostling skyline of small turrets and ornate chimneys. With no defensive architecture to speak of, it was a triumph of artistry over military concerns. In this, it was certainly true to Leonardo in his later years, and its design spoke to the

elevated intelligence, rather than the low brutality of the Renaissance. And Chambord contained one feature that was as good as a Leonardo autograph: a double-helix staircase in which two spiralling flights of steps wound together, so that two people might ascend or descend without ever passing one another.

When it was complete in the sixteenth century, the Chateau de Chambord was a gem of the French Renaissance, which only grew grander in its aspect as subsequent French monarchs added to its layers and towers. Even after the French Revolution it retained some of its ability to entrance. In the nineteenth century, the novelist Victor Hugo visited the chateau and was charmed into a reverie, remarking in a letter to a friend: 'I visited Chambord yesterday. You cannot imagine how singularly beautiful it is. All enchantments, all poetry, even all follies are embodied in the admirable strangeness of this palace of fairies and knights.'[35] Hugo climbed one of the turrets, broke off a piece of stone and a clump of moss and later scratched away a portion of a window-frame where Francis I had etched some amorous graffiti about falling in love with difficult women. Of bombardment and besieging there was no mention. This was the Renaissance without blood and gunpowder: time and romantic imagination had washed the filth away.



When Machiavelli, the Florentine diplomat and writer who had recommended Leonardo da Vinci to Cesare Borgia, sat down to consider castles, he was much of the same opinion as Vegetius, Giles of Rome, Christine de Pizan and many others before him. Like them, he had many ready pieces of advice on fortress design, concerning the height and width of walls, the placement and depth of moats, the zoning of agricultural land outside the walls, and so on. He reminded his readers of the age-old advice that a fortress was only ever as strong as the people defending it. 'A good sculptor will never be found who believes he can make a beautiful statue from a piece of marble poorly shaped,' he wrote.[36] Yet Machiavelli also recognised that in the age of gunpowder, good soldiers needed strong castles and city walls to defend – and he hoped that the people of Italy would prove as talented at building fortresses as they were at making beautiful art. 'This country appears to be destined to resuscitate the things

which are dead, as has been observed with Poetry, Painting, and Sculpture,' he wrote. Could they match their achievements in the realm of fortification? This, thought Machiavelli, was one of the great questions facing rulers up and down the Italian peninsula.

The answer, resoundingly, was yes. in Rome, the Castel Sant'Angelo continued to evolve after its overhaul during the pontificate of Alexander VI. Frenchmen, Spaniards and even the Turks – resurgent since the death of Mehmed II – continued to present a threat to the papal states. In 1560 the Calabrian pirate and Muslim convert known as Ucciali[**] was causing havoc in the Mediterranean, raiding Italy's Ligurian coast. The pope of the day, Pius IV, took this as a prompt to upgrade the Castel Sant'Angelo. A pentagonal star of stone walls with gun placements was raised around the existing fortress, designed by Michelangelo's assistant Francesco Laparelli – a brilliant architect whose other work would include contributions to the great dome of St Peter's Basilica, and later, fortifying the Maltese city-fortress of Valetta.[37] With gun platforms at every point of the star, the castle became the key to a system of defences that surrounded the entire Vatican hill, from where fire could be raked in every direction.[38] Soon the star-shaped artillery fort would be seen everywhere on the Italian peninsula and beyond.

Behind this bristling perimeter, the Castel Sant'Angelo remained both as beautiful and brutish as it ever had been. Michelangelo may not have invented *La Girandola*, but he had a hand in the marble façade of the papal chapel, while another of his apprentices, Raffaello da Montelupo, sculpted the beautiful marble angel with copper wings, which is today on display at the castle (though its place on the roof has been taken by a bronze by the Flemish sculptor Peter Anton von Verschaffelt). The papal library, the Room of Apollo and the Cagliostra rooms (as they are known today) were decorated in the 'grotesque' style, deliberately echoing the designs that had been found in the remains of Domus Aurea (Golden House), built by Nero in the first century CE, rediscovered in the fifteenth century and pored over for inspiration by artists including Raphael, Pinturicchio and Domenico Ghirlandaio. The Loggia of Paul III – an elegant passage leading to the papal apartments, which looked out over the countryside beyond Rome – was bright with frescoes and stuccowork by Girolamo Siciolante da Sermoneta, much of it emphasising the ancient history of the castle in its days as Hadrian's Mausoleum.

For welcome visitors, the papal castle was a wonderland. Yet it had a macabre side. Ordinary Romans passing beyond the castle walls might at any time of the day hear the screams of prisoners being tortured in the papal cells. Straws inserted under the fingernails were one reliable method used to encourage the unhappy inmates to talk.[39] Cardinals were not immune from such hostile treatment. Indeed, not even artists were safe: the brilliant but chaotic goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini was imprisoned in the dungeons of Castel Sant'Angelo in the late 1530s, charged with trying to steal the pope's tiara.

Beyond Rome, there was also plenty of work for Renaissance men who could apply their minds to military engineering. In the late 1520s, Michelangelo was summoned by the leaders of the Republic of Florence to consult on the improvement of their own city defences, which required urgent upgrading. Michelangelo had never built any fortifications, but like Leonardo before him, he had spent a lot of time thinking about them. He presented his fellow Florentines with plans for jagged artillery platforms which took their inspiration from crab-claws. He designed bastions that relied on geometry to give defending gunners the maximum range of fire to drive enemies away from their positions.[40] It was not long before Michelangelo's drawings, ambition and his proven talent in other fields earned him the post of Director of Fortifications for the republic. He was to oversee not only Florence's defensive structures, but those of nearby towns including Pisa, Ferrara and Livorno.

The walls and bastions Michelangelo placed around Florence were built at speed and with urgency, for even as he was appointed, imperial armies sent by the same Charles V who assaulted Rome and forced Pope Clement VII into hiding in the Castel Sant'Angelo had the city in their sights. Every able-bodied male citizen was drafted to the workforce, and marble mined for artistic projects was repurposed to make cannonballs. Michelangelo's fortifications were not beautiful: his walls were made from unfired bricks packed around dirt and straw, while the beautiful campanile (bell-tower) at the basilica of San Miniato was protected from artillery fire using mattresses stuffed with wool.[41] But they were robust enough that when the imperial troops attacked in late 1529, Florence resisted the siege for ten months, eventually succumbing to starvation only after a long blockade.

Where Michelangelo led, other Renaissance artists followed. Some decorated: in the 1520s, the mercurial painter Parmigianino – described by

one knowledgeable contemporary as ‘Raphael reborn’ – was invited to paint the Rocca Sanvitale in Fontanellato, near Parma.[42] He created stunning frescoes showing the story of Actaeon spotting the virgin goddess Diana bathing naked with her nymphs.[††] Others built: in the 1560s Baldassarre Lanci – a brilliant theatre designer and an even more talented military architect – constructed an enormous, imposing fortress in Siena for Cosimo de’Medici, followed by an entire fortified town, Terra del Sol (Town of the Sun) defended by bastions and surrounded with walls 12m high and 9m thick.

Perhaps the most influential castle-builder of the sixteenth century, however, was the architect Michele Sanmicheli, described in his day as being ‘excellent not only in fortification but also in private buildings and in temples, churches, and monasteries’.[43] A native of Verona – and therefore a citizen of the Republic of Venice – Sanmicheli served his apprenticeship working on cathedrals, before going to Rome, where he surveyed papal fortifications for Clement VII.

Returning to Venice in 1527, Sanmicheli was entrusted with an astonishing sequence of work that occupied him for the next three decades. He redesigned the city gates and fortifications of Verona. He was sent all over the republic’s Mediterranean empire, known as the Stato da Mar. He oversaw fortress-building in Zadar (modern Croatia), Corfu, and in the port of Chania, in Crete. Besides this huge scope of military work, he also found time for civic projects, designing bridges, grand palazzi, churches and bell-towers.

Sanmicheli’s masterpiece was in Venice, where he designed a new principal fortress on the Lido, overlooking the main sea channels into the Lagoon and the city proper. The Forte Sant’Andrea wowed those who saw it: it was ‘from the beauty of the masonry and from its incredible cost, one of the most stupendous [fortresses] that there are in Europe. . . rivalling the grandeur and majesty of the most famous edifices erected by the greatness of the Romans.’ It was also one of the most heavily armed, and when the guns were fired, ‘it seemed as if the world had burst to pieces, and the fortress, with all those flaming cannon, had the appearance of a volcano and of Hell itself.’[44]

The guns of Sant’Andrea, however, were only discharged once in anger, nearly 250 years after Sanmicheli’s death. On April 20th 1797, following a

year of escalating tensions between the Republic of Venice and France's revolutionary First Republic, three French warships appeared before the Lido. The garrison at Sant'Andrea opened fire, sinking one of the ships and killing its captain. It was a short-lived victory. Five days later Napoleon Bonaparte threatened to declare open war on Venice, and the doge resigned, bringing to an end more than 1,000 years of republican rule.

Later in the year the French plundered the city, sank the Venetian navy and destroyed the shipbuilding centre known as the Arsenal. Between 1811 and 1814 the French built a new fortress to guard the entrance to the Lagoon: the squat, cylindrical Torre Massimiliana, which bore a fleeting reference to the great central barrel of Hadrian's Mausoleum, built seventeen centuries earlier in ancient Rome. It left Michele Sanmicheli's elegant Renaissance fortress redundant, and by the late twentieth century the Forte Sant'Andrea was crumbling, its underwater foundations eroding with the current. In the 1950s a large portion of it collapsed into the water and sank.



In 1527 the German painter, engraver and scholar Albrecht Dürer produced a book on civic and military architecture. *Various Lessons on the Fortification of Cities, Castles, and Localities* (Etliche Underricht zu Befestigung der Stett, Schloss und Flecken) discoursed on urban planning and military defence, proposing a new model for building towns, in which the arrangement of palaces, houses, monuments, walls and gun platforms was treated as a geometry problem. It was unlike anything else Dürer had written. But in the aftermath of serious unrest in the German states – the rise of the religious reformer Martin Luther, a bloody peasant rebellion in 1525 and the ongoing threat of Ottoman armed incursions into central Europe – Dürer felt he had something to add to discussions of how society should be reformed to adapt to the threats of a new world.

Like his contemporary Leonardo's plans for the French royal palace at Romorantin, however, Dürer's model city never made it from the page to the construction site. Its scheme, for a contained settlement with a meticulous grid of streets, radiating outwards from a central royal palace towards high walls protected by rock-filled ditches, was never to be tested against reality. Although Dürer was engaged with the political reality of life

in sixteenth-century Germany, his work belonged to the genre of social theory as much as it did to architectural design. *Various Lessons on the Fortification of Cities, Castles, and Localities* had a good deal in common with books like the English humanist and statesman Thomas More's *Utopia*, which accepted with regret the inevitability of human conflict, but suspected that the application of new learning could mitigate against it as effectively as any number of gun embrasures and bastions.[45] The influence of works like these was as much literary as military. Dürer, and other writers who tried their hand at designing the perfect Renaissance fortified city, belonged as much to the abstract tradition of Christine de Pizan as to the practical tradition of a Francesco Laparelli or Michele Sanmicheli.

That said, the 'ideal' Renaissance fortified city, built entirely from scratch, did occasionally find earthly form. One fine example was back in the Venetian Republic, where in 1593 the city authorities commissioned Palmanova: a heavily defended military garrison town, built in the shape of a nine-pointed star, around 110km (70 miles) north-east of Venice, on the frontier with the Ottoman Empire. The town was built around a huge hexagonal central piazza, from which die-straight roads ran all the way to a triple set of walls.

Palmanova was an effective enough piece of military engineering that it was still considered functional at the time of the First World War, when it was used as a logistics hub and processing centre for refugees fleeing the fighting in the area. But during the battle of Caporetto[‡‡] in October 1917, it met its match. As the Italian 2nd Army was routed by the Central Powers, Palmanova was shelled, and its defences heavily damaged. The defenders, overwhelmed and demoralised, abandoned their posts and an army of more than 2,000 Austro-Hungarian troops occupied the remains of the fortress until the end of the war. This did not necessarily signal the final obsolescence of star-shaped fortification.[§§] But it proved yet again the axiom, acknowledged by every serious analyst since Vegetius, that a fortress was only ever as strong as the army holding it.

[*] Sixtus was a controversial figure, to say the least. He was an enthusiastic nepotist, an alleged sodomite, an inveterate plotter, a patron of the slave trade and the prime mover behind the Spanish Inquisition. He ruled Rome in the manner of a secular prince and treated other rulers in Italy and beyond with violent disdain. In 1478 he tacitly sponsored a plot to murder

the ruler of Florence, Lorenzo de'Medici, and his brother Guiliano during High Mass in Florence's great cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

† Gunpowder – a mixture of sulfur, saltpetre and charcoal – had been discovered in China in the ninth century by alchemists trying to create an elixir of immorality. It had arrived in Europe by 1267, when Roger Bacon copied out the recipe. From the 1340s primitive handguns were used on battlefields. By the early fifteenth century cannon had reached sufficient size and sophistication to destroy stone walls if used in a sustained barrage.

‡ See chapter 8.

§ Usually Easter Monday and the feast day of St Peter and St Paul (June 29th).

Originally called the *Cappella Magna* (Great Chapel), the Sistine Chapel was built (as the name indicates) during the papacy of Sixtus IV, but its famous ceiling was commissioned under Julius II.

∫ Literally, Stephen of the Castle. A happy coincidence.

Ω Dionysus I of Syracuse (c.432–367 BCE), took power in Sicily in 405 BCE, then abolished democracy and ruled as an absolute king surrounded by a large mercenary bodyguard. He conquered widely in the Adriatic and kept a court filled with intellectual men, including Plato, but treated them (and others) with random cruelty. Dionysus built the Euryalus fortress near Syracuse, which can still be seen today, and pioneered the use of siege engines. He is said to have died after one of his own plays won an Athenian drama competition, and he celebrated with a fatal drinking binge. He is the king featured in the story of the Sword of Damocles.

≈ Still a common complaint among historians.

∂ Effectively true, as objects falling freely through air close to the surface of Earth accelerate at roughly 9.8m/s^2 (metres per second squared). This effect is not limitless, as falling objects will at some point hit terminal velocity. But Christine was writing in the early fifteenth century. Newtonian physics would come later.

π As the chronicler Procopius described it, the Romans 'broke in pieces the most of the statues, which were very large, and taking up great numbers of stones thus secured, threw them with both hands down upon the heads of the enemy, who gave way before this shower of missiles.' See Procopius, *History of the Wars* volume III, translated by H. B. Dewing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916), 217.

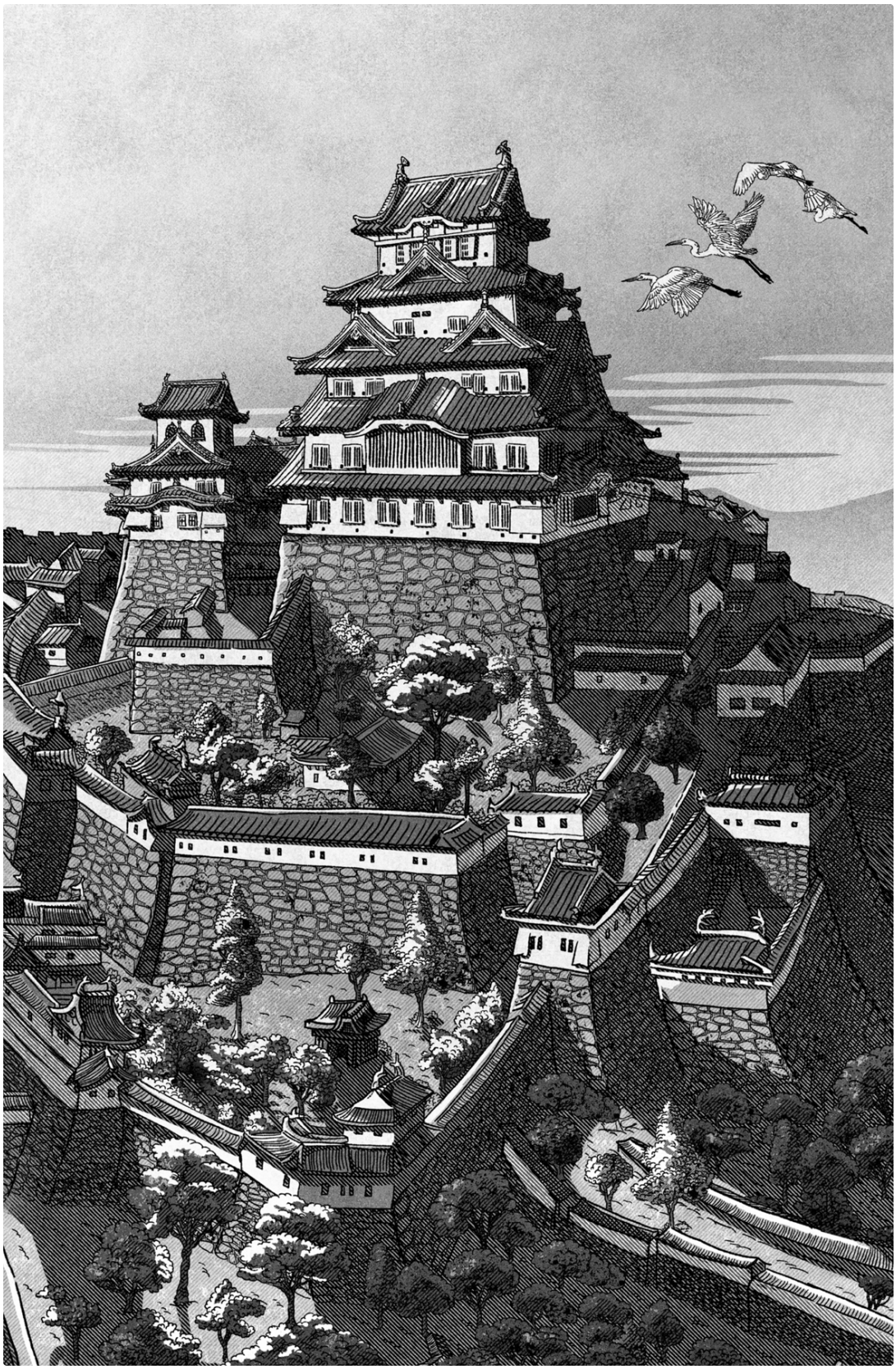
Δ Benedict was posthumously revenged in 998 CE when the head of the Crescentii – Crescentius the Younger – led another rebellion against the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III and appointed an antipope in the place of the imperial choice. Crescentius the Younger was besieged in the castle for several months before being captured and beheaded, after which his remains were gibbeted on the Monte Mario. His antipope, John XVI, arguably fared worse: he was blinded, had his nose, ears and tongue cut off and his hands broken and was forced to ride backwards through Rome on a donkey.

** An Italianisation of Uluç Ali, or Ali the Renegade. Born around 1519, Uccialì was preparing to enter a monastery when he was kidnapped by Muslim pirates and enslaved for a time. Having converted to Islam, he became a successful corsair in service of the Ottoman Empire, raiding around the Mediterranean and rising to become admiral of the entire Ottoman fleet. He survived the battle of Lepanto in 1571 and fought with sufficient bravery that he was given a new nickname: Kiliç Ali, or Ali of the Sword.

†† A story with a grisly end: Diana transformed Actaeon into a stag, and he was torn to pieces by his own dogs.

‡‡ Also known as the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo.

§§ In 2020 the French Sénat acknowledged that their troops fighting jihadist groups in Mali were building star-shaped compounds (known as Vauban forts), protected with trenches (www.senat.fr/compte-rendu-commissions/20200706/etr.html).



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10

SAMURAI CASTLES

Not easily might men ascend to such a castle,
though it be not defended by a single warrior!

THE TAIHEIKI

In the summer of 1581, the Italian Jesuit missionary Alessandro Valignano was invited to pay a visit to the most powerful man in Japan. Oda Nobunaga, a warrior from a samurai clan who had risen to become a leading military lord, or *daimyo*, was putting the finishing touches to his official residence: a castle on Mount Azuchi, in the Shiga Prefecture on the island of Honshu. Since Valignano was staying in the newly built town at the foot of the mountain, and since Nobunaga loved nothing more than showing off, the daimyo assumed he would like to come and inspect the latest works.[1]

Valignano had seen Azuchi Castle before, but he was smart enough to accept the invitation. Nobunaga was the dominant military figure in Japan, a brusque forty-seven-year-old warlord who – after a somewhat dissolute youth[*] – had spent his career grinding towards the unification of the islands. Valignano, meanwhile, was Visitor of Missions in the Indies: the ranking Jesuit in the whole of Asia, answerable only to the head of the Order in Rome. The Jesuits had been among the vanguard of western visitors to Japan after the first contact was made with Europeans in the 1540s. But their mission was still young. Valignano could not hope to proceed with his aim of converting the Japanese to Christianity, or his plan to establish a permanent mission in Azuchi, without Nobunaga's continued favour.

What was more, Azuchi Castle, on top of a mountain surrounded on three sides by a serene lake, was genuinely spectacular – and Valignano was going to see it at its best. The night before his tour, Nobunaga laid on a traditional *Obon* festival of lights, a ceremony to honour the dead, which was given a twist. Whereas families normally lit lanterns in their homes to commemorate their ancestors, on this occasion the daimyo had them bring their lights into the streets, so they illuminated the winding path that led from the town, past the noble mansions that stood in the foothills, all the way to the top of the mountain. There stood Azuchi Castle, described by one of Valignano's colleagues as 'a very rich, beautiful and inexpugnable fortress', which, 'in its work of architecture can be compared with the most noble and sumptuous of Europe.'[2] A fence, 11m high, enclosed the

mountaintop, within which were ‘very large, beautiful, and very rich houses caked in gold, so clean, and well made, as far as human skill can allow it.’[3] The castle’s crowning glory was a six-storey, 35m wooden *tenshu* (or keep). The day after the *Obon* festival, Valignano and some of his colleagues were taken up to the tenshu for their tour.

What they found was an expression in architectural form of Nobunaga’s growing mastery over Japan. The palatial fortress spoke to his many military victories, through which he was bringing to an end the upheavals of the Warring States period, which had ravaged Japan since the 1460s. The castle had been built – symbolically – out of stone harvested from the nearby fortress of Kannonji, seized during one of Nobunaga’s military campaigns.[4] But it also advertised Nobunaga’s self-image as a daimyo, and leader of samurai. He was a man who sat at the pinnacle of Japan’s caste of honour-bound warriors, whose collective code combined a dedication to lethal violence with a high aesthetic sensibility.

Nobunaga was, wrote one visitor to his court, ‘tall, thin, sparsely bearded, extremely war-like and much given to military exercises, inclined to works of justice and mercy, sensitive about his honour, reticent about his plans, an expert in military strategy, unwilling to receive advice from subordinates. . . he openly denies the existence of a creator of the universe, the immortality of the soul or life after death. . . He is upright and prudent in all his dealings and intensely dislikes any delays or long speeches.’[5] He was capable of great generosity and thoughtfulness, loved sumo wrestling and elaborate tea ceremonies, and took a keen interest in art and design. But he also tortured, slaughtered, beheaded, crucified, immolated, and massacred tens of thousands of people, spoke to rival daimyo as though they were worthless insects and demanded that his underlings address him on their hands and knees, with their faces pressed into the ground.[6] During the building of Azuchi Castle he had marched around the building site in rough, coarse clothing, carrying a tiger-skin to sit on while he watched the work progress, enacting summary justice on anyone whose behaviour offended him. A Portuguese visitor to Azuchi alleged that ‘while on the site one day [Nobunaga] happened to see a soldier lifting up a woman’s cloak slightly in order to get a glimpse of her face, and there and then [he] struck off [the soldier’s] head with his own hand.’[7]

The castle that he had built at Azuchi, and which Valignano visited in the summer of 1581, was a monument to all Nobunaga's cultured ferocity. It stood on a stone foundation nearly 25m in height, inside which were built store-rooms. On top of this were six more storeys, painted red, blue and gold, with blue-tiled gabled roofs, tapering in size as they reached the pinnacle, where there was an octagonal belvedere covered in gold, with vermillion pillars all around it. 'It is filled with wonderful architecture,' one of the Jesuit party wrote, recalling that the gable borders were enlivened with 'some round heads covered in gold, and. . . some superb mascarons,[†] which greatly beautify and ennoble the building. . . this work is such that it can be compared with the most sumptuous buildings in Europe.'[8]

This judgement rather flattered Europe. And inside, the castle was just as delightfully presented. Valignano and his colleagues saw rooms decorated by the most sought-after artists of the day, including Kanō Eitoku, who had painted a second-storey room with plum trees in black ink. There was a room painted with doves, another with geese, and a third with pheasants feeding their young. Nobunaga's presence chamber was decorated with flowers and birds. Upper chambers were themed around plants: bamboo, pine and hydrangea. Despite Nobunaga's alleged atheism, the room bore images of Chinese scholars, another the disciples of Buddha, and others were overlooked by the Taoist immortals. (In one the immortal Zhang Guolao held his famous gourd, from which he could conjure a white donkey that unfolded like origami when the gourd was blown on with water spray; the donkey could gallop tens of thousands of miles in a single day.)[9] There were rooms in which tigers fought dragons and dragons chased dolphins, where hungry ghosts writhed around demons, and where angels mingled with emperors, philosophers and sages. The grandest room of all, however, had no pictures in it: this was Nobunaga's tea ceremony room, and here the walls were covered with a powder of pure gold-dust.

The Jesuits were dazzled, just as Nobunaga intended. To make sure they stayed dazzled, and relayed to their homelands the message that 'Nobunaga's glory and his prowess were immeasurable', he also presented the order with a set of six folding screens, on which Azuchi Castle and the town at the foot of the mountain had been painted by Kanō Eitoku.[10] These were sent back to Rome as gifts to Pope Gregory XIII, who installed them in the Vatican Library.[‡] This was a wonderful gift, but it was also practical

policy. Nobunaga wanted the whole world to know how magnificent he was. ‘For greater ostentation and arrogance of his name, he wished to show the sumptuousness of his mansions, and ordered. . . permission [to be given] to any person, whether man or woman, that within the space of certain days they could freely see his mansions and fortress, and entry would such be given. The infinity of people coming from so many kingdoms was so great that it caused admiration upon all,’ wrote another Jesuit, Luís Fróis.[11]

Whether they knew it or not, those who took up Nobunaga’s offer and came to feast their eyes on Azuchi Castle were witnessing a transformative moment in the history of Japanese castle-building. Azuchi Castle was not totally original in its design – Nobunaga had copied much from Tamonyama Castle in Yamato Province, built by a rival warlord in the 1560s. But given Nobunaga’s vast personal power, his role in unifying Japan after the Warring States period, and his order, given in 1580, that hundreds of existing castles be systematically destroyed, Azuchi became a landmark in the history of Japanese fortification. However, if the moment was transformative, it was also fleeting.

In the early summer of 1582, with Nobunaga at the peak of his powers and seemingly on the verge of completing his unification of Japan, he visited the imperial capital of Kyoto – a city still recovering from his decision to burn half of it to the ground during a military campaign in the previous decade. On June 21st the daimyo was enjoying a tea ceremony at the fortified temple of Honnō-ji when he was ambushed by one of his own generals, a samurai named Akechi Mitsuhide. Surrounded and outnumbered, and with the temple on fire as the treacherous general attacked, Nobunaga ended his life in the way expected of all samurai faced with disgrace or death. He committed *seppuku*: ritually disembowelling himself with a sword.

Although Nobunaga was soon revenged by his loyal retainers, and his goal of unifying Japan was continued by his successors, Azuchi Castle did not survive. In the days after Nobunaga’s death, it was overrun by the assassin Mitsuhide’s forces, who stripped the gold from the walls, then abandoned it to local peasants, who looted everything else and set it on fire. When the flames subsided, all that was left of Nobunaga’s monument to his own might and glory was the stone base it was built on.

Impressed as the Jesuits had been at their encounters with Nobunaga and their viewings of his castle, the accounts the brothers wrote of his demise were not especially sympathetic. ‘From the one [man] who made everyone shiver, not just with his voice, but with his name, not even a single little hair remained that was not converted into dust, and ash,’ wrote Luís Fróis. ‘It cannot be denied that Nobunaga had rare parts, and he governed. . . with extreme prudence, but his arrogance also put him down, and destroyed him, *et periit memoria eius cum sonitu, et in puncto ad infernos descendit*. (And his memory perished with a crash, and in an instant he went down to Hell.)’[12]

Much the same could be said for Azuchi Castle. Yet just as Nobunaga laid the ground for a new age in Japanese history, so his prized fortress set the template for a distinctive era in Japanese castle-building.[13] In the forty years that followed the construction and destruction of Azuchi Castle, some of the most iconic castles in the world were built in Japan. Their tall elegant wooden keeps, protected by complex arrangements of gates, walls and baileys, are a window into a time of immense turmoil in Japanese history, much of it driven by the fortunes of the samurai.

The earliest written record to mention the archipelago off the coast of Asia is a Chinese dynastic history dating to the late third century CE. It describes *Wa*, a kingdom ruled by a witch. Her name was Himiko and she lived in ‘a palace surrounded by towers and stockades, with armed guards in a state of constant vigilance.’[14] Within this fortified palace, Himiko was said to be attended by 1,000 female servants, and a single man who looked after her wardrobe. While these minions pampered her, and her bodyguards kept lookout, Himiko busied herself with sorcery and bewitching people.

Over the years, Himiko has become a popular character in Japanese legend – and the subject of lively historical debate. Who she was, or on whom she was based, are questions that may never be satisfactorily answered. Yet what her story does reveal is that from an early period, Japan was thought by outsiders to be a realm of fortifications – and that these were associated with great power.

The earliest archaeological remains of Japanese fortifications, however, do not suggest the quite such exotic origins as the legend of Himiko implies. They date to an age known as the Yayoi period (between 300 BCE and 300 CE) and suggest simple, rural structures: ditches dug around highland farmsteads. They were built on a far smaller scale than the huge fortified cities found in the same era in the developed areas of China, or the stone mountain fortresses that were all over the nearby Korean peninsula.

And so it remained for a long time. In the seventh century CE, however, Japan was threatened with invasion from China and Korea, and suddenly there arose an urgent need for more serious fortifications. The ruling Yamato imperial dynasty scrambled to protect the coast, hiring dissident Koreans to come to Japan and build stone castles on high ground near the sea. The ruins of these first stone castles can still be seen today, in the walls of Onojo, in Fukuoka Prefecture, and Kinojo (Demon Castle) in Okayama Prefecture.

In the eighth century CE, the threat of foreign invasion receded and the style of castle-building changed again. The priority of the Yamato emperors became conquering the north-east of the island of Honshu from tribal peoples they scornfully called Emishi (‘toad barbarians’). Stone castles were not well suited to a war of colonisation. The fighters on the front line deployed temporary wooden stockade forts with long, rammed-earth walls, gatehouses and towers mounted with giant crossbows. Once the Emishi had been quashed as a military threat in the early ninth century, some of these large frontier forts were turned into centres for local government.[15] Others were dismantled, their purpose having been served.

The next great spur to castle-building came during the twelfth century, from a surge in violent conflict that led to a great shattering in the political and military structure of Japan. Over many generations the Yamato emperors in their court in Kyoto had grown wealthy but increasingly powerless, reliant on warrior clans to rule on their behalf in the localities. From 1156 a series of wars and rebellions, culminating in the Genpei War, pitched the most powerful of those clans against one another. The victorious clan was the Minamoto, and in 1192 their leader, Minamoto no Yoritomo, became Japan’s first shogun: a military ruler who nominally wielded power on behalf of the emperor but was really the chief warlord in a feudal system. During the decades that followed, Japan fractured into overlapping patches over which the shogun’s warrior vassals claimed control. These

vassals, the most dangerous and powerful figures in Japan, were the samurai. As they came of age in a violent, fractured empire, castles became an essential feature of the political – and literal – landscape.

The word samurai, plainly translated into English, means ‘one who serves’, though a more colloquial rendering might be ‘henchman’. The samurai originally emerged during the years of Yamato rule, as a class of warrior families who protected land, kept the peace, and went into battle on behalf of noble families and religious institutions – particularly in the more remote parts of country, far away from the imperial court at Kyoto. As the Yamato Empire crumbled, then collapsed in the 1180s and 1190s, samurai became critical to the new realities of power. They were mounted fighters, who fought with bow, spear and sword. Since they exercised a monopoly on violence, they became indispensable to the daimyo lords who carved up power under the shogunate. Such was the fragmentation of power that without the samurai, tax collection, war and dispute settlement would have been practically impossible.

As the samurai accrued power and status, and private armies abounded, a culture of honour and ritual emerged, which set them apart from peasants below and the lordly class above. Samurai culture celebrated loyalty and courage, prioritised reputation, honour and public conduct, and valued fine clothes, elaborate armour and battle rituals, such as declaring one’s lineage before taking part in combat on the battlefield. Horsemanship, proficiency with the bow, expertise with short and long swords, pride in one’s family and an unflappable bearing in the face of death were all essential qualities. The life of a samurai was not exclusively about fighting: samurai also farmed, wrote poetry and attended courtly rituals. But during their rise to prominence, samurai were by definition elite killers. Naturally, they often came into contact with castles.

The type of castle that flourished during the rise of the samurai between the tenth and twelfth centuries was the *Yamashiro* (mountain castle), which, as the name suggests, was usually to be found on one of Japan’s countless, thickly wooded hillsides. Since the dominant weapons in Japan were blades and arrows, castles did not advance much beyond earth and timber constructions. The typical castle was a network of ditches, wooden fences, rammed-earth walls and lookout towers, embedded in high ground, forests, swamps and cliffs.

Chronicle descriptions of castles from this age capture their deep integration with the landscape. Kasagi Castle, just outside Kyoto, stood so high on a mountain that it was obscured by the clouds. 'Mossy crags dropped away below for myriad fathoms. The twisting path leading upwards was half a league long. . . rocks had been hewn away to make ditches and boulders were piled up to serve as walls. Not easily might men ascend to such a castle, though it be not defended by a single warrior!'[16] Kasagi was considered a fine fortress, which was only stormed with immense difficulty when a detachment of samurai slung swords on their backs, free-climbed a 1,500-foot cliff, tiptoed for several miles over mossy rocks, then set fire to the wooden towers. Not all were built to such high specifications. The chronicler who described Kasagi drew a pitiful contrast with a more basic castle at Akasaka: 'A stronghold of hasty devising! The ditch was not a proper ditch, and there was but a single wooden wall, plastered over with mud. . . The castle was not more than one hundred or two hundred yards around, with but twenty or thirty towers within, made ready in haste. Of those who saw it, not one but thought: "Ah, what a pitiable spectacle the enemy presents!"'[17]

Fighting over mountain fortresses was perilous – but samurai culture prized danger. The chronicle known as *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*) narrates the rise and fall of the Taira (or Heike) clan, who went to war against the Minamoto (or Genji) clan for control of the imperial court in the Genpei War of 1180–85. Among the many bloody encounters of this war was the battle of Ichi-no-tani, fought on March 20th 1185, for control of a Taira fortress positioned on a narrow strip of land between mountains and sea, near the modern city of Kobe. The battle turned on the samurai Minamoto no Yohitsune's decision to lead a cavalry charge down the mountain – described in *The Tale of the Heike* as 'the three hundred foot gorge and the hundred-and-fifty foot rock face. . . inconceivable on horseback.'[18] This drew the Taira samurai out of their redoubt and into a melee on the beach, from which the survivors had to flee by boat. In the course of the Genpei War, this was a critical encounter. But for contemporary chroniclers it was also an opportunity to illustrate the magnificence of samurai at war.

For one thing, there was the noble elegancy of clothes, armour and well-bred horses. 'Naozane [one of the most famous Minamoto samurai] was attired in a dark blue *hitatare*, a suit of armour with red leather lacing and a

red cape; he rode his famous steed Gondakurige [Chestnut Gonda],' recounts *The Tale of the Heike*.[19] Later the chronicler introduces a very grand official 'attired in a crane-embroidered *nerinuki* silk *hitatare*, a suit of armour with shaded green lacing, and a horned helmet. At his waist he wore a sword with gilt bronze fittings; on his back, there rode a quiver containing arrows fletched with black handed white eagle feathers.'[20]

Then there were battle rituals. It was customary for a samurai riding into battle to call out his family credentials, often at length. At a battle for the fortress at Ichi-no-tani one warrior had time to cry out: 'I am Kajiwara Heizō Kagetoki, a warrior worth a thousand men! I claim descent from Kamakura no Gongorō Kagemasa, the sixteen-year-old who led Hachiman Tarō Yoshiie's assault on the Senbuku Kanazawa stronghold in Dewa during the Latter Three Years' Campaign, the same who earned everlasting renown when he felled an adversary with a return shot, though an arrow had pierced his left eye and penetrated to the top layer of his neck guard.'[21]

When the shouting was done, battles between samurai were fierce and bloody, both brutal and performative. When the Minamoto charged down the mountain cliff towards the fortress of Ichi-no-tani, 'the massed armies met in mingled combat, the riders charging by turns and vying to announce their names. Their shouts and yells awoke echoes in the mountains. . . there were those who rode alongside enemies, grappled with them, fell and died in dagger fights; there were those who seized others, held them down and cut off their heads; there were those who had their heads cut off.'[22] Decapitation was the right of a victor and – in a sense – of the vanquished, and it was considered noble both to chop one's enemy's head off and hold it aloft on the end of a sword, and to be on the receiving end of the same treatment – for to have one's head made into a prized trophy was the ultimate confirmation of a good reputation.

Ichi-no-tani was just one battle among many, and no doubt its narration in *The Tale of the Heike* is deliberately stylised. But clashes like this, which were fought around Japan's thousands of castles for centuries, revealed how the samurai class saw themselves. The fight for a castle during the turbulent twelfth century in Japan was by definition an opportunity to earn eternal renown, be it in victory or sharp, gory death.

Occasionally, however it was not a warrior but a castle that gained celebrity and renown. This was especially true during a brief window in

Japanese history when men like Oba Nobunaga were ascendant. Then, fortress construction became more than the business of barricading hillsides: it was a monumental art form in its own right.



In 1333 Akamatsu Norimura, the military governor of Harima Province,[§] built a wooden fortress on a hill called Himeyama. This was a busy time for castle-builders, for Japan was in the throes of a lurching power-struggle between rival authorities. That year, the shogunate established following the Genpei War had been violently overthrown by an emperor, Go-Daigo,[#] who was determined to exercise real imperial control. This royal restoration was destined to last just three years, before the emperor was driven into exile and a new line of shoguns was installed. In 1333, however, this outcome was far from guaranteed. And since Akamatsu Norimura had fought against the emperor, at that moment it was prudent for him to have a high-security bolthole. He found it in Himeyama. There was already a Buddhist temple on the hillside, but this did not present much of a problem; castle-builders often accommodated temples inside their walls, even using them as a compound's central building.

Once built, the fortress on Himeyama served its purpose for more than a decade, protecting Norimura as the emperor rose, then abruptly fell again. In 1346 Norimura's son took over the castle and embarked on renovations. He dismantled the temple and moved it down the hill to make way for a more substantial set of fortifications, albeit still in the *yamashiro* style, securing the landscape with wooden fences, turrets and a gatehouse. Over the next two centuries, Himeyama Castle became an important stronghold, fought over and modified by successive clans. In the surrounding area, houses for samurai and merchants were built, so that by the sixteenth century, what had once been a temple with a fence around it was now a fully realised castle town.[23]

If that had been all, Himeyama would have been little different from thousands of other mountain-castle-town complexes that existed up and down sixteenth-century Japan. However, at the end of the century, when Oda Nobunaga, the ruthless daimyo of Azuchi and friend of visiting Jesuits, was campaigning to bring the whole country under obedience, Himeyama

underwent another transformation. This time it was upgraded to become one of the most iconic castles in the entire world. It would also gain a new name: Himeji.

The first architect of Himeyama's reinvention as Himeji was Oda Nobunaga's protégé Toyotomi Hideyoshi. In 1581, Hideyoshi had been charged by Nobunaga with bringing the independent-minded daimyo of western Honshu to heel. He chose Himeyama as the military base from which to launch his campaigns. To make the place accessible, commercially viable and strategically useful, he redirected the road that led west from the imperial capital of Kyoto, so that it ran right through the castle town. He redesigned the town to make it a more appealing place for merchants and other new settlers to come. Then he cleared the fortifications on the hilltop, installed a sloping stone base like the one Nobunaga had built at Azuchi and, on it, erected a three-storey tenshu, surrounded with stone walls. Like Azuchi, this was castle-building on a scale that had rarely been seen in Japan before. And the audacity of the works captured the imaginations of those who lived around the hillside. It was later said that an old woman who sold rice cakes on the street was so enthused that she donated the stone bowl in which she prepared her wares, so that it could be used in the foundations. Other townsfolk followed her example and donated their own possessions,[ʃ] so that they might have given something to such an extraordinary project.[24] What none of them knew was that this was just the beginning.

In the autumn of 1600 a battle often cited as the most important in Japanese history was fought at Sekigahara (modern Gifu Prefecture). Toyotomi Hideyoshi had succeeded Oda Nobunaga, but in 1598 he also died, leaving his five-year-old son as his heir. Since the boy could not hold office, there was an existential tussle to control government in his name, and it seemed as though every samurai in Japan took a stake in the quarrel. On October 21st, after a series of skirmishes, two great factions came together at Sekigahara. One side was the 'Western Army', led by a samurai named Ishida Mitsunari. On the other was an equally massive force – the 'Eastern Army', led by Tokugawa Ieyasu, a shrewd politician who had once been Hideyoshi's right-hand man.

Prior to the battle at Sekigahara, there had been a series of castle sieges – at Fushimi, Gifu and Tanabe – as the two factions tested each other's mettle.[Ω] But when the two sides came together at Sekigahara, on a foggy,

sodden battlefield, large sections of which were rice paddies swollen by rainstorms, the violence exceeded anything that had come before. As many as 180,000 samurai joined the fighting, using guns as well as swords and spears. Accounts of the fighting written later were apocalyptic in tone, describing beheadings, goring and ritual suicides. 'Ally and foe pushed against each other,' recalled one participant. 'The musket-fire and the shouts echoed from the heavens and shook the earth. The black smoke rose, making the day as night.'[25] It ended with resounding victory for the Eastern Army of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who was now able to make himself the new shogun, order his enemies to commit suicide, and parcel up the spoils of victory for his followers. One of the many awards the new shogun made was to grant Himeji to his son-in-law, who was also given a mandate to turn it into a super-fortress that would help keep the daimyo of western Honshu in line for good.

The works that followed over the next decade vastly expanded Himeji's footprint, swallowing up nearby villages in the process, and sent its silhouette soaring towards the heavens. The main tenshu was rebuilt once again, this time to the height of five storeys. Around it three more, smaller keeps, or *kotenshu*, were installed. These towers – made of thick timber frames, packed with bamboo and clay, plastered and painted brilliant white – were connected with fortified, double-storey corridors. The gabled rooftops in the towers were tiled.[26] Inside, their walls were lined with gun-racks, while the largest tenshu featured hiding places, known as *mushakakushi*, where samurai could conceal themselves ready to leap out and ambush assailants.[27] The walls surrounding the tenshu and their outbuildings were reinforced with sixty-six turrets and eighty-four gates. There were three moats, thirty-three wells and a large number of warehouses and towers to store rice, salt and other provisions that would be needed to survive a siege. Nearly 1,000 sniper positions, in the form of arrow slits, were positioned around the perimeter.[28]

With its gleaming white walls and elegant curved rooftops, Himeji earned the nicknames *Hakuro-jo* and *Shirasagi-jo* (meaning White Egret or White Heron castle). Travellers who saw it in years to come were stunned by its elegance, as well as its size – covering several hundred acres in total. But beneath with the castle's beauty lay fiendish architectural ingenuity. To approach the tenshu, visitors – or intruders – had to navigate a deliberately

bewildering series of tunnels and pathways that twisted back on themselves, often leading to nowhere. The inner parts of the castle were controlled with a sequence of checkpoints, including six ‘water gates’: barriers where liquids brought into the castle were tasted to check for poison. The precision of Himeji’s design gave rise to extravagant myths about its creation: it was said that a master carpenter who worked on the great tenshu was so distressed at being told that the tower was leaning by a fraction that he placed a chisel in his mouth, climbed to the highest point on the (allegedly) crooked tower, and hurled himself to his death.

Yet strange to say, if the story of the despairing carpenter is true, then this was one of the most violent episodes that ever occurred at Himeji. During the decade that it was undergoing its renovation, the political and military situation in Japan was grave. The new shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, was obliged to keep fighting to complete his unification of Japan, and it was only after a huge siege at Osaka Castle in 1614–15 that his mission could be considered accomplished. But neither during that period of fighting, nor any other subsequent age, was the great tenshu of the castle at Himeji directly attacked. One of the most sophisticated fortresses ever built in Japan was destined never to have its elaborate defensive mechanisms tested.

In a sense, however, this made Himeji the perfect symbol of the new Tokugawa shogunate – or *bakufu* – that was created in the aftermath of the battle of Sekigahara. The new shoguns pursued peace by a combination of monumental building and wholesale disarmament. This meant that only small number of extremely grand castles were allowed to exist – many of which were erected under the shogun’s supervision. The most significant of these was at Edo (in modern Tokyo), which was to be the military headquarters of the new regime. Here, the existing castle, dating back to 1457, was massively enlarged so that the compound swelled to ten miles in circumference. Its outer walls enclosed half a dozen different wards, numerous tenshu, palaces, tea rooms, temples, barracks, moats, bridges and gardens. In and around Edo castle were fine houses for Japan’s daimyo, who were now compelled to live there, along with a prescribed number of their samurai, for a set period of every year, and to leave their wives and children there permanently as hostages for their good behaviour. During the building phase, the daimyo were also compelled to provide stone for the works – giving them a material interest, if not a particularly happy one, in the new command centre to which they would now be forever tethered.

Besides Edo, the Tokugawa shoguns built (or rebuilt) more huge, beautiful castles at Nagoya, Wakayama and Takamatsu. Osaka Castle was reconstructed after the siege of 1614–15. Kumamoto Castle was enlarged on a scale that was almost as grand as Himeji. In Kyoto, which remained the imperial capital for the politically neutered emperors, the shoguns built Nijō Castle, where two rings of fortifications protected lavish palaces and gardens.

Many of these new castles were flatland castles (*hirajiro*) – they no longer made use of high ground as the basis for their security, but relied on the size and complexity of their manmade defences. To an extent, the sheer magnitude of these new castles – more lavish, elegant and imposing than the mountain fortresses of centuries past – allowed them to exist on the plains. But really, these new castles were built for a completely different age in which weapons – particularly guns and artillery – were strictly controlled and warfare was being systematically stamped out. Castles now represented power, rather than projecting it. At the heart of the Tokugawa shogunate was a determination to bring about political order and military stability by imposing stifling control over a rigidly fixed society.

In 1615, the shogun introduced ‘Laws for Military Households’. These regulations enforced the rule that daimyo had to be part-resident in Edo, under the watch of the government. But they also laid down onerous new rules for families of the samurai class.[29] Marriages and alliances required permission from the shogun’s court. Strict rules for samurai conduct were imposed, mandating military training and literary education and forbidding rowdiness and lavish spending. Fraternising between people from different parts of the country was forbidden. And castle-building was prohibited. A policy of ‘one castle per province’ meant that hundreds of old mountain fortresses and secondary strongholds were marked for demolition, and the samurai who might once have been scattered among castles were now forced to congregate in towns.

On top of all this, a new, rigid caste system was introduced, with movement between social groups more or less banned. Samurai, farmers, merchants and artisans were delineated, and their rights ascribed according to their birth status. Within the daimyo class, another set of subdivisions held sway. Relatives of the Tokugawa family were afforded high privilege and status, followed by those who could trace their lineage back to someone who fought on the winning side at the battle of Sekigahara. But for those

whose ancestors had backed the wrong side in 1600, life would now be very difficult: they were excluded from office and forcibly relocated around Japan, and the samurai who had served them were often reduced to the status of ronin – wandering, masterless warriors without honour, who lived in poverty and semi-criminal desperation.[30] The Edo period under the Tokugawa shoguns was renowned as a long age of peace, which was nowhere better expressed than in the massive, sprawling castle complexes that were scattered around Japan, seldom if ever attacked by anything other than fire or earthquakes. But an end to war did not bring blissful happiness or satisfaction to all those whom violence and death had given a purpose.



In 1858, during the waning days of the Tokugawa shogunate, a British career diplomat, Rutherford Alcock, arrived in Japan bearing the grand ambassadorial titles of consul general and minister plenipotentiary. It was an exciting, dangerous and unprecedented job, even for a thrusting young son of empire like Alcock. Having trained as a surgeon in London and served at war in Spain, Alcock had spent the 1840s and 1850s in China, where he was involved in the diplomatic fall-out from the first Opium War and subsequent commercial treaties that had forced the Qing dynasty to trade on terms highly favourable to the British.

Now Alcock was coming to Japan under similar circumstances. Under the shoguns Japanese people were forbidden to travel and foreigners were largely unwelcome in the country. Christianity was banned. But in 1853–54, American ‘gunboat diplomacy’[≈] had forced the shoguns to accept an end to two centuries of heavily restricted trade and contact, by opening up their ports and markets to westerners. Alcock was the first British diplomat to live in Japan, and he recognised, as he later wrote, that he was part of an ‘experiment’, which consisted of ‘allowing a free circulation of the European within the frontier which for the last two hundred years has been steadily barred against all intrusive strangers whatsoever. . . [it is] in its circumstances one of the most singular in the known history of the world.’[31]

For a man like Alcock, curious and thoughtful, even as he was steeped in all the values of the Victorian age, his posting to Japan was more than just a

job: it was a priceless opportunity to observe. In a memoir published during his years of service, he described the lives, habits and environment of the Japanese, from peasants, prostitutes and street-hawkers to the shogun himself, whom he referred to as the ‘Tycoon’. Despite the hostility towards foreigners, Alcock travelled energetically around Japan, visiting temples, attending festivals and even climbing Mount Fuji.

As he travelled Alcock noticed castles. When he visited the shogun in Edo, Alcock was impressed by the moats, walls and vast enclosures of the city’s enormous palace compound (though he did not see the tenshu, which had burned down in 1657, never to be rebuilt). When he travelled through Okazaki he was disappointed not to be able to make a detour to inspect Nagoya Castle, which he had heard possessed ‘the highest palace in Japan.’[32] Even second-tier daimyo castles caught his eye, though not without drawing his critical judgement: ‘What constitutes a Daimio’s [sic] chateau or castle. . . is first a moat surrounded by a wall, generally built of mud intersected with layers of tiles, and plastered over; sometimes with parapets and loopholed for musketry,’ he wrote. ‘A large gateway with massive overhanging roof; a straggling group of ignoble looking lath and plaster houses inside, rarely more than one story high; and sometimes, if the owner is a daimyo of very great pretensions, his walls will be flanked with turrets; and in his grounds, something like a two or three storied square pagoda will rise above the dead level of the other roofs, and look picturesque through the clumps of fine timber. . .’[33]

This was not an entirely flattering description, but neither was it born of pure British imperial jingo. Alcock’s appraisal of the average Japanese castle reflected his general unease about the situation in Japan. The opening up to the modern west, he felt, was bound to shine a light on the central paradox in the shogun state. As he wrote in 1863:

> While their material civilisation is not far behind our own, and the mass of the nation is well-ordered and peaceable, with as much of culture and intelligence as any nation in Europe: they are governed by a feudal and military class, for a parallel to which we must go back to the ferocious and turbulent periods of our own history—to a period when Anglo-Saxon, Dane, and Norman had fought over the whole land, and divided the kingdom among the respective chiefs and followers. . . How to deal with two such opposite social states and conditions of existence in the same nation, is a problem which has never before been presented to any Government for solution, and one which may well prove perplexing to the best statesmen of Europe.

The Japanese castle, so redolent of a creaking feudalism, hinted at what Alcock saw in Japan in the early 1860s more generally. That was a realm ripe for a realignment – or revolution.

He was right. In 1868, more than two and a half centuries after it began, the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown in the Meiji Restoration. Governing authority was put back in the hands of the emperor, and a rapid period of state-led modernisation swept through Japan. The new government reformed the army and the tax code, built new roads and railways, and dismantled the feudal system over which daimyo and samurai still ruled. Samurai were stripped of their ancient privileges, even if for many of them, life had long since ceased to bear much comparison with the glory days of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Within a generation, Japan was transformed from the medieval state Alcock had described to become a modern Asian nation-state with territorial ambitions to match.

All this had important implications for the castles that had survived the Tokugawa shogunate. The events leading to the Meiji Restoration had shown up the total inadequacy of Japan's castles as practical instruments of defence. The few modern fortresses that had been built by the shoguns – a series of gun batteries installed around Edo Bay in the 1840s – had proven useless when US gunboats turned up. Then, in the short civil war to defeat the shogun's followers in 1867–68, the grand old fortresses built around the turn of the seventeenth century proved equally unfit for purpose. Osaka Castle was besieged and suffered catastrophic fire damage. Wakamatsu Castle was pounded with heavy guns. Kumamoto Castle was burned, battered with artillery and later largely dismantled.

Once the new imperial government of the Meiji emperor was installed, a more systematic approach to destroying castles was adopted, which sought deliberately to erase the most egregious vestiges of Japanese feudalism. In 1873 the new government issued a decree known as the *Zenkoku Jokaku Sonpai-rei* (Ordinance for the Keeping and Disposal of the Country's Castles) – better known as the *Haijo-rei* (Ordinance to Dispose Castles).[34] More than three-quarters of the 200 castles that still stood in Japan were demolished, leaving only the shells of buildings, walls, or nothing at all. Of those that were not razed, forty-three were passed to the new imperial army ministry, which sold off grounds and turned buildings over for use as state buildings. A few castles were spared – Himeji and Nagoya escaped destruction, along with several that happened to have imperial palaces in

their grounds. But from the 1870s until the 1920s, when a law was belatedly passed designating what was left of Japan's castles as national treasures, the ruin of castles across the realm was general.

Yet efforts to halt the destruction and – in some cases – to reverse it soon ran afoul of an even more devastating period in Japanese history. In 1931 the newly modernised imperial state launched an invasion of Chinese Manchuria, establishing a puppet state of Manchukuo. In July 1937, full-scale warfare broke out between Japan and China, opening what would become the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. In December 1941, Japanese aircraft attacked the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, bringing the United States into the world war and initiating a conflict that would end with attacks on mainland Japan more devastating than anything in history.

These attacks took the form of massive and merciless air strikes. In November 1944 air-raids led by new US B-29 Superfortress bombers began to attack Japanese military and civilian targets. Four months later US bombers started flying low-altitude raids, dropping incendiary bombs as well as heavy ordnance. Tokyo (formerly Edo), Nagoya, Osaka and many other cities were subjected to intense, indiscriminate devastation. Besides the hundreds of thousands of people killed, dozens of national monuments, including many of Japan's castles, were also lost.

During the vicious fighting between Japanese and Allied troops, there had been attempts in Japan to revive the spirit of the samurai in support of a patriotic narrative about the war. (Kamikaze pilots were photographed carrying samurai swords into the cockpits of their aircraft before suicide raids.) But in 1945 the damage wreaked on the castles that dated back to the heyday of the samurai was apocalyptic. In May the city of Nagoya was firebombed; a military command post based in Nagoya Castle was hit, and the castle burned down. In late June Okayama Castle was destroyed, along with around 70 per cent of that city's centre. In July Wakayama was also hit, and its castle razed.

Devastating as that was, it was nothing compared to what followed the next month. On August 6th, the first of two bombing raids that eventually halted the world war took place when the B-29 *Enola Gay* flew over the city of Hiroshima and dropped an atomic bomb with an explosive yield equivalent to 15,000 tonnes of TNT. At the point of detonation and in the firestorm that followed, roughly 90 per cent of Hiroshima was vaporised or

severely damaged, including the five-storey tenshu of the castle built there in the 1590s.

Though a rare combination of good fortune, Hiroshima Castle had survived the Meiji Restoration's demolition programme, and in the 1930s had become a popular tourist destination: in 1934 the American writer Alexander Hume Ford had visited it and recalled that 'it gave me the surprise of my life – the most exquisite, charming feudal castle in all of Japan. . .. I feel like shouting: "Wake up Hiroshima! Get busy with your publicity stunts! Your castle is great and in this cherry season it is a dream never to be forgotten."'[35] But just eleven years after this, the castle, along with almost everything – and everyone – in Hiroshima, was obliterated.

When the Japanese military command surrendered a few days later, following a second atomic blast, over Nagasaki, vanishingly few of the thousands of castles that had once stood in Japan were left. What the policies of the Tokugama shoguns and the Meiji emperor had begun, Allied bombing had all but finished.

Yet here and there, a few reminders of Japan's greatest age of castle-building did still remain. One was Himeji, which had enjoyed an astonishing run of good luck. In 1873 Himeji had been earmarked for razing under the Haijo-rei law, and would have been pulled down had the merchant who bought the licence to do the work not found the job too onerous and expensive. Subsequent Japanese military occupation did some damage to Himeji, as did a fire in the 1880s. But in the 1910s a restoration policy had begun, with the castle opened for public visits. On the night of July 3rd 1945, when B-29 bombers dropped hundreds of tonnes of firebombs over Himeji in the space of around one hour, the iconic white tenshu keep was only lightly damaged. This miraculous survival meant that once the war was over, Himeji's heron-like tenshu remained, as a symbol of a Japanese past that had been obliterated.

Today, Himeji is one of the most instantly recognisable castles in the world, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, visited by millions of tourists every year, who explore the still-bewildering pathways that lead through the outer complex towards the great white tower. It has been used in famous movies such as *Ran*, by the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, and the 1967 James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* (in which it featured as a ninja training school). One of Japan's most famous ghost stories (*kaidan*), *Banchō Sarayashiki*, tells the story of a young servant girl at Himeji who

rejects the romantic advances of a samurai, is brutally murdered by him and subsequently returns to haunt him with her screams.

But Himeji is not the only castle of its era to attract continued attention. Although only around a dozen original tenshu still stand, many of those destroyed during the Meiji Restoration and the Second World War have been rebuilt or restored since the 1950s. Osaka, Nagoya and even Hiroshima castles are all now visitor attractions designed to tell stories about Japanese history and culture. This has not always been popular: during the 1960s, when castle rebuilding was taking place all over Japan, one historian complained that 'castles and their keeps were built from blood and tears', and were best left to the feudal past that had originally created them.[36] Millions, however, can now enjoy in peace the reborn edifices of castles originally built by pitiless warlords like Oda Nobunaga – a gentler second coming, if nothing else, and one that chimes with the sentiment of a death poem written by one of the thousands of victims of that old butcher of Azuchi:

> That a flower which
> Has budded should blossom twice
> Is what I pray for
> As I turn my gaze to the
> Moon that shines the whole night through.

* Oda Nobunaga is remembered as one of the Three Great Unifiers of Japan, who consolidated power following the Warring States (Sengoku) period and collapse of the Ashikaga Shogunate in 1573. His successors were Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the future shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. His riotous youth was the subject of much gossip. His contemporary official biographer noted that as a young man, Nobunaga wore sleeveless vests, slouched as he walked and gobbled fruit and rice cakes in the street with no regard for propriety. He was a bit of a punk. Ōta Gyūichi, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, translated by J. S. A. Elisonas and J. P. Lamers (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 58–9.

† A mascaron is an ornamental human face carved into a building – often above a door or a lintel.

‡ Sadly the Azuchi screens have long disappeared, and are known only from two early seventeenth-century woodblock prints, taken from sketches made shortly after the screens' arrival in Rome.

§ Today in Hyogo Prefecture, in the south-west half of Honshu.

Emperor Go-Daigo was a conventional token emperor from 1318, but in 1333 overthrew the Kamakura shogunate and ruled directly. In 1336 he was ousted by Ashikaga Takauji and fled to Yoshino. From this point until 1392 there was an imperial schism, with rival emperors in Kyoto (the Northern Court) and Yoshino (the Southern Court).

∫ This trope of castle-building legend cuts across cultures – there are stories of pilgrims during the crusades donating their possessions, and even their bodies after death, to the foundations of great fortresses.
Ω The siege of Tanabe Castle in 1600 is famous for its strangeness. The castle was held for the Tokugawa by Hosokawa Yusai, a poet and scholar who was deeply respected for his learning. Seemingly in deference to his character, the assaulting army neglected to enforce the siege properly, allowing Yusai to remain in his fortress more or less unscathed.
≈ In 1853–54 Commodore Matthew Perry brought a squadron of modern warships into Edo Bay, threatening the Japanese coast and refusing to leave until the Japanese signed the first of a series of trade treaties with the west.



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11

FANTASY CASTLES

In a dream I conceived it; my will called it into being. Strong and fair it stands, a fortress proud and peerless!

RICHARD WAGNER, *DAS RHEINGOLD*

In early January 1750 Horatio 'Horace' Walpole, a thirty-two-year-old English aristocrat, connoisseur and man of letters, sat down in his London house on Arlington Street and wrote to Horace Mann, the British envoy to the duke of Tuscany. The two men were old friends, who had met when Walpole was on the Grand Tour and kept up a correspondence ever since. Walpole began his letter by lamenting that he had little to say: for three months, he sighed, 'nothing has happened'. But that did not stop him filling several pages of paper with his neat, looping hand.

Walpole fed Mann titbits of London gossip, telling him of the society matriarch who had 'talked me to death'. He shared news from Parliament, where his late father had led the government for an unprecedented twenty years,[*] and where the younger Walpole now sat as MP for a Cornish town he would never visit. He penned an impromptu obituary for the earl of Pembroke, who had recently died, remembering him as 'public-spirited and inflexibly honest' but 'so blasphemous at tennis that the Primate of Ireland had to leave off playing with him.' He signed off in his usual jaunty fashion – then added an intriguing postscript.

'My dear Sir,' he wrote, 'I must trouble you with a commission, which I don't know whether you can execute. I am going to build a little Gothic castle at Strawberry Hill. If you can pick me up any fragments of old painted glass, arms or anything, I shall be excessively obliged to you. I can't say I remember any such thing in Italy, but out of old châteaus [*sic*] I imagine one might get it cheap, if there is any.'[1] Walpole presented this scheme – his 'little Gothic castle' – as an afterthought. It was anything but. Strawberry Hill was to become a project that would occupy him for the rest of his life.

Three years earlier, in the spring of 1747, Walpole had purchased a house set in five acres of the fashionable Thames riverfront near Twickenham, a couple of hours' carriage-ride from London. When he took it on, the house was a two-storey timber-framed structure known as Chopp'd Straw Hall, supposedly because its original owner had scrimped so excessively while building it that he had been unable to buy hay for his horses, and had therefore fed them overwinter on chopped straw. He decided to remodel it in a manner that would showcase his artistic and architectural passions, and

speak to a new style emerging in English architecture. For a century, since the time of Inigo Jones, English gentlemen had favoured classical designs for their houses.[†] Walpole had other ideas. 'The Grecian is only proper for magnificent and public buildings,' he wrote. 'Columns and all their beautiful ornaments look ridiculous when crowded into a closet or cheesecake house.'[2]

As Walpole indicated in his letter to Mann, the style he felt best befitted an Englishman's home – or, indeed, his castle – could be summed up by the word 'Gothic'. Strawberry Hill was to draw its inspiration from the fortresses, cathedrals and monumental tombs of the Middle Ages. He would borrow from any part of that long era, roaming as he pleased across the eleven centuries between the Sack of Rome and the Reformation; as he wrote in another letter, he simply loved 'old castles, old pictures, old histories and the babble of old people [who] make one live back into centuries that cannot disappoint one.'[3] He planned to embellish Strawberry Hill with battlements and spires, windows with pointed arches and quatrefoil detailing.

Inside he would have vaulted ceilings, ornate staircases and a profusion of painted glass, arranged to create a warm, dark atmosphere he called 'gloomth'. There would be space everywhere for his artworks and trinkets: ceramics, miniatures, paintings, prints, books, antiquities, furniture and coins. The gardens were to be carefully landscaped to show off this exotic homage to the world before the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and the original five-acre plot would expand as more land came available for sale, eventually covering forty-two. The overall effect, which would be guided by a 'committee of taste' (consisting of himself and his aesthete friends John Chute and Richard Bentley), would be both an expression of Walpole's unusual talent as a collector of art and ornamental curiosities, and a playful, romantic rekindling of a historical age that had long been out of fashion.

In 1750, when Walpole asked to Horace Mann to keep an eye out for acquisitions that might suit his project, work at Strawberry Hill had already begun. It would proceed in phases until the 1770s, and as soon as he could, Walpole used the castle as a summer villa at which to entertain his many friends: aristocrats, artists, politicians, poets and dowager countesses.[4] Although the last sieges of British castles had taken place as recently as

1745–46,[‡] there was no real defensive purpose to Strawberry Hill's crenellations, and no private army kept watch over its battlements. Rather, the world was invited in. Walpole opened the house up to curious members of the public, who could book tickets in groups of four to be shown the castle's grandest rooms by his housekeeper, Margaret.[§] Once through the gates, the visitors would be treated to an extraordinary confection of old and new, arranged to play tricks on the eyes.

In one sense, Walpole's castle project might have been considered an exercise in artifice and vanity. For although Strawberry Hill looked like a castle, it was really just a playful pretence of one. The ornate interiors, which resembled medieval fixtures of carved stone and wood, were largely made from plaster or even papier-mâché. Many 'windows' were in fact blind scenes painted onto the walls in *trompe-l'œil*. As a fortification, it might as well have been made of confectioner's sugar. Yet it was executed with such passion, underpinned by learning and humour, that it succeeded, eventually becoming one of the most influential buildings in modern British architecture. And it contained a collection of artistic treasures, which stood comparison with the more orthodox assembly of Old Masters his father had collected in the Walpoles' ancestral seat of Houghton Hall in Norfolk.

In Strawberry Hill visitors could see a bust of Caligula excavated from Herculaneum (acquired in Florence by Horace Mann), a lock of Mary Tudor's hair, an ornate prayer-book that had once belonged to Queen Claude of France, and a Turkish dagger Walpole believed (incorrectly) to have been owned by Henry VIII.[5] A room named the Holbein Chamber contained a collection of three dozen copies of famous Tudor portraits, as well as the great archbishop-minister Cardinal Wolsey's hat. At the top of the main staircase in the hall a vaulted armoury was filled with medieval arms and armour. Displayed throughout the rooms were more than 1,000 pieces of ceramic and glass, around half of them in a dedicated China Room. In another letter to Mann, written in 1753, Walpole described the Hall, with 'lean windows fattened with rich saints in painted glass, and a vestibule open with three arches on the landing place, and niches full of trophies of old coats of mail, Indian shields made of rhinoceros's hides, broadswords, quivers, long bows, arrows and spears, all supposed to be taken by [his alleged ancestor] Sir Terry Robsart in the holy wars [i.e. the crusades].'[6] Everything in the house had a story to tell, and was displayed

to pique the curiosity.[7] When it was fully built, Walpole's 'little Gothic castle' was one of the wonders of his age.

Yet Strawberry Hill was not the only castle for which Walpole was famous. One night in 1764, while building works were progressing, Walpole was plagued by a nightmare in which he saw a great ghostly hand clad in armour, clutching the top bannister of a staircase. Terrified but inspired, he began to write a story that began with a similar scene. In short order that story would become *The Castle of Otranto*. It was a novel set in exactly the sort of castle that Walpole had in mind as he pored over his plans for Strawberry Hill: dark, magical and melodramatic.

The Castle of Otranto is an action-packed, exciting novel, sometimes preposterous but always entertaining. The story opens with a southern Italian count named Manfred about to marry his weakling only son to a young heiress, Isabella, in order to safeguard his family's contested claim to the castle. But before the ceremony can begin, Manfred is crushed to death beneath a giant knightly helmet which falls into the castle courtyard. Shocked, then impassioned, Manfred decides he must marry Isabella himself – after divorcing his wife, Hippolita. Horrified by this incestuous proposal, Isabella flees through secret underground passages, aided by a resourceful, surprisingly noble peasant named Theodore. Above ground, meanwhile, the castle is disturbed by supernatural visions including portraits that come to life and visions of huge pieces of armour. After a good deal of chasing and scheming, Isabella's father, Frederic, arrives, claiming to be the rightful owner of the castle; the building responds by manifesting even more omens. Eventually, in a confused denouement, Manfred accidentally kills his own daughter, Matilda, then retires in shame to a monastery, after which Theodore and Isabella marry and take over the castle.

When Walpole started writing *The Castle of Otranto*, he did so 'without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate'.[8] Two months later, he was done, though some of his self-bemusement remained and he decided to publish the book anonymously. The foreword to the first edition declared that the story was a genuine tale dating to the high Middle Ages: 'If the story was written near the time when it is supposed to have happened, it must have been between 1096, the era of the first crusade, and 1243, the date of the last, or not long afterwards.'[9] It seemed to be set in a genuine Italian *Fortezza* – perhaps even the real castle at Otranto, built by Alfonso II

of Naples in the late fifteenth century. ‘The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle. The author seems frequently, without design, to describe particular parts. The chamber, says he, on the righthand ; the door on the left-hand; the distance from the chapel to Conrad’s apartment: These and other passages are strong presumptions that the author had some certain building in his eye.’[10] Walpole even invented a specious provenance for the story’s transmission, asserting it was preserved in a sixteenth-century Italian manuscript transcribed by one ‘Onuphrio Muralto’, which had been translated into English by ‘William Marshal’. (The former name was a loose pun on Walpole’s own; the latter the name of England’s most famous medieval knight.) Needless to say, all this was untrue. Walpole was playing his favourite game: straight-facedly presenting the pretend as the real, while winking broadly to his audience, to keep all but the most credulous in on the joke.

Once *The Castle of Otranto* was released, however, Walpole felt the need to come clean. His book had attracted attention for its apparent historicity, and ‘succeeded so well, that I do not any longer entirely keep the secret.’[11] In the preface to the second edition, he owned up to being the author, explaining that it had been an experiment: ‘an attempt to blend the two kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern.’ He no longer presented his characters as the products of a fevered two months of improvisation. He now argued that they were ‘personages under the dispensation of miracles and witnesses to the most stupendous phenomena’, who would nevertheless act ‘according to the rule of probability’, so that the reader would ‘never lose sight of their human character’. Thus presented, the book was a careful literary study in exposing rational individuals to the inexplicable, supernatural and macabre. The juxtaposition, he claimed, was precisely thought out.

Some of this was plainly a *post-facto* attempt on Walpole’s part to make sense of a book that was really the unplanned product of his own imaginative freestyling. But in the decades to come it would not matter. By accident or design, in *The Castle of Otranto*, Walpole had set the template for a literary genre that would be remarkably enduring. At the same time as he was building his *gloomth*-infused castle Strawberry Hill, Walpole had written the first Gothic novel.

By the eighteenth century the word ‘Gothic’ had accrued a number of meanings, not all of them flattering. The original Goths were the wandering tribes who had breached the borders of the Roman Empire, pillaged Rome under Alaric in 410 CE and thereby brought classical civilisation to ruin. To many, their name was synonymous with stupidity, wanton destruction and coarseness. The 1775 edition of Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* defined a Goth as ‘one not civilised, one deficient in general knowledge, a barbarian’. Voltaire used the term ‘Gothic horde’ to disparage France’s vulgar lower orders.[12] In architecture, Gothic – a catch-all term for the monumental castles and cathedrals of the later Middle Ages – was also widely derided as a grotesque adulteration of classical elegance. The sixteenth-century Italian painter Giorgio Vasari, whose *Lives of the Artists* codified the great figures and works of the Italian Renaissance, called the Gothic style ‘monstrous and barbaric, wholly ignorant of any ideas of sense and order’; the Goths had ‘filled the whole of Italy with their accursed buildings.’[13] A few years before Walpole’s birth, an English critic had concluded that ‘in the whole the Gothick [sic] manner looks great at first, [but] the more you are acquainted with it, the more you despise it. . . . [it is] a mode introduced by a barbarous sort of people who first distressed then dissolved the Roman Empire.’[14]

Given the scorn heaped on Gothic architecture, and the wild popularity of the neoclassical styles that swept through Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was hard to see how any argument might be made for reviving a style so associated with superstitious ignorance. Yet a case did exist, and by Walpole’s day people were making it, particularly in England.

For one thing, constitutional historians had begun to rethink the Goths themselves. They argued that the Germanic tribes who came to Britannia after the legions left – the Angles, Saxons and Jutes – brought with them ‘Gothic’ modes of government that laid the basis for English liberty: democratic representation, community self-government, a love of property. Not by chance, these were the very values that constitutional historians typically contrasted with the absolutist tendencies of the Stuart monarchs, who had been run out of the country in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

What was more, if the Goths were Germanic tribes who crushed Rome, might that not be a good thing? After all, under the Hanoverians, Britain had explicitly chosen a Germanic royal family that would respect limited government and the Protestant, anti-Roman, faith. If all this were accepted, and classical Rome and Catholic Rome were then made equivalent, the Goths looked all the more heroic: not so much agents of chaos as the forerunners of modernity.

Alongside this historical rehabilitation of the Gothic came a literary and artistic one. Writers who wished to feel wistful about the past began to mine the national landscape for ruins that evoked some lost noble spirit. In 1757 the political philosopher Edmund Burke published an essay on the 'sublime' – a force he thought was more compelling than simple beauty. Burke's concept of the sublime relied on horror, terror and awe. It flourished in the dead of night. And it could be found in the massive structures and mysterious ceremonies dating from prehistory to the Middle Ages. 'To the sublime in building, greatness of dimension seems requisite,' he wrote. 'Strength, violence, pain, and terror are ideas that rush in upon the mind together.'[15]

Burke was hardly alone. Two years before Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, the Irish clergyman Thomas Leland anticipated some of its gloomy medieval themes in *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance*, which involved the titular hero, a half-brother of the Plantagenet king Henry III, being treacherously imprisoned in his own castle.[16] At almost the same time, Richard Hurd, a future bishop of Winchester, published *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, a book that argued for the Middle Ages as a time of chivalric nobility, great storytelling and fine building. 'Gothic architecture has its rules, by which when it comes to be examined it is seen to have its merit, as well as the Grecian,' Hurd wrote.[17] And in 1765 Thomas Percy published a three-volume collection of ancient English ballads, songs, fairy stories and romances which celebrated old 'Gothic' writings of the sort that *The Castle of Otranto* deliberately mimicked.

So as Walpole built and wrote his vision of the Gothic into existence, reimagined in the twin castles of Strawberry Hill and Otranto, a wider movement was emerging that sought to resurrect the Gothic, and celebrate buildings like medieval castles. Indeed, by Walpole's death in 1797, Gothic revival was on its way to being a leading style in public architecture in Britain and beyond. As he laboured on Strawberry Castle, several other

eighteenth-century aristocrats followed Walpole's lead and had their own stately homes dressed up as fortified strongholds. In Scotland the architect Robert Adam designed Inveraray Castle with imposing round corner towers topped with sharp conical points, Mellerstain House with crenellations running around its rooftops, and Wedderburn Castle with battlements and octagonal towers recalling great medieval fortresses like Edward I's masterpiece at Caernarfon.[#] In Northumberland, Widdrington Castle, ruined during the Jacobite Rising in 1715, was raised again in Gothic style during the 1770s, though it burned down before works could be completed. And in Wales, the Monmouthshire gentleman William Jones built a small L-shaped Gothic castle amid the chestnut groves on his estate, as a tribute to his wife Elizabeth, who died in 1787. Jones spent a good deal of money with the London firm Ince and Mayhew, who supplied furniture to fit out the little castle in 'the Gothic style'.

Even where the idea of living in a fake medieval castle did not appeal, Britain's eighteenth-century aristocrats – and aesthetes – found they could embrace Gothic fortifications in other ways. In the 1760s Henry, Lord Arundell, and his wife Mary Conquest built a country house in Wiltshire, known as New Wardour Castle. Designed by James Paine in the Italian Renaissance style known as Palladian, it was untouched by Gothic influence. However, a few hundred metres away in the house's grounds lay the ruins of 'old' Wardour Castle, a fortress built in the 1390s and blown to pieces with gunpowder during the English Civil War. When the grounds around it were landscaped, the ruins of that original castle became a focal point, integrated into the scenery with paths, trees and a manmade lake, and augmented with a little Gothic banqueting house and an artificial stone cave known as the Grotto, complete with ferns, moss and dripping water.

The effect Lord Arundell and his wife were aiming at in setting Old Wardour Castle at the heart of their grounds was described by the clergyman William Gilpin as 'picturesque'. In 1792 Gilpin published three essays on that concept, which he defined as being different from simple beauty; things that were picturesque, he wrote, 'please from some quality capable of being illustrated in painting.' The picturesque could certainly be natural features of the landscape, such as trees, rocks, woods, rivers, lakes and mountains. Yet there was something especially picturesque about ancient buildings set within the natural landscape – and all the better if they were the mouldering remains of a bygone world. 'Among all the objects of

art, the picturesque eye is perhaps most inquisitive after the elegant relics of ancient architecture,' he wrote. 'The ruined tower, the Gothic arch, the remains of castles, and abbeys. These are the richest legacies of art. They are consecrated by time; and almost deserve the veneration we pay to the works of nature itself.'[18]

In defining the picturesque, Gilpin had alighted on as enduring a theme as Burke did in his writing on the sublime. Both concepts would be of great importance to the development of Gothic architecture as it continued to gather pace in the nineteenth century. And both found their epitome in another castle built almost a century after works began at Strawberry Hill. This castle – a fusion of Gothic styles with the Romantic and even the Byzantine – was not built in England, but on a mountaintop in Bavaria, by a man even more obsessed with immersing himself in the medieval past than Horace Walpole. His name was King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and the castle he built was the New Swan Stone, or *Neuschwanstein*.



Ludwig II of Bavaria was born in Nymphenburg, a neoclassical palace near Munich, decorated with frescoed scenes from Roman history, in late August 1845. He was named for his grandfather, King Ludwig I, an enthusiastic patron of the arts and builder, whose works in Munich included art galleries, boulevards, memorials and statues, all designed to resemble the glories of ancient Athens and Rome. As a child, Ludwig earned his grandfather's approval when he began playing with toy bricks, making what the old king called 'astonishingly good buildings in excellent taste.'[19]

He certainly had plenty to stir his imagination. Besides the grand streets of Munich, Ludwig spent his summers in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps at a castle known as *Hohenschwangau* (High Swan County), which reflected his father Maximilian's tastes. There, on the ruins of a medieval fortress above Lake Alpsee, Maximilian had commissioned a square Gothic castle with hexagonal corner towers. Inside, rooms were decorated with scenes from the Old German romances of the Grail. The great hero of this Arthurian cycle was Lohengrin, known as the Swan Knight, who was said to have lived in the castle in some long distant day. There were a number of variations on the tale of the Swan Knight, but the common feature was that he appeared in a boat towed by swans to rescue a beautiful damsel,

defending (and in some tellings, marrying) her, on the condition that she never ask his name. The young Ludwig was captivated by the story, and in later life his identification with the Swan Knight would become close to an obsession.

Ludwig was a sickly child. A bout of meningitis when he was aged seven months left scarring on his brain, and affected his general health thereafter. He had joint pain and headaches. He was anxious in social situations, and as a teenager suffered from hallucinations.[20] (He was not the only member of his close family to be afflicted with delusion: his father's sister Alexandra lived her life convinced that she had swallowed a grand piano made of glass.) He was captivatingly beautiful, tall and strong, but bored by politics and a mediocre soldier at best. It was all the more unfortunate, then, that in 1848 his grandfather was forced to abdicate the throne, and in 1864 his father died suddenly and prematurely. That meant Ludwig inherited the crown of Bavaria aged eighteen. He looked the part, and to begin with he approached the job of rule conscientiously. Yet it soon became clear that his real interests lay not in government but in architecture and the arts, in medieval legends and in castles.

He was especially fond of music. At the age of fourteen, Ludwig heard his first opera by the most brilliant and controversial musician working in Germany at that time: Richard Wagner. Wagner was a composer of considerable genius, who had developed a vision of art he called *Gesamtkunstwerk* ('total artwork') which integrated drama, dance, music and stage design. He was also a radical, a political revolutionary and an incurable spendthrift, who had been living in exile from Germany since 1849 for taking part in an uprising that year in Saxony. During his time abroad he had occupied himself writing libretti, essays on art, anti-Semitic tracts and letters to his friends at home begging them to have his works staged in his absence.

It was one of these productions *in absentia* – a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* staged in Munich – that a fourteen-year-old Ludwig heard in February 1861. He saw the Swan Knight on stage in his world of long-lost castles and fell instantly in love.[21] The following year Ludwig saw Wagner's *Tannhäuser* – an opera about a medieval wandering *Minnesinger* (poet-minstrel) – and was so convulsed with ecstasy that he seemed on the verge of having a fit.[22] When Ludwig became king in 1864, Wagner had been readmitted to Germany but was in hiding from his creditors,

despairing that he would never finish writing his epic *Ring* cycle. One of Ludwig's first orders was therefore to send a senior minister to find the fifty-one-year-old composer and bring him to Munich. He was to live under royal patronage and make all the wonderful music he could.

Wagner's time at Ludwig's court was by turns glorious and tempestuous. The king and composer met every day in the little lakeside palace of Schloss Berg, which had been crenelated by his father, and to which, in time, he would add a medieval tower. During the hours when they were apart, they exchanged letters full of passionate declarations of their mutual infatuation. That the affection was real did not prevent Wagner turning it heavily to his own advantage. Ludwig gave him a house and a generous salary, allowing him to write and stage *Tristan und Isolde*, and to complete his *Ring* cycle. He agreed to fund a new opera house in which Wagner's works could be staged.[∫] In the late autumn of 1865 the two men stayed together at the Hohenschwangau castle. Every day at dawn military musicians awoke the castle playing passages from Wagner's *Lohengrin*. For entertainment in the evenings, Ludwig staged the scene of Lohengrin sailing in his swan-drawn boat on the waters of the Alpsee.[23] Their friendship, spiritually if not physically consummated[Ω] in the castle, was a blissful experience for both men, albeit for different, even if overlapping, reasons. It saved Wagner's career, and crystallised in Ludwig's mind the idea of himself as a romantic hero in Lohengrin's mould: a Swan King, whose patronage of the arts elevated him far beyond the grubby reality of politics.

Yet it was also a fleeting association. Wagner's presence – and his manner – upset Ludwig's chief ministers and offended the population of Munich, who resented this non-Bavarian interloper, lavished with funds from the royal purse. In December 1865 Ludwig was forced to send Wagner temporarily back into exile – a decision that pained him so much he considered abdicating his throne. This was not the end of their friendship, and they would remain in intermittent contact until the early 1870s. But it was a decisive break all the same, and it led to Ludwig finding his own artistic outlet for the dream-vision of Germany's medieval past. What Wagner expressed in music, he would realise in stone.

In 1868, Ludwig wrote to Wagner, still then living under his patronage, to tell him of a great project he had planned. On a high ridge around half an hour's walk from the Hohenschwangau stood the ruins of another medieval

castle, known as the *Vorderhohenschwangau*. Back in the 1850s King Maximilian had planned to build a viewing gallery there, but had never proceeded with the scheme. Now, Ludwig told Wagner, 'I propose to rebuild the ancient castle ruins. . . in the genuine style of the old German knights' castles.' There would be plenty of guest-rooms 'commanding wonderful views' and fit for visits from Wagner: 'the godlike Friend through whom alone can flower the salvation and true blessedness of the world.' Should he come to stay, he would find 'reminiscences of Tannhäuser (minstrels' hall with a view of the castle beyond) and of Lohengrin (castle, courtyard, outdoor passageway and approach to the chapel).' The whole thing would be a homage to medieval legend and a fantasy escape from all that lay at the bottom of the mountain. The castle would, Ludwig said, be much finer than Hohenschwangau, which was 'profaned' by the presence of his mother, the dowager queen Marie, whom he despised.[24]

Demolition and groundworks for this new castle began in 1868, and the foundation stone – a block of marble enclosing a miniature portrait of Ludwig himself – started the following summer. The designs were managed by an experienced royal architect named Eduard Riedel, who originally suggested a Gothic castle over three storeys. This would have been a similar castle to the medieval Wartburg in Thuringia, where the original minstrels' contest dramatised in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* was said to have taken place. Yet as Ludwig immersed himself in the project he reworked the idea of the Gothic to something even more daring. In 1867, on a trip to France, he had seen both the sensational Baroque palace of Versailles, and the vast Gothic revival Chateau de Pierrefonds, then being restored by the great architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Ludwig yearned for grandeur on a similar scale.

To that end he employed Christian Jank, the scenic painter who had created the stage designs for Wagner's *Lohengrin*, to produce watercolours of a fantastical castle extended upwards to five storeys, its square walls embellished with Romanesque windows and soaring towers. Like Wartburg it would have a Singers' Hall. There would be a throne room, royal apartments, a dining hall, and an exotic Moorish Hall. Ludwig was determined to borrow from wherever his imagination led him: the Gothic and the Romantic, eastern and western, Christian and pagan. The connecting thread was a celebration of the medieval past, heroic and majestic, heavily inspired by the works of the 'godlike Friend'. Even as his

friendship with Wagner stuttered – the composer would never visit this new castle – Ludwig was to remain true to the vision that had first drawn them together.[≈]

Within a year of construction beginning on Neuschwanstein,[∂] a real war broke out. The Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 pitched Napoleon III's France into conflict with a Prussian-led confederation of German states. The war was conceived – or at least, exploited – by the Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck as a means to humiliate France, unify Germany and realign the political map of Europe, and it would have lasting consequences into the twentieth (and, arguably, twenty-first) centuries. Under the terms of a secret agreement between Ludwig and Bismarck, the kingdom of Bavaria was obliged to participate. Ludwig honoured the terms, but stayed away from the fighting and subsequent diplomatic redrawing of Europe's borders. He stayed in Bavaria, in Munich or else in his mountain castles and lodges: the Gothic fortress of Hohenschwangau, a hunting retreat at Linderhof, or Neuschwanstein, where building did not pause for the war. He refused to leave Hohenschwangau to attend the Versailles conference that created a new German Empire dominated by Prussia. When the imperial crown prince, his cousin Frederick, visited Munich to celebrate victory, Ludwig sulked. His heart lay in his castles, and their recreation of a purer age of knights and minstrels. Increasingly, he could not abide the nastiness of the real world.

By 1873 the first section of Neuschwanstein was completed and ready for Ludwig to move in. The gateway was perhaps the most obviously Gothic part of the castle, with battlements and round towers framing a façade pierced by symmetrical rows of windows. It was not the most exotic part of the overall design, but it contained apartments where Ludwig could stay as construction of the much larger main body of the castle proceeded.

The buildings that he watched emerge during the ensuing years were daring and even dazzling. Out of the pine forests that covered the 1,008-metre ridge rose a castle whose silhouette was like nothing else on the mountain. From the gatehouse, Ludwig could look over two courtyards towards the main body of the castle, known as the Palas. This was connected to a smaller building known as the Knights' House, and framed by three principal towers: the Square Tower and two Staircase Towers. Within, these were built with the most advanced materials of the day, supported by steel frames and concrete. But with the exception of the

gatehouse most of the castle was clad in white limestone, so that it gleamed in the sun. As a boy, Ludwig had memorised most of the libretto to Wagner's *Lohengrin*. As he watched Neuschwanstein rise, he could very well have thought of the hero's description of the location of the Grail:

> In a far-off land, inaccessible to your steps,
> there is a castle by the name of Montsalvat;
> a light-filled temple stands within it,
> more beautiful than anything on earth. . .[π]

This castle was even more radiant, and Ludwig loved it. After Wagner's music, this was the passion of his life. He pored over the designs, becoming explosively angry if his instructions were not followed to the letter.

His fierce scrutiny drove his builders, decorators and painters to distraction – but also to greatness. Neuschwanstein's centrepiece rooms, on the third and fourth floors, were the Throne Room and Singers' Hall. The Throne Room with a double-height 13m cupola ceiling, was decorated in shimmering Byzantine style, echoing the churches of the east, the greatest of which was the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The cupola was painted bright blue and dotted with brilliant gold stars, while all around it were religious and royal murals: Christ and the saints; canonised kings including Louis IX of France and Edward the Confessor of England; St Stephen of Hungary converting his pagan people to Christianity; St George, on horseback in Roman armour with a swan adorning the top of his helmet, thrusting a lance into the mouth of a dragon. The Singers' Hall was painted with scenes from the legend of Lohengrin's father, Parzival, seeking the Grail, as related by Germany's original Arthurian tale-teller, Wolfram von Eschenbach.[25] The walls showed Parzival being knighted, fighting the Red Knight, wedding the Red Knight's widow, Kondwiramur, who would bear him his son, Lohengrin. Ludwig paid intense attention to the progress of these murals, correcting tiny details, and even insisting that a mural showing Parzival encountering pilgrims on Good Friday be completed on Good Friday 1884.

When light poured in through Neuschwanstein's windows, the walls of the Singers' Hall and Throne Room fairly glimmered. They did not in any sense transmit the quality that Horace Walpole had named 'gloomth'. Yet there were other parts of Ludwig's castle that leaned firmly into the Gothic vision of the Middle Ages as it was understood a century earlier. In Ludwig's bedroom, stained glass windows set with heraldic badges lit a room in which stood a bed that resembled nothing so much as a late

medieval tomb. Carved in walnut wood, hung with blue and gold drapery and surrounded by more wall paintings depicting medieval sagas, it was said to have taken a team of seventeen woodworkers more than four years to complete.[26] And between the salon (decorated with more Lohengrin scenes) and the study (devoted to the Tannhäuser saga) was an artificial stone grotto, complete with dripping water, a fake moon, and electric lights, the colours of which could be set to create different moods.

The overall effect of Neuschwanstein was – and is – as intense a blast to the senses as a Wagnerian opera, and Ludwig demanded from the craftsmen who toiled on it the same level of obsession that he had felt for such topics since his youngest years. Yet even as work was first beginning on it, he was making plans for more castles and palaces. Between 1874 and 1886 he tore down the hunting lodge of Linderhof, and rebuilt it in the rococo style of Versailles. He used a similar style at Herrenchiemsee, built on the site of an abandoned abbey on an island in the Chiemsee lake. Then in 1883 he turned sharply back towards the Gothic, commissioning Christian Jank to make sketches for another fairytale mountain castle on the site of a medieval ruin at Falkenstein – the highest point in Germany that any fortress had been built.

Had Falkenstein been built, it would have been a ‘robber-knight’ castle, with an ornate Gothic exterior and rich Byzantine-influenced interiors in the style of Neuschwanstein. Yet by the 1880s, building – and ruling – were becoming difficult. From 1881 onwards, Ludwig’s behaviour became erratic and he seemed mentally ill. He began to hallucinate, hearing voices and talking to people who were not there.[27] He adopted a preposterous manner of walking, stretching his legs out as far as he could and then stamping them down precisely. He demanded to eat his meals outside in the snow, and fantasised about beating and sexually assaulting his mother, and dragging his father out of his tomb and boxing his ears. He started to worship trees, to leap around tugging at his hair and to beat his servants severely. He forbade anyone to look him directly in the face, sneeze or cough near him; one servant who disobeyed this order was forced to wear a black mask for a year to ‘hide his criminal countenance’.[28] For his more senior aides, he began to devise cruel and unusual punishments, demanding that they be whipped, tortured or beheaded. One had sealing wax applied to his forehead and another (male) advisor was forced to put on a dress and ride around the Hohenschwangau castle on a donkey.

Things became progressively more unhinged. Ludwig gave orders (sensibly disregarded) that his cousin the crown prince Frederick should be imprisoned in a cave and starved. He fantasised about burning Munich to the ground. He became convinced he was related to Louis XVI of France, who had been executed during the French Revolution, and would even dress up as one of the Bourbon kings whose absolutist rule had prompted their overthrow. By 1886 he had dismissed a number of his ministers and appointed his barber and hairdresser to official administrative posts. Insomnia drove him to abuse the sedative chloral hydrate, and he started to neglect his personal hygiene, growing filthy, dishevelled and fat, despite missing so many teeth that he could not easily chew his food.[29] At times he was suicidal, and begged his attendants to find him a supply of poison.

Eventually, Ludwig's wild behaviour and mounting financial difficulties persuaded a core of remaining ministers to act. With the support of the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck, they mounted a coup. They engaged a panel of medical professionals to compile evidence for the king's insanity (albeit without examining him in person), then asked his sixty-five-year-old uncle, Prince Luitpold, to prepare to take over the rule of state.[Δ] On the night of June 10th 1886 an arrest party arrived at the Hohenschwangau, had a champagne dinner, then set out up the mountain path to Ludwig's dream castle at Neuschwanstein. On arrival, however, they were denied entry to the castle and chased back to Hohenschwangau by a gang of peasants. Here they themselves were locked up in the cells, while Ludwig stayed at Neuschwanstein, ranting about having his ministers whipped and blinded.

Yet once the night had passed, a new day and a new reality dawned on the exhausted Ludwig. Mighty as it was, his mountain fortress was built to be seen, not defended. In Munich, his uncle was already taking command of affairs, and posters were being pasted up around the city declaring that a new reign had begun. For two days Ludwig paced around his castle, gazing out of the windows, drinking champagne and rum and contemplating jumping from one of the towers. Before he could do so, however, he was arrested and taken to one final castle: the palace at Schloss Berg, on Lake Starnberg, where he had spent some of his happiest times with Wagner.

Ludwig arrived at Schloss Berg on June 12th. Among the people waiting for him were the doctor who had authored the report declaring him insane. On June 13th the two men went for an evening walk. They never came back. As night fell, around 10 p.m., a search party found both their bodies

floating in the castle lake. Exactly how the two men died – in what order and by what means – is still a matter of some debate. Drowning, the official cause of death, seems very unlikely.[**] But a perplexing death might well have given some satisfaction to Ludwig, who once said, ‘I want to remain an eternal mystery to myself and others.’ His legacy was certainly not the rectitude of his tragic reign. But in Neuschwanstein castle he captured the spirit of his moment, poised between the vanished dreamscape of a medieval past and the brutal forces of modernity. This was what the castle had become: not a military stronghold in any meaningful sense, but a vehicle for stories, legends and fantasies about history.



In 1897 Bram Stoker, the fifty-year-old touring manager of the famous actor Henry Irving, published *Dracula*, a suspenseful, sensational Gothic novel about a vampire who lived in a castle. Like Horace Walpole before him, Stoker claimed to have been inspired to write his story by a nightmare. (In this case, Stoker ate too much crab-meat at London’s famous Beefsteak dining club, and later dreamed that a large crab had risen from his plate and was about to attack him with its claws.) Like Walpole and Ludwig of Bavaria, Stoker conjured a castle that expressed historical themes in the form of a fanciful Gothic-romantic stronghold.

The story of *Dracula* begins in Transylvania, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire,[††] in a castle occupied by the titular vampire, Count Dracula, and three sexually insatiable vampiresses, all of whom thrive on drinking blood. The novel’s main protagonist, a solicitor named Jonathan Harker, gives a vivid description of the building and its surroundings. Castle Dracula sits high in the Carpathian Mountains, ‘on the very edge of a terrible precipice.’ (Looking out of the window, Harker observes that ‘a stone falling from the window would fall a thousand feet without touching anything!’) Its architecture is impeccably Gothic: the castle has ‘a great door, old and studded with large iron nails, and set in a projecting doorway of massive stone. . . massively carved. . . much work by time and weather.’

Inside the castle is just as spectacular. Everywhere, Harker sees ‘extraordinary evidences of wealth’. ‘The table service is of gold. . . the curtains and upholstery of the chairs and sofas and the hangings of my bed are of the costliest and most beautiful fabrics, and must have been of

fabulous value when they were made, for they are centuries old, though in excellent order.' A warren of countless rooms are mostly inaccessible except by the count's command: 'doors, doors, doors everywhere, and all locked and bolted. In no place save from the windows in the castle walls is there an available exit. The castle is a veritable prison. . .'[30] When Dracula wishes to leave the castle, he climbs out of a window and crawls down the sheer rock-face, his cloak billowing behind him.

After Harker's initial visit to Transylvania, the action of *Dracula* moves to England – to Whitby, in Yorkshire, and Hampstead, London, where the truth about the count's abysmal nature is gradually revealed. Dracula bites, sucks and seduces young women, dragging them into the vortex of his own vampiric evil. And it is to the Transylvanian castle, where Dracula's evil is strongest, that the story returns for its violent denouement. After a chase in a snowstorm, conducted to the sound of wolves howling, the count is run to ground and stabbed through the heart, upon which he crumbles to dust. One of the novel's final images is the mountain stronghold in silhouette: 'The Castle of Dracula now stood out against the red sky, and every stone of its broken battlements was articulated against the light of the setting sun.'[31]

By the 1890s, the imagery deployed in Stoker's novel was already broadly familiar to readers of Gothic fiction. Originally, vampires belonged to the realm of peasant superstition: they were revenants, usually the recently dead, who broke free of their graves and attacked people or livestock. During the nineteenth century, however, the vampire had been transformed into a demonic aristocrat. Between 1797 and 1816, Samuel Taylor Coleridge had written (although not finished) the poem *Christabel*, which told of a baron's daughter who finds a bedraggled woman named Geraldine in the woods near her father's castle, invites her home and becomes sensually but evilly bewitched. In 1816 Lord Byron conceived and his physician, John Polidori, later wrote,[‡‡] *The Vampyre*, establishing the vampire as a magnetic, sexually rapacious nobleman. Then, in the 1840s, an anonymous serialised novel entitled *Varney the Vampire* followed the adventures of a pale-faced bloodsucker called Sir Francis Varney as he committed vampiric atrocities in a series of European stately homes and castle ruins.

Following on from these works, *Dracula* was not exactly new. Yet in its pages Stoker swirled together so many tantalising images – of sex, violence, debauchery, madness, mysticism, science, magic, the supernatural – and set

them in such richly atmospheric Gothic locations, that it succeeded. *Dracula* was enthusiastically greeted by reviewers in 1897, and its popularity grew with every subsequent decade. On the book's release the *Daily Mail*'s reviewer compared it to *Frankenstein* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: 'But *Dracula* is even more appalling in its gloomy fascination than any one of these.'[32] *The Daily Telegraph* declared it 'one of the most weird and spirit-quelling romances which have appeared for years. . . never was so mystical a tale told with such simple verisimilitude.' That credibility rested, thought the *Telegraph* reviewer, on the book's opening section in Transylvania: 'that precise corner of Europe which shelters the superstitions of the Middle Ages: we feel that anything can happen in the midst of the Carpathian Mountains, and Castle Dracula may be situated anywhere we please within the region which is the wildest and least known portion of the Continent.' [33] In other words, the dark power of the novel emanated first from its Gothic castle.

Was there any such castle?[§§] Only in the loosest sense. Certainly Count Dracula owed something of his existence to history books Stoker had read in Whitby library in the 1880s. His real-life historical namesake was Vlad III 'Dracula' ('Son of the Dragon'), a fifteenth-century prince of Wallachia, on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains from Transylvania. As ruler of Wallachia, Vlad had fought vicious wars against neighbouring territories, and earned a reputation as a butcher for his habit of impaling his enemies on wooden stakes.[##] (He also earned another nickname: Vlad Tepes, 'the Impaler'.) But Vlad did not limit his barbarities to impaling: he also burned and boiled his victims alive. And in the 1460s he captured the leading citizens of the Wallachian capital of Târgoviște, beat them, and transported them around 100km (62 miles) to Poenari, where he was rebuilding a hilltop fortress in a loop of the river Arges. By Stoker's day, Poenari Castle was a ruin, and had been for several hundred years. But it had a storied past: local legends told of a hoard of gold hidden there, guarded by the devil; of a tragic girl who killed herself by leaping from the castle's towers rather than be captured by the Ottomans during a siege; of Vlad Dracula escaping the same enemy by shoeing his horse backwards to disguise his tracks.[34]

So it is not impossible that Castle Dracula was based on a real fortress, even if one some way from Transylvania itself. Yet it is by no means certain that Stoker cared to borrow anything more from that medieval prince than

his name and his cruel reputation. Castle Dracula was a Gothic castle primarily of the imagination, drawn as much from existing literary conceits as from careful study of Wallachian architecture. The truth was that between Walpole's day in the eighteenth century and Stoker's at the cusp of the twentieth, castles had become objects of fantasy and artifice rather than of practical purpose. Whether they evoked horror, delight, or some combination of the two, they were essentially playthings, designed to entertain or, on occasion, to mislead. This was as true on the page as it was in real life.

In the late nineteenth century the Gothic style was sweeping the world – to be found in cathedrals, parliament buildings, town halls, railway stations, universities and court-houses on almost every continent.[ʃʃ] Where castles were still being built – such as at Neuschwanstein, Chateau de Pierrefonds in France, De Haar Castle in the Netherlands and Balmoral in Scotland – they were now exclusively the sort of mock medieval pleasure-palaces that Walpole had pioneered in the 1750s.

But that is not to say they were frivolous. The most enthusiastic castle-builder of the Victorian age – after Ludwig of Bavaria, perhaps – was John Crichton-Stuart, 3rd marquess of Bute. The Bute dynasty controlled what was certainly the greatest fortune in Britain and reputedly the largest on earth, which derived from a landed estate of more than 100,000 acres in Scotland and the coal-rich country of the Welsh valleys. The 3rd marquess had inherited this in 1848, when he was six months old, and in adulthood, he spent some of it on restoring castles and palaces in dazzling Gothic style. In Scotland he bought and refurbished Falkland Palace, a one-time refuge of Mary, Queen of Scots, and commissioned a sprawling Gothic-revival country house on the Isle of Bute, known as Mount Stuart House. In Wales, Bute rebuilt Cardiff Castle on vast and lavish scale, and the smaller, nearby Norman fortress of Castell Coch.

Bute's partner in realising his highest visions of Gothic splendour was the architect-designer William Burges, who in his own youth had travelled extensively, absorbing the styles of the greatest historical architecture in Europe, while also reading extensively about the Japanese, Arabic and Assyrian art. Like every other great designer and architect of the day, he had studied the work of Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Yet Burges, while well-read, was also stunningly original. Indeed, his interpretation of Gothic was so bold and exotic that many of the projects he took on proved too

ambitious to complete – but Bute's wealth and shared enthusiasm allowed him to give full expression to his genius.

His finest work, undoubtedly, was in Wales. The rather dilapidated Cardiff Castle had once been a Roman camp, then a Norman motte-and-bailey stronghold. Under Burges, from 1865, it was given a new clock-tower, decorated inside with marble, stained glass, murals and mosaics; a guest tower in which rooms were painted with scenes ranging from Aesop and Ali Baba to Jack and the Beanstalk; a Moorish-style 'Arab room' and banqueting hall whose walls bore scenes from Cardiff's medieval past. Castell Coch, begun in 1875, was smaller, but no less striking: a fairytale vision of the Middle Ages, with little conical-tipped red sandstone towers set amid beech woodland, the leaves of which were radiant in autumn with a thousand competing colours. Burges died in 1881, aged fifty-three, and never lived to see his works on these castles completed. But his vision was seen through, and can still be admired in its essence today. And, comfortingly, Burges spent his last moments in another of his Gothic pseudo-strongholds: his home at Tower House in London, a red-brick Victorian townhouse with a conical castle-tower, and interiors every inch as fine as his paymaster Bute's.ΩΩ

The Gothic mania that Burges rode began to cool after the First World War, when it once more became fashionable to reject the old feudal past, rather than worshiping its foibles. Yet thanks to the ambition of patrons such as Walpole, Ludwig II and Bute, the brilliance of the architect-designers they worked with, and the popularity of writers like Stoker, Gothic and Romantic castles could be found all over the world, perpetuating a vision of the Middle Ages that has become, to casual observers, almost indistinguishable from the real thing. The remixed Middle Ages that lives on in these castles is by turns ghostly, dreamy, sexy and even scary. That it is historicist rather than historical likely does not bother many of the millions of visitors that the *ersatz* medieval castles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attract every year. The sensual evocation of the past is every bit as powerful as the real thing.

The result is that even in parts of the world that the European Middle Ages failed entirely to reach, tributes to that time can today be found. One such is Larnach Castle in Dunedin, New Zealand, where ground was struck on behalf of the businessman-turned-politician William Larnach in 1871. This forty-three-room house, with medieval-style battlements, a tower and

stone lions standing guard on the steps to the main entrance, was Larnach's pride and joy until he went bankrupt, turned to drink and, in 1898, shot himself dead.

Today Larnach Castle is a tourist attraction and hosts a popular annual winter ball. But in fitting Gothic style, it is said to be haunted by a bearded gentleman – possibly Larnach himself – who leaves a trail of cigar smoke and port wine vapours around the house. This unquiet soul occasionally creeps up on workers and visitors to the castle, pushes them in their backs and gives them a fright. So here, in New Zealand, half a world away from Horace Walpole's playful castle on the banks of the River Thames, the spirit of Strawberry Hill lives on.

* Sir Robert Walpole is considered Britain's first prime minister, serving from 1721 to 1742 during the reins of George I and George II. He died in 1745.

† Inigo Jones, Surveyor of the King's Works to James VI and I (r. 1603–25) and his successor Charles I (r. 1625–49) had brought Italianate classical architecture to England, notably in his works on the Queen's House in Greenwich, Banqueting House on Whitehall, the piazza at Covent Garden and Wilton House in Wiltshire.

‡ During the Jacobite Rising of 1745–46: an attempt to restore the Stuart line to the throne, led by Charles Edward Stuart, also known as the Young Pretender or Bonnie Prince Charlie. During the rebellion, there were sieges of castles at Carlisle, Stirling, Inverness, Blair Atholl, Fort William and Fort Augustus. The uprising was effectively ended with Charles' defeat at the battle of Culloden on April 16th 1746.

§ Walpole often had occasion to regret his open-door policy, and after a while, closed the house between May and October, forbade entry to children and made polite entreaties to his visitors to keep their hands off his trinkets.

See chapter 7.

∫ Eventually this became the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus*, which opened for the premiere of all four parts of the *Ring* cycle in 1876. By then the men's friendship was over.

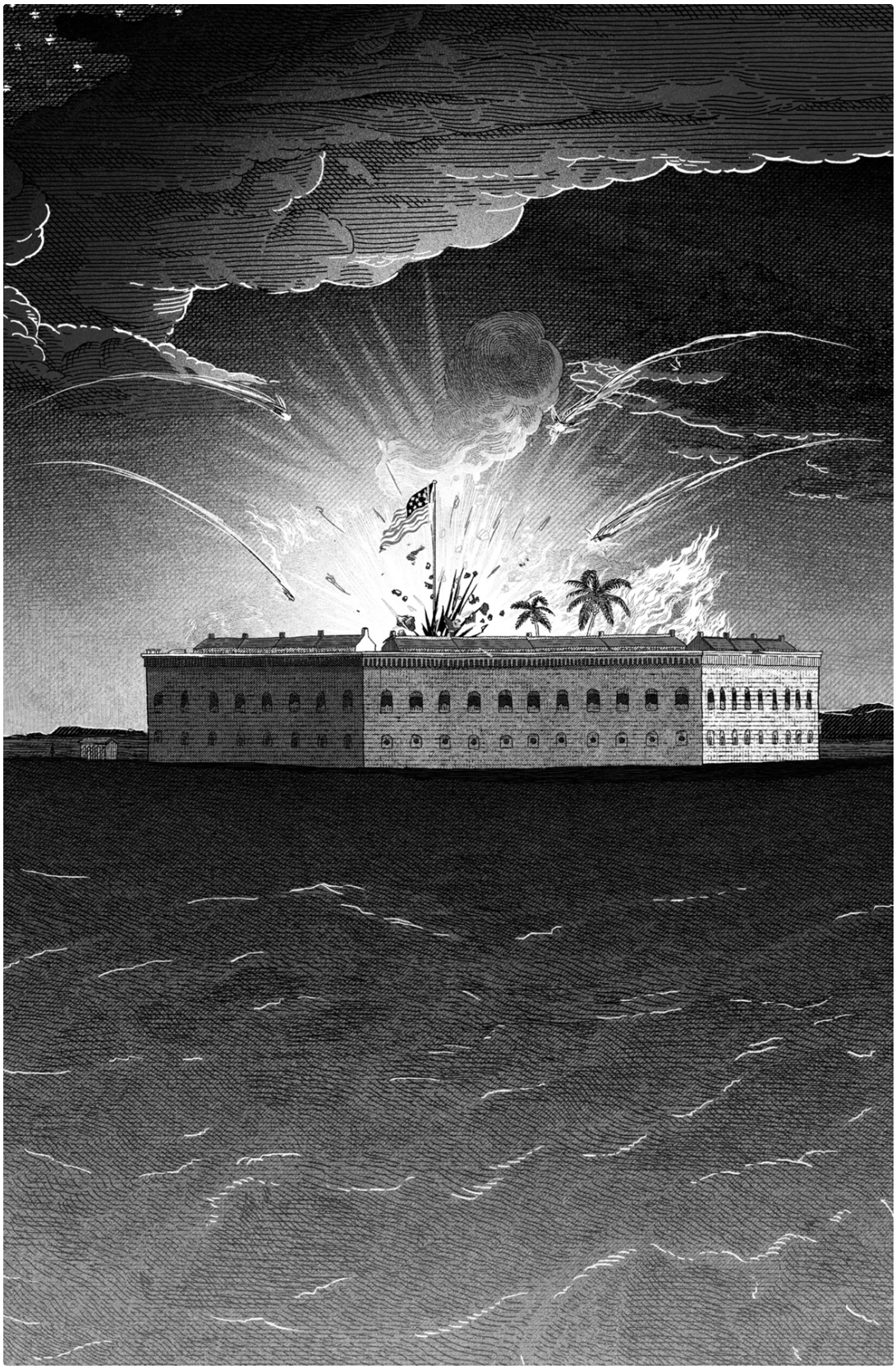
Ω Ludwig was certainly more sexually attracted to men than to women. Wagner's declarations of love for 'the Exalted One' seem to have been more calculated to reflect the king's own ardour, though he plainly delighted in having such an illustrious disciple. During his time in Bavaria, Wagner began an affair with Cosima Bülow, the wife of his conductor Hans von Bülow. She fell pregnant by him, and they eventually eloped and married.

≈ The last time Ludwig saw Wagner was in August 1876 at the first Bayreuth festival, where the *Ring* was being performed. They continued to correspond until Wagner's death in Venice in 1883.

∂ In Ludwig's lifetime the castle was known as New Hohenschwangau; it only became Neuschwanstein after his death. For clarity here I have used its most familiar name.

π In fernem Land, unnahbar euren Schritten,
liegt eine Burg, die Montsalvat genannt;
ein lichter Tempel stehet dort inmitten,
so kostbar, als auf Erden nichts bekannt.

Δ Ludwig’s younger brother Otto had been confined in 1883 after being incapacitated by his own bouts of derangement, which may have been schizophrenic or syphilitic. Upon Ludwig’s deposition, Prince Luitpold was asked to serve as regent on Otto’s behalf.
** Autopsy notes showed no fluid in Ludwig’s lungs.
†† Today a region of Romania.
‡‡ Bryon wrote the initial notes for a vampire story on the famous night in 1816, at the Villa Diodati, near Lake Geneva, when Mary Godwin (later Mary Shelley) came up with the idea for *Frankenstein*. Byron and Polidori fell out, and Polidori developed *The Vampyre*, which he published in 1819 under Byron’s name. In 1821 Polidori took cyanide and died.
§§ In Romania today, the magnificent castle at Bran markets itself as Dracula’s Castle. Although it has a fascinating history, dating back to the early thirteenth century, when the Teutonic Order were first invited to protect Christian Hungary from the Cumans, there is vanishingly little evidence to connect it to Bram Stoker and his novel.
Recent scholarship has revised down Vlad the Impaler’s total number of victims, from 40,000–100,000 impaled to around 2,000, and emphasises that impalement was also used by Ottoman sultans, Hungarian kings and even Hospitaller knights on Rhodes. For comparison, during the 1461–62 campaign against the Ottomans, Vlad had around 23,000 people beheaded. Vlad the Beheader, however, feels less interesting. See Dénes Harai, ‘Counting the Stakes: A Reassessment of Vlad III Dracula’s Practice of Collective Impalements in Fifteenth-Century South-eastern Europe’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (2025), 1–16.
∬ See, by way of a tiny sample: the Houses of Parliament/Westminster Palace in London, the Hungarian Parliament building in Budapest, St Patrick’s Cathedral, New York City, Jakarta Cathedral, the University of Sydney Quadrangle, Vienna City Hall.
ΩΩ Tower House has had several illustrious owners since Burges, including the poet John Betjeman, actor Richard Harris and Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page.



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12

AMERICAN CASTLES

You may as well bombard the Rocky Mountains

GENERAL JOSEPH G. TOTTEN

On the early afternoon of Thursday April 11th 1861, a few well-to-do men and women sat down to dinner[*] in Charleston, South Carolina. They were in surprisingly good humour. The political situation in the city was grave, and certain soon to grow worse. Yet the knowledge of coming horrors filled the party with a kind of fatalistic gaiety. It was, wrote one of them, thirty-eight-year-old Mary Chesnut, 'the merriest, maddest dinner we have had yet. Men were audaciously wise and witty. We had an unspoken foreboding that it was to be our last pleasant meeting.'[1]

The fears they entertained were shared by almost everyone in Charleston and beyond. In April 1861 violent tensions had been building in the United States for years, and had already gone a long way to tearing the young nation apart. Now they were about to break into an all-consuming crisis. The place where this seemed certain to erupt was an island fortress in the mouth of Charleston's sea-harbour known as Fort Sumter. Sooner or later – probably sooner – shots would be exchanged between the fort's garrison and forces stationed on the mainland. When the guns boomed in anger, the doleful hour would have arrived. America would be in a civil war.

Mary Chesnut had a front-row seat to see this historical tragedy unfold. As she dined on April 11th, her husband, James Chesnut Jr, a long-serving Carolina politician, was at Fort Sumter negotiating with the garrison captain Major Robert Anderson. Midway through the meal he arrived back from his conference, taciturn and gloomy. 'Mr Chesnut was not inclined to be communicative,' wrote Mary, but it was clear what had happened. Anderson had refused to surrender the fort. As soon as he had eaten, Mr Chesnut would be going back to make one last attempt to broker peace. His appeal would be sincere: he 'felt for Anderson', whose position in charge of Fort Sumter he recognised as somewhere between wretched and impossible. Both the Chesnuts had deeply mixed feelings about the entwined issues of slavery and states' rights that had brought the United States to the precipice of open warfare. Ultimately, however, they were loyal to South Carolina and the other southern states that had seceded from the Union following the election of Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth US president in November 1860. Chesnut was in direct contact via telegraph with Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy those breakaway states had formed. Davis'

terms were clear: if Major Anderson did not surrender Fort Sumter to Confederate control before 4 a.m. the following morning, ‘he shall be fired upon’.[2]

Later that evening Mary Chesnut went to bed, but she did not even pretend to sleep. She just lay and listened to a strong wind blow and the bells of the nearby church of St Michael chime the hours. When they rang four, and no further noise broke the blustery night’s peace, Mary felt hopeful. But half an hour later came the dreaded sound: the roar of cannon-fire. ‘I sprang out of bed,’ wrote Mary in her diary, ‘and on my knees prostrate I prayed as I never prayed before.’[3] She ran up to the house rooftop, and there, with neighbours gathered, watched the first shells bursting over the harbour, fired from batteries on the shore. Somewhere out there in the pre-dawn dark, she thought, her husband was in a rowing boat. After watching this hopeless scene for a while, Mary felt weary, and sat down on ‘something that looked like a black stool’.[4] It was a chimney pot, and sparks from the fire below lit her dress on fire. Fortunately the flames were put out.

Meanwhile, the first barrage against Fort Sumter seemed to be similarly bloodless. Later that morning Mr Chesnut and his boat came back unharmed and the exhausted politician took a long sleep on the sofa of Charleston’s military commander, Brigadier General Pierre Beauregard. Strangely, despite the guns booming from the shore, Fort Sumter was yet to fire back. And though smoke could be seen drifting from the fort, it was understood that there had yet been no fatalities among its defenders. True, there were those in city society who were overcome by nerves: ‘the anxious hearts lie on their beds and moan in solitary misery.’ But the ‘negro servants’, as Mary called the enslaved people who worked in her house, seemed indifferent. And her friends who came round to discuss the bombardment of the fort agreed God would see to it that the defenders were defeated. ‘He hates the Yankees,’ they told each other.[5]

On Fort Sumter, meanwhile, things were a little more fraught. The pentagonal fort and the artificial island on which it stood had been founded in 1829 to command Charleston’s harbour: part of the ‘Third System’ chain of fortifications built to protect the eastern seaboard of the United States from foreign invasion following the War of 1812. It was designed to house 135 guns and 650 men. But works had never been completed. When Major

Anderson had taken command of the fort on behalf of the United States in December 1860, Fort Sumter had been in a sorry condition – barracks half-built and gun embrasures bricked up.[6] In the four months since, Anderson had managed to mount sixty cannon on it. But he had scarcely more than eighty troops, with very little food or firewood. Some of his defensive preparations had been alarmingly old-fashioned. On each of the five walls Anderson had installed medieval-style machicolations: wooden sniper-boxes from which muskets could be fired and shells dropped on troops attempting to storm the island. If they failed, the defenders had armed the parapets with piles of stones to hurl.

Besides his obvious deficiencies in men and materiel, Anderson was also in something of a political corner. The matter of shots fired over Fort Sumter was not an isolated military decision. It went to the heart of the quarrel between the 'Yankee' states of the north, which remained part of the Union, and the southern states, including South Carolina, which had chosen to secede and join the Confederacy. Small as the garrison was, Fort Sumter was a northern military garrison in a southern city. It would have been unthinkable for Anderson to fire the shots that began the war – it was essential that the Confederates under Jefferson Davis and General Beauregard be left to take that dreadful step. But nor could Anderson surrender the fort ahead of any fighting without incurring disgrace and admitting the inevitability of the secessionist cause. Once the shooting started, he was entitled to defend his position, but unless he was reinforced by Union ships anchored outside the harbour, braving a gale, his job was essentially to endure bombardment until he and his men could stand no more.

For the first few hours of the shelling, Anderson therefore held off returning fire. But when it was light, around 7 a.m., he fed his men on a paltry breakfast of pork and water and gave the command to start shooting back towards the gun emplacements on Charleston's harbour shore.

It was an uneven contest from the beginning. Around 10 a.m. the Confederate guns found their range. Shells began to burst directly over the fort. Rounds that hit the external walls did little more than superficial damage to the masonry. But shells bursting over the parapets made it very dangerous to operate the biggest guns, which were positioned there. Meanwhile, Beauregard started firing hot shot[†] at the wooden buildings within the fort's walls. This was what caused the fires Mary Chesnut and

others saw from Charleston. Although around nightfall on April 12th a rain shower doused some of the flames, by the next morning the fires were burning again, and creeping towards Fort Sumter's gunpowder stores, where Anderson had stockpiled around 300 barrels of powder. Though he gave orders to move the gunpowder to a safer part of the fort, conditions were growing chaotic. Choking smoke was billowing around. Defenders were taking shrapnel wounds. And there seemed to be no hope of relief.

During the first twenty-four hours of the bombardment, Fort Sumter's flag, bearing the United States colours, had been flying defiantly on its pole. Around 1 p.m. on April 13th the pole was hit, and collapsed. Although in itself not a lethal blow, this coincided with the arrival of another negotiator from the Confederate side. Colonel Louis Wigfall, whose wife spent some hours of the attack having tea with Mary Chesnut, rowed out to the fort on his own initiative, holding a white flag and offering to broker a truce. He told Anderson he could leave the fort honourably. Anderson agreed he and his men had suffered enough. They had endured 3,000 shells blasted at them. Fires were still raging and his hungry men were exhausted. Anderson judged it was now honourable to evacuate, and around 3 p.m., the shooting stopped. On April 14th General Beauregard sent a ship, the *Isabel*, to escort the garrison peaceably out of the fort and on to a Union ship, which transferred them to New York.

While on his way north, Anderson wrote a succinct report outlining his actions. 'Having defended Fort Sumter for thirty-four hours, until the quarters were entirely burned, the main gates destroyed by fire, the gorge wall seriously injured, the magazine surrounded by flames. . . and no provisions remaining but pork, I accepted terms of evacuation offered by General Beauregard,' he wrote, 'and marched out of the fort Sunday afternoon, the 14th instant, with colors flying and drums beating, bringing away company and private property, and saluting my flag with fifty guns.'[7] On the shore, the news was greeted with jubilation. Mary Chesnut wrote: 'I did not know one could live such days of excitement.'[8] But the relief could not mask what must now follow. The American Civil War had begun.

Among the Civil War's many legacies would be a transformation in the American castle. Fort Sumter – with bastions and gun positions that could be traced back to the fortresses of the Italian renaissance, and machicolations that echoed those built into the great crusader fortresses of thirteenth-century Syria – was a lineal descendant of the European castle

that had played some part in warfare for 1,000 years. But during the four dreadful years of the Civil War, the American fort failed. And with it, the castle as an essential tool of military hardware died, and twentieth-century warfare was born. The US Civil War was not the end of the American castle – as we shall see. But after the 1860s, nothing would be the same again.



On January 1st 1492 Christopher Columbus was among the crowd at the Alhambra in southern Spain, to watch that huge fortified palace be handed over from the last Muslim emir of Granada to the 'Catholic monarchs' Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. Just over nine months later, in October 1492, Columbus made his first landfall in the Americas. He was stunned beyond words by 'the extreme beauties of this coast' he explored – and thrilled by the potential for exploitation.[9] There were, he thought, 'good sites for building towns and villages.'[10] Yet he saw nothing remotely to compare with the Alhambra – or any of the other castles that could be found everywhere in fifteenth-century Europe. So one of Columbus' first actions on that voyage was to order his men to build a fort, using timber from his ship the *Santa María*, which had been wrecked when it ran aground off Haiti. The stronghold they built, named Villa de Navidad,[‡] had the distinction of being the first western-style fortification built in the Americas. It was also one of the most short-lived. By the time Columbus returned on his second voyage, in 1493, Villa de Navidad had been burned down and all its defenders were dead.

Although the Columbian encounters profoundly changed the direction of American history, the history of American fortifications long predated Columbus. Indeed, for thousands of years before the fifteenth century, people in the Americas had been drastically altering their landscapes: to defend themselves, to provide the setting for rituals and to signal prestige. The evidence can still be found all over the modern United States, Canada and Latin America. In what is now Louisiana, modern archaeologists have explored huge earthworks at Watson Brake, dating to around 3500 BCE, and Poverty Point, where a 400-acre complex was constructed between 1700 and 1100 BCE, using 15 million basket loads of earth. Other similarly ancient earthworks have been studied at sites like Crystal River in

Florida.[11] Monumental mound-building was a practice associated with the Adena culture, which flourished on lands centred on the modern state of Ohio between 500 BCE and 100 CE, and the Hopewell culture that overlapped it between 100 BCE and 500 CE. And just a few centuries before the Columbian encounters between the peoples of the old and new worlds began, the Cahokia Mounds in today's state of Illinois comprised a city that covered 3.5sq miles, and was home to between 15,000 and 20,000 people.

The tallest mound of the 120 identified at Cahokia, known as Monks Mound or the Great Knob, was built between 950 and 1100 CE. In its pomp it covered a roughly similar footprint to the Great Pyramid at Giza, rose 30m (100ft), and housed wooden buildings on the top; it would have borne passing comparison at the very least with a Bronze Age European hillfort. Surrounding Monks Mound and its neighbouring mounds and monuments was a long wooden palisade fence, secured with gatehouses and bastions.[12] This was unusually large, but it was not unique. A similar defensive palisade system was used at the Etowah Indian Mounds, a roughly contemporary settlement more than 800km (500 miles) away in modern Georgia. And the Southwold Earthworks, constructed by people of the Neutral Confederacy in today's province of Ontario, Canada, from around 1450 CE, was defended with a double ring of earthworks topped by wooden defensive fences.

Elsewhere other examples of pre-Columbian fortification could also be found – and in startling variety. In the Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado lie the spectacular ruins known as the Cliff Palace, constructed by Ancestral Pueblo people between 1200 and 1300 CE; a huge sandstone-and-mortar mansion built seamlessly into the cliff-face, the palace could have housed more than 100 people.[§] Further south, fortifications were even more spectacular. In Mexico, the Zapotec settlement at Monte Albán, founded around 500 BCE, was enclosed by thick walls up to 9m tall. The Mayan coastal city of Tulum, which flourished between around 1200 CE and 1600, was surrounded on its landward side by a thick, 3–5m wall, and overlooked by a 7.5m lighthouse-temple which Spanish explorers understandably but inaccurately named *El Castillo* (The Castle). In Peru and Ecuador, the Inca built formidable fortresses, mountain palaces and citadels, at locations such as Machu Picchu, Ollantaytambo and Sacsayhuamán, where the giant, geometrically hewn stone walls, built over several decades from the 1430s

CE, were even more immense than the Cyclopean Walls of Mycenae, which the ancient Greeks had assumed were built by demi-gods.

This, very briefly, was the state of fortification in the Americas when the Columbian European encounters began in the late fifteenth century. But as in almost every area of American life, contact was followed rapidly by change.

Although the fort Columbus had ordered made from the salvaged timbers of the *Santa María* had been overrun by its disapproving neighbours on Haiti, the next wave of explorers and colonisers continued to throw up fortifications as they explored, traded, conquered and colonised. In 1519 the Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico, in the lands of the Aztec Empire ruled from Tenochtitlan (now buried under Mexico City). On Good Friday of that year he established a coastal town he named Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (the Rich Town of the Holy Cross). On an island facing the town the Spanish subsequently raised San Juan de Ulúa fort, redeveloped many times between the 1530s and 1760s, and embellished with towers, a governor's palace, military parade grounds, dungeons and a graveyard.

Cortés did not remain long on the coast. Between 1519 and 1521 he carved a path inland through the Aztec Empire. Although there were, as Cortés wrote to his master Charles V of Spain, 'fortified places in all the provinces, garrisoned with [the Aztec emperor's] men, where are also stationed his governors and collectors of the rents and tribute', these proved no match for Spaniards armed with muskets and cannon and carrying smallpox and influenza. In the summer of 1521 Cortés besieged and destroyed Tenochtitlan; he captured and later hanged the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc.[13] Having done all this, he wrote to Charles V announcing his intention to press on and conquer the Spice Islands of Indonesia, which he assumed must lie close at hand. 'I pledge. . . to go in person or to send thither such a fleet as will subdue those islands, and to settle them with Spaniards and to build fortresses so well equipped with artillery and other means for their defence that no prince of those parts or any other will be able to invade them,' he wrote.[14]

As Cortés recognised, building forts was going to be a vital tactic in the conquest of the sixteenth-century Americas. But it was not merely functional. The wealth and prestige that accrued to men like Cortés was sufficient that they could also build fortified pleasure palaces just as well-appointed as the castles they had known in the Old World. In 1526 Cortés

built a *conquistador* castle in Cuernavaca, a wealthy, temperate city around 80km (50 miles) south of Tenochtitlan. A former Aztec tribute collection centre was razed and in its place arose the *Palacio de Cortés*: a stone-built structure with battlements and a watchtower, galleries, courtyards and stables, as well as gardens and an orchard. The palace's chapel was richly appointed with silver and gold ornaments, while Cortés' living quarters were hung with expensive tapestries. For a short time Cortés used Cuernavaca as an administrative hub for the lands he had conquered in Mexico, and though it would slide into disrepair in the seventeenth century, the *Palacio* still stands today, the oldest surviving building of the colonial era in the Americas.

As the rush to the New World gathered pace during the sixteenth century, and European colonial powers fought one another as well as the natives over the division of its spoils, fortifications sprang up all over the continent. Some of these would serve their purpose. Others were doomed. In 1584 the English adventurer and courtier Sir Walter Raleigh was granted a charter by Queen Elizabeth I to establish a colony somewhere between Newfoundland and Spanish Florida, in territory referred by loyal Englishmen as Virginia. Raleigh sent ships full of men across the Atlantic with a royal licence to 'discover, search, find out and view such remote heathen and barbarous lands, countries and territories not actually possessed of any Christian prince, as. . . shall seem good.' The queen afforded the colonists the right to 'inhabit or remain. . . to build and fortify', and, in exchange for a flat 20 per cent tax on all gold and silver they discovered, to claim for themselves 'all such cities, castles, towns, villages and places' that took their fancy.[15] Failing that, they had a free hand to rob Spanish treasure ships at sea.

The location Raleigh's settlers chose to settle was Roanoke Island, off the coast of what would become North Carolina. In 1585 they dug in there, and built a timber fort to protect themselves against the local Secotan tribal people and the Spanish who were England's deadly enemies at sea. The English fort at Roanoke was probably built to the standard template of the day, comprising earthworks, a ditch and a wooden fence protecting a small clutch of buildings inside. But exactly what it looked like is now unknown, because within a few years it had vanished. The first colony established on Roanoke in 1585 was quickly abandoned, following food shortages and conflict with local groups. In 1587 a second colony was established on the same site and the fort was rebuilt. But by 1590, when a resupply mission

arrived in Roanoke, all the colonists were gone. Their fort and other buildings had been dismantled and the only clue left was the word ‘CROATOAN’ – a nearby island – carved into a wooden post. What happened to the inhabitants of Raleigh’s ‘Lost Colony’ remains a mystery.[16]

If life in the early colonies could be precarious, however, the promise of vast wealth (and a new religious settlement) in the New World kept people crossing the Atlantic. So as the seventeenth century dawned, colonial fortifications became more ambitious. Some would become famous, others were simply robust enough to outlast the generations who built them. In 1607 the English founded Jamestown, their first permanent settlement, which was initially defended by a triangular wooden fort, each corner armed with raised, half-moon shaped earthworks on which guns could be mounted. Jamestown served as the colonial capital of Virginia until the end of the seventeenth century. In 1625 Dutch colonists on the southern tip of Manhattan island began building Fort Amsterdam, a four-sided earthwork wall with sharp bastions on each corner, which protected a troop barracks, workshops, storehouses and a church; this was the first stirring of what would become the great city of New York.[17] And in 1672 the Spanish began work on the Castillo de San Marcos in St Augustine. This masonry fort replaced a wooden one destroyed by the British and was built to such high specification that throughout its long history of active service it would never be taken by storm. Its star-shaped walls (whose legacy lay in the forts of the Renaissance)[#] were made from the local sedimentary shell-stone known as *coquina*. The fort was accessed through a single entrance via a drawbridge over a dry moat; it had gun embrasures for cannon along the top of its walls, and musket ports lower down. Its shape owed everything to the Italian artillery forts of the Renaissance; its ditch and gatehouse to every castle since the days of the Normans. The fortress was so robust, well-positioned and defensible that it was still in use as a military installation in 1898 during the Spanish–American war, and was only transferred from the US War Department to the National Parks Service in 1933.

By the eighteenth century, the timber forts of the earliest colonists had long been superseded. Increasingly American castle-building was shaped by the European imperial powers who exported their wars from the old world to the new. When British forces successfully laid siege in 1758 to Louisbourg, on Breton Island, Nova Scotia, they had to overpower a

fortress whose defences extended for more than two miles, to surround the entire town around it. (Louisbourg cost so much to construct that the French king Louis XV joked that it ought to be visible from Versailles.) And when Louisbourg fell, the British gained strategic advantage in the western theatre of the Seven Years' War, which eventually led to Britain taking control of the French colony of Canada. It was a measure of the size and sophistication of Louisbourg's fortifications that when the British had taken command of it, reduced Quebec and brought Canada under their own control, they dynamited the fortress, for fear that it might one day be retaken by the French and held against them.

As it transpired, however, it was not the French who would pose the greatest threat to the British in North America in the later eighteenth century, but colonists who called themselves loyal British subjects. The struggle of the colonies to free themselves from British rule in the Revolutionary War of the 1770s was not a conflict primarily famous for its dramatic assaults on fortresses: many of the most famous engagements – Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, Trenton – were either open battles, or city sieges. Yet there were moments in the war where colonial forts were tested, and their survival or failure proved costly to either side. The struggle for Boston in 1775–76 was tipped in the colonists' favour after they captured the French-built fortress known as Fort Ticonderoga[ʃ] and brought its heavy guns to reinforce their positions above Boston harbour. Likewise, the revolutionaries' success in capturing, then holding, Fort Stanwix (also known as Fort Schuyler), was a major boon that contributed to their victory in the Saratoga campaign. And George Washington famously regarded the West Point fortress system that controlled the Hudson River as the 'key to America'; its resistance to assault throughout the war prevented the British from strategically cutting the colonies in two.

For all this, however, it was not the Revolutionary War that spurred the next great phases of American fortification, but the return of the British in the War of 1812. After declaring war on Britain and enjoying some early success, in August 1814 the United States suffered the humiliation of seeing British troops invade Washington and burn the Capitol and the president's house (i.e. the White House). Several weeks later, on September 13–14th, there came a morale-restoring episode at Fort McHenry in Baltimore: a pentagonal coastal fort with the customary gun bastions, which endured forty-eight hours of bombardment by British gunships without surrendering.

The large garrison flag, sewn by the seamstress Mary Pickersgill, was brought out of Fort McHenry in one piece on September 14th, having survived the whole bombardment, and this rousing sight inspired a watching lawyer, Francis Scott Key, to write a patriotic poem, originally entitled ‘Defence of Fort M’Henry’. Key recommended the poem be sung to the tune of the British song ‘To Anacreon in Heaven’. The result became the US national anthem, ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’.[Ω]

The war was over by January 1815, by which time the Treaty of Ghent had settled borders between the United States and British-ruled Canada along their pre-war lines, and the future president Andrew Jackson had won a rousing victory at the battle of New Orleans. Yet neither the satisfactory overall outcome nor the rousing defence of Fort McHenry could disguise the fact that the United States’ coastline had been easily breached by British ships, with disastrous consequences in the political capital. It was with this in mind that, in 1816, the US Congress appropriated $800,000 for the construction of new coastal fortresses running the length of the eastern seaboard, from Maine to Florida. This was the beginning of the Third System.

As the name implies, the Third System followed two previous attempts to put in place a coherent national fortification system, both of which had involved building forts. The First System, commissioned by the young federal government in 1794, largely took the form of low sets of angled earthworks and walls with bastions and single rows of cannon on the roof, placed in a dozen harbours along the coast. Unfortunately, the forts built were cheaply made and degraded quickly (although one of them, Fort McHenry, achieved lasting fame, as we have seen). They were also vulnerable to new types of artillery, which fired shells that exploded in the air above fortifications, making it perilous to operate cannon on the roof.

The Second System, commissioned under Thomas Jefferson’s presidency in 1807–08, sought to address these deficiencies. On the advice of a French engineer, Marc René, marquis de Montalembert,[≈] new designs were considered: the marquis recommended that forts be made from thick masonry, and that the rows of guns be set within casemates: chambers between sets of walls, covered from above, with small openings (known as embrasures) through which to fire. These were sound principles, and they gave a newly established corps of US military engineers, trained at the military academy at West Point, much to think about. Some of the Second

System forts are well-regarded tourists sites today – not least Fort Wood, a granite, eleven-pointed star-shaped fort erected on Bedloe's Island, just off the coast of New York City, which in 1885–86 became the base for the Statue of Liberty. Yet before the Second System could be fully realised, the War of 1812 had broken out, and another rethink was required.

The Third System, therefore, was built to prevent a repeat the embarrassments of 1814, and it rolled together the founding principles of the first two systems to achieve its aims. In all, forty-two forts were laid down, and under the direction of another French engineer, Simon Bernard,[∂] most shared the features stressed by the marquis de Montalembert several years earlier: they were constructed from thick masonry and their guns were mounted inside the walls. The forts' locations were carefully selected, and the strategic aim laid out by the planners, who reported to President James Madison and his successor, James Monroe, was to guarantee the safety of the Union for at least the next thirty years. Progress on new super-fortresses such as Fort Independence (on Castle Island in Boston), Fort Monroe (overlooking Chesapeake Bay in Virginia) and Fort Adams (in Newport Harbour, Rhode Island) was slow, but in Monroe's second inaugural address in 1821, he defended the cost and time required to get the system right.

'By these fortifications, supported by our navy. . . we should present to other powers an armed front from St. Croix [on the Canadian Border) to the Sabine [on the Louisiana-Texas border),' he said. '[This] would protect, in the event of war, our whole coast and interior from invasion; and even in the wars of other powers, in which we were neutral, they would be found eminently useful, as, by keeping their public ships at a distance from our cities, peace and order in them would be preserved, and the government be protected from insult.'[18]

These were well-intended words, defending a scheme that produced some truly extraordinary fortresses: inspired by old-world castle-building, but equipped for defence in a time when gunships ruled the world. Yet the Third System, conceived in 1815–16, planned in the 1820s and largely executed in the 1830s was an applied example of the maxim that generals are forever fighting the last war. Between the War of 1812 and the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii in 1941, there was no serious foreign assault on the American seaboard that required any of these state-of-the-art masonry forts to fire their cannon in anger. The ocean, so long the source of danger, fell quiet. Trouble was to come from within.

As the nineteenth century matured, westward expansion and the incorporation of new territories into the Union brought to the fore questions about economy and human liberty, which, it seemed, could only be answered by recourse to violence. At the core was the issue of slavery in the States, which drew a geographical, economic and moral boundary between North and South. In the 1850s, it was across that boundary that the shots were now fired. The Civil War broke out with the shelling of Fort Sumter by Confederate guns in 1861, and in the four years that followed it tested existing American fortifications to destruction. As it did, a quite different approach to warfare – sieges prosecuted not around fortresses but between long, snaking, hellish formations of trenches – was about to take hold, and the age of the American fort was over.



On July 1st 1829 a twenty-two-year-old Virginian named Robert E. Lee, recently graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point, was commissioned second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. Lee had been an excellent cadet, and now he was moving on to an elite branch of the army. Works on the Third System of American fortification were underway, and the brightest military minds were needed for the defence of the Union.

Lee's first posting was to Savannah, Georgia, where construction of a fort had begun in the city harbour on a spot called Cockspur Island. The plans, drawn up by Simon Bernard in 1819, were considerable. Wooden pilings were to be sunk deep into the island, and a canal dug to transport building materials around the 260-acre site. Millions of bricks, and hundreds of tonnes of stone, lumber and timber, were to be brought in from Georgia, Virginia, New York, Connecticut and Maryland.[19] The walls were to be built of red brick layered seven feet thick, backed by huge masonry pillars: unbreakable by all known ships' guns, and out of range of any heavy land artillery. The natural position of Cockspur Island, surrounded by sea and marshes, made assault by storm virtually impossible. The fort was named Fort Pulaski after a hero of the Revolutionary War, and in the opinion of a later Chief of Engineers of the US Army, General Joseph G. Totten, shooting at it would be futile. 'You may as well bombard the Rocky Mountains,' he said.[20]

Lee stayed at Fort Pulaski for two years, during which time he assisted with site surveys and oversaw the digging of foundations; a sketch map he drew of Cockspur Island, including the proposed fortress, with its gun batteries and drainage ditches, still survives.[21] But he left Savannah long before it was completed. In March 1831 he was transferred to Hampton, Virginia, where the twin fortifications of Fort Monroe and Fort Calhoun (later Fort Wool) were being built. His career subsequently took him far and wide across the United States and its territories and neighbours: he worked on the harbours in St Louis and New York and repaired roads and bridges during the Mexican War of the 1840s. But life would draw him, as if inevitably, back to forts. In 1850 Lee directed works on Fort Carroll in Baltimore harbour. And eleven years later, after the Civil War broke out, he returned to Fort Pulaski.

By this time, Lee had resigned his commission in the US Army and had been appointed a general in the Confederate Army. President Davis had given him the urgent task of surveying the South's coastal defences, to see how they might be defended from the North's navy. When he arrived at Fort Pulaski in early November 1861 he found all the work he had sketched three decades earlier was complete. But with Union forces at that moment engaged in a devastating bombardment of Port Royal Sound,[π] just fifty miles north, Lee's job was now to make Fort Pulaski even stronger. After a tour conducted by the fort's commander, Major Charles Olmstead, Lee gave his orders. Between each gun position on the ramparts, a 'traverse' – or barrier wall – was to be erected to give protection to the gunners. Ditches were needed to catch shells. Extra reinforcing earthworks were needed to shield doors.

If this were all done as he recommended, Lee reckoned Fort Pulaski would be able to hold out any amount of Union gunfire that might be coming its way, be it from ships or batteries on land. He took Olmstead aside and pointed towards the nearest island in the harbour that might be used as an offensive gun platform. The inhospitable mud-marsh known as Tybee Island was 1,700 yards away. Military wisdom held that from any more than 800–900 yards, cannon could not penetrate masonry. 'They will make it very warm for you with shells from that point,' said Lee. 'But they cannot breach at that distance.'[22] Shortly afterwards he left the fort by boat, and headed out to inspect other key points along the coast, leaving

Olmstead's men to get on with the work. Neither he nor they yet knew how wrong his judgement had been.

In the last week of November, Union ships arrived from Port Royal Sound and northern troops took over Tybee Island. Command on the island was given to the thirty-six-year-old Captain Quincy Adams Gillmore, and over the following weeks he made his preparations. While the navy enforced a blockade, cutting off communication and supply lines between Savannah and Olmstead's troops, Gillmore fitted gun batteries on Tybee Island. By late February, the threat to Fort Pulaski was serious enough that General Lee returned to Savannah, so that he could observe across the water the progress of the siege, and offer what help he could. Telegraph lines had been cut between the city and the fortress, but in February Lee managed to smuggle a letter by messenger onto the island advising Olmstead on changing some of his gun positions and recommending that 'everything be done to strengthen the defenses of your work in the rear.'[23] His confidence of the previous autumn was starting to wane. Lee had begun to suspect that a long bombardment might bring the fort down.

On Tybee Island this was also the view of Captain Gillmore. The gun positions he was building were almost complete. Gillmore was taking his time, because it was no easy task to haul heavy cannon across the stinking mud of Tybee Island's marshes, mostly at night to obscure the preparations from spotters in Fort Pulaski. 'No one except an eye-witness, can form any but a faint conception of the Herculean labor [required],' he wrote. 'Two hundred and fifty men were barely sufficient to move a single piece, on sling-carts. The men were not allowed to speak above a whisper, and were guided by the notes of a whistle.'[24] Yet Gillmore believed the effort would be worthwhile, and when he did eventually open fire he would stand a good chance of success. The reason for his confidence was singular. Among the heavy artillery his men were unloading onto Tybee Island was a new type of weapon: the rifled cannon.

Rifled cannon had been in use on battlefields since 1858, but their potential was still not widely understood in America. 'Rifling' (spiralled grooves cut inside the barrel) allowed cannon to fire much further and more accurately than the 'smoothbores' that were the standard weapon in use until that point. Guns such as the 'James' and 'Parrott' rifles could fire huge conical shells that would explode on impact, rather than above a target.[Δ] All the same, there was no general confidence that they would make a

difference. Gillmore's superior officer, Brigadier-General Thomas W. Sherman, thought rifled cannon insufficiently tested and was sceptical as to their usefulness: 'All that can be done with guns is to shake the walls as far as practicable in a random manner,' he wrote.[25] But once the bombardment began he – and many others – would have their minds changed.

Early on the morning of April 10th a messenger rowed under a flag of truce from Tybee Island to Cockspur Island and presented Olmstead with a demand that he surrender Fort Pulaski. Olmstead refused, stating that he was there to defend the fortress, not to give it away. At a little after eight o'clock, therefore, Gillmore's guns lit up. Soon after, Olmstead began to return fire.

To begin with, both sides fired waywardly and without great success. But within a few hours, they had found their range. And by lunchtime, it was clear that Gillmore had the upper hand. Although some of the large smoothbore guns were missing with 90 per cent of their shots – as Lee had predicted – the ten rifled cannon in his artillery were doing exactly as Gillmore had hoped they would. In his report of the bombardment he wrote: 'By one o'clock in the afternoon (April 10th), it became evident that the [fort] would be breached, provided our breaching batteries did not become seriously disabled by the enemy's fire. By the aid of a powerful telescope, it could be observed that the rifled projectiles were doing excellent service; that their penetration was deep and effective; and that the portion of the wall where the breach had been ordered, was becoming rapidly "honey-combed."'[26]

The shooting carried on all afternoon, only slowing when the sun set. Gillmore kept up a token barrage of a few shots per hour overnight, and in the morning resumed with gusto. Although Olmstead's men fired back as fiercely as they could, their guns were slowly being knocked out of service. Worse, the 'honeycombed' section of wall had now become a full breach, opening up the casemates in which the Confederate guns were protected. Gillmore continued to pour shot towards that crumbling spot, knowing that now the shells he loosed would be hurtling through the fort towards the magazine, where 40,000 pounds of gunpowder was stored.

The options remaining to Olmstead were few and all unpalatable. Fort Pulaski's masonry walls were falling to pieces around him. He had lost only one man and several were seriously injured – but he had no hope of repairing the damage done by Gillmore's rifled cannon, and was one direct

hit on his magazine away from an explosion and devastating fire. If and when Gillmore's barrage stopped, it would likely be followed by an assault by Union troops. There was little sense in fighting on. Just after two o'clock, therefore, Olmstead raised a white flag. A few hours later Gillmore arrived on a rowing boat. Olmstead greeted him, and they agreed terms of unconditional surrender.

Robert E. Lee was no longer present in Savannah when the Union flag rose above Fort Pulaski's battered walls. Six weeks earlier, Jefferson Davis had summoned him to the southern capital of Richmond, Virginia, where he was to assume supreme command of all the Confederate armies. He was informed of the bombardment in a telegram sent by one of his colleagues, Major-General John C. Pemberton, who told him tersely: 'The enemy opened fire at 8 o'clock this morning from his land batteries on Fort Pulaski. Firing continuous.'[27] This was bad news. But there was nothing much Lee could do about it.

Fort Pulaski's defeat in April 1862 did not mark the fall of Savannah. (On its landward side, the city remained well-protected: it would only succumb in the winter of 1864, at the culmination of General William Tecumseh Sherman's 'March to the Sea'.) But the successful reduction of this supposedly impervious fort within two days made it clear that warfare was changing, and fast. In his report submitted to the US Corps of Engineers after the siege, Gillmore wrote that his assault on Fort Pulaski 'fully demonstrates the power and effectiveness of rifled cannon, for breaching at long distances – at distances indeed hitherto untried, and considered altogether impracticable, thus opening a new era in the use of this most valuable, and comparatively unknown arm of service.'[28] His commanding officer, Major-General David Hunter, agreed. In his official report, Hunter praised Gillmore, and added that 'the result of this bombardment must cause, I am convinced, a change in the construction of fortifications. . . No works of stone or brick can resist the impact of rifled artillery of heavy caliber.'[29]

It did not take long for the same conclusion to sink in across the Union and Confederate states. One hundred and sixty miles away in Columbia, South Carolina, Mary Chesnut heard of the defeat in Savannah and noted it with brief despair. 'Pulaski has fallen,' she wrote. 'What more is there to fall?'[30]

In the spring of 1862 American warfare changed in many ways, seemingly all at once. Fort Pulaski's reduction with rifled cannon preceded similarly devastating assaults at Fort Macon in North Carolina and Forts Jackson and Philip, near New Orleans. In September 1863, Gillmore went to Charleston and trained his guns on Fort Sumter, firing 5,000 shells in a week, and reducing the fortification where the war had begun to what he called a 'shapeless and harmless mass of ruins.'[31] The pile of rubble that was once Fort Sumter would hold out for the Confederacy, stubbornly, until the end of the war, but it was no longer recognisable as the stronghold that it had been in 1861. Nor, manifestly, was there any future for the Third System of fortification.

At the same time, a revolution was taking place at sea, where ironclads – steam-propelled warships encased or constructed from metal – arrived to end the military supremacy of timber-hulled sail-ships, which had lasted for 10,000 years.[**] And on land, fighting between infantry was beginning routinely to involve lines of fortifications dug in by armies defending and attacking targets. As faith in brick and masonry evaporated, and guns became more powerful, more accurate at longer ranges, and even capable of rapid repeat-firing,[††] it was safer to shelter from mortars and bullets below-ground. The essential functions of the fort were now assumed by warrens of earthworks, trenches and tunnels.

As the Civil War progressed, trench-digging became ever-more common and the term 'fort' developed a new meaning. During fierce fighting for Vicksburg, Mississippi in the summer of 1863, the Union commander, General Ulysses S. Grant, wrote: 'We have our trenches pulled up so close to the enemy that we can throw hand grenades over into their forts. The enemy do not dare show their heads above the parapet at any time, so close and so watchful are our sharpshooters. The town is completely invested.'[32] This was a foretaste of many such battles to come. In May 1864, fighting along miles of earthworks and trench 'forts' around Spotsylvania Courthouse in Virginia produced carnage, with more than 30,000 casualties. One veteran recalled 'men lying six and eight deep, almost to the top of the works, and, sloping back, hiding the earth from sight. . . There was not a tree, nor bush, nor twig which was not cut by flying missiles.'[33] A month

later, trenches were dug around Petersburg, Virginia, which over the next nine months grew to be nearly 50km (30 miles) long. Where the Union and Confederate lines at Petersburg were closest there was barely 150m between them. The low-lying, timber-clad earthworks and artillery positions from which constant fire was exchanged for week after gruelling week were officially called Fort Sedgwick and Fort Mahone. Troops knew them as Fort Hell and Fort Damnation.

Thus, in the last year of the Civil War,[‡‡] the artillery fort morphed into the trench systems that would be exported to Europe to find their awful final form on the Western Front in the First World War: where tens of thousands of miles of wet, muddy ditches connected concrete bunkers and pillboxes, defended with barbed wire and machine guns. And at the same time was severed any connection between the fort and the old European castle, with its machicolations, battlements, moat and drawbridge. A way of warfare both more advanced and more terrifyingly primitive had arrived.



As one form of American castle – the Third System fort – was consigned to the realm of memory and public monument by the Civil War, another form of American castle arose. For after the war was over, the United States entered a period that would be known by the ironic title of a novel co-written by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner: *The Gilded Age*. Industrialisation, immigration, urbanisation, technological innovation, territorial expansion, oil drilling, mining, the laying of the railroads, and a booming financial market produced both soaring rises in real wages and appalling inequality. There were many whose race, class, sex or background denied them the fruits of this boom. Yet for those who succeeded, the Gilded Age really did glitter. The leading men of the new industries founded dynasties, and built dynastic seats to match – often on the model of the castles whose last influences on American warfare had been so decisively swept away between 1861 and 1865.

One of the grandest of these dynasties was the Vanderbilts, whose fortune was made by Cornelius Vanderbilt, a shipping and railroad magnate who died in 1877 leaving a legacy of $105 million[§§] to his family. Eleven years later his grandson George Washington Vanderbilt II, who had inherited a portion of this, bought 125,000 acres of woodland in North Carolina and set

about building a landed estate centred on the largest private home anywhere in the Americas. The 250-room Biltmore House took its inspiration from the French royal Chateau de Blois, built between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries; nods to the influence of this great age in French chateau-building could be seen in the statues of Louis IX and Joan of Arc incorporated into its winding staircase. Vanderbilt – shy, bookish and a talented linguist fluent in eight languages – filled his mock castle with fine art, furniture, tapestries, weapons and decorative items sourced from all over the world. When he opened this grand American chateau to his friends and family for a housewarming party at Christmas in 1895, his astonished guests found it contained a huge Renaissance-style banqueting hall with a great marble fireplace and carved Gothic throne, a library containing 20,000 books, a music room with a pipe organ fit for a cathedral, a palm court, billiard room, gun room, swimming pool and bowling alley, and much more besides. Besides a collection of historic armour that included Japanese samurai armour dating to the age of the Tokugawa shoguns, there was nothing remotely defensive about Biltmore House.[34] But its opulence and eclecticism, in pursuit of an idea of history rooted in European fortifications of centuries past, was fit to compare with the Gothic and Romantic castles that obsessed men like Ludwig II of Bavaria. And it set an example for other super-wealthy Americans to match.

Match it they did. The Lyndhurst mansion in the state of New York was a fine, asymmetric Gothic revival specimen with towers, turrets, narrow corridors and vaulted ceilings, of which Horace Walpole would have surely approved. Boldt Castle, built by the New York hotelier George Boldt on Heart Island in the St. Lawrence River between 1900 and 1904, comprised a huge, six-storey central European-style residence with conical towers and four other medieval-themed stone buildings around the island. Richtofen Castle, built by the Prussian baron Walter von Richtofen[##] in Denver, Colorado in 1887, was a volcanic rock moated fortress that deliberately mimicked the central European castles of the baron’s youth; it was decorated with a statue of the twelfth-century German emperor Frederick Barbarossa.

Castles also proved attractive to those connected with the dawning age of Hollywood. Between 1914 and 1919 the actor William Gillette, who played Sherlock Holmes more than 1,000 times on stage and screen, built a castle on top of a hill in Connecticut that was designed to resemble a medieval

ruin. Gillette Castle was known officially by its owner as Seventh Sister, but he also referred to it fondly as ‘the pile of rocks’. It was served by a narrow-gauge railway, and contained secret doors and passageways and a mirror-based spying system. Gillette, who lived alone, but kept more than a dozen cats, loved his castle as much as any medieval count or king ever did, and stated in his will that he hoped ‘the stone walls and towers and fireplaces of my home – founded at every point on the solid rock of Connecticut’, along with his railway cars and other devices, might never fall into ‘the possession of some blithering saphead who had no conception of where he is or with what surrounded’. The castle was bought by the state of Connecticut in 1943 and eventually refurbished as a tourist attraction.

Of all the castles built in the United States after the Civil War, however, two achieved lasting international fame – both of them built on the west coast in the state of California. The first was another dynast’s pleasure palace, built between 1919 and 1947 by the newspaper and magazine magnate William Randolph Hearst on his 250,000-acre estate in San Simeon, roughly halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Originally called *La Cuesta Encantada* (the Enchanted Hill), but better known as Hearst Castle, the sprawling hilltop complex, whose buildings contained 165 rooms, was designed in Spanish colonial revival style, evoking the age when Christopher Columbus had helped make Spain the leader of European expansion into the Americas. Amid more than 100 acres of gardens lay pools, a Prohibition-era secret wine cellar, an airstrip and the world’s largest private zoo. At the heart of it all was the Casa Grande, which Hearst’s architect Julia Morgan modelled on the church of Santa Maria la Mayor in the picturesque southern Spanish town of Ronda. And on the third floor of the Casa Grande was Hearst’s huge master bedroom: part of the Gothic Suite, in which the beautifully painted fourteenth-century ceiling and doors had been removed and imported from the city of Teruel in Aragon, Spain.

Hearst shared this bedroom with one of Hollywood’s early darlings. Although in 1903 he had married a dancer named Millicent Willson, and had five children with her, Millicent was not a resident of Hearst Castle. By the time work began at San Simeon, Hearst was in a relationship with the actress Marion Davies, which would last for more than thirty years. The parties thrown by the couple attracted a cast-list of the world’s most famous people of the Roaring Twenties and beyond: the Hollywood elite including

Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, Gary Cooper, Jean Harlow and the Marx Brothers; politicians including US President Calvin Coolidge and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill; writers such as Irving Cobb and George Bernard Shaw; and fellow tycoons including Howard Hughes. For the extravagance of his spending and socialising, along with the controversy he attracted as a news baron, Hearst was often sneered at, and he was satirised in Orson Welles' 1941 movie *Citizen Kane*. But those who were his and Davies' guests at San Simeon were generally flattering about the experience. The British photographer and designer Cecil Beaton recorded his impression of arriving at the shimmering ranch, packed with historical artefacts and even entire medieval buildings transported from Europe: 'We caught sight of a vast, sparkling white castle in Spain,' he wrote. 'It was out of a fairy story. The sun poured down with theatrical brilliance on tons of white marble and white stone. There seemed to be a thousand statues, pedestals, urns. The flowers were unreal in their ordered profusion. Hearst stood smiling at the top of one of the many flights of garden steps.'[35]

If Hearst Castle was the defining American castle of the first half of the twentieth century, however, it was another Californian castle that proved the most successful of the years that followed the Second World War. On Sunday July 17th 1955 at 5.30 p.m. an official press preview was held for an amusement park opening in Anaheim, California. The invitation, a slip of green cardboard, showed the façade of a classic chivalric medieval castle, with high walls and towers, triangular flags fluttering above an imposing gatehouse. In Gothic letters was the name of the park: Disneyland.

At the opening of Disneyland, which was televised in a broadcast hosted by (among others) the actor and future US president, Ronald Reagan, a crowd of invited guests and 90 million television viewers were shown around five 'worlds', including Main Street USA, Tomorrowland and Frontierland. Although the first day was plagued with problems – long queues for rides, ongoing construction works and faulty water fountains – it marked the expansion of Walter Elias 'Walt' Disney's successful cartoon business into the realm of live entertainment. And at the heart of it all was a castle.

The Sleeping Beauty Castle – a confection of dreaming, blue-roofed spires – was a 23m (77 foot) tribute to Neuschwanstein, the mountain retreat of Ludwig II of Bavaria, which was itself a tribute to the imaginary

castles of medieval German myths about the Holy Grail. Disney's design team had entertained various working names, including 'the Medieval Castle' and 'Robin Hood Castle'.[36] But it was Sleeping Beauty[ʃʃ] that stuck, and Disney's constant refrain was that the park's image rested on getting the castle right. It needed to be 'a very, very conspicuous castle, because the castle is gonna be the symbol of this whole place,' recalled one of the designers.[37] As the tallest building in Disneyland it would help visitors find their way around without getting lost. But as the invitations to the opening day showed, it was more than a simple navigation aid. The image of a fantasy medieval castle also went to the core of Disney's brand of storytelling. In time, the castle would become the central part of the Disney logo: used on its own, and later hybridised with the Sleeping Beauty castle, which would itself make the leap from animation to construction at Walt Disney World in Florida (1971) and Disneyland Tokyo (1983).

When Walt Disney opened Disneyland in July 1955 he gave a short speech to a television camera, welcoming his visitors and explaining his ambition for the new park. 'To all who come to this happy place, welcome,' he said. 'Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past, and here youth may savour the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and the hard facts that have created America, with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world.'[38] As he spoke, a crowd of cheerful middle-class Americans clapped, and off-camera, someone dutifully cheered. Walt Disney's vision of America's past and future was certainly contestable – not least the cheerful streets of Frontierland, which made a playground of the violent memories of the relentless expansion of America's modern settlers across new lands. But as his speech subtly indicated, Disney's approach to American history always proceeded in strict order of precedence: ideals first, dreams second, and hard facts a rather distant third. How else to explain the American castle's journey, which began with Columbus' doomed fort built from the wrecked timbers of the Santa Maria and reached its dramatic nadir with the bombardment of Forts Sumter and Pulaski, rising again as the showpiece of an amusement park an hour's drive south of Hollywood?

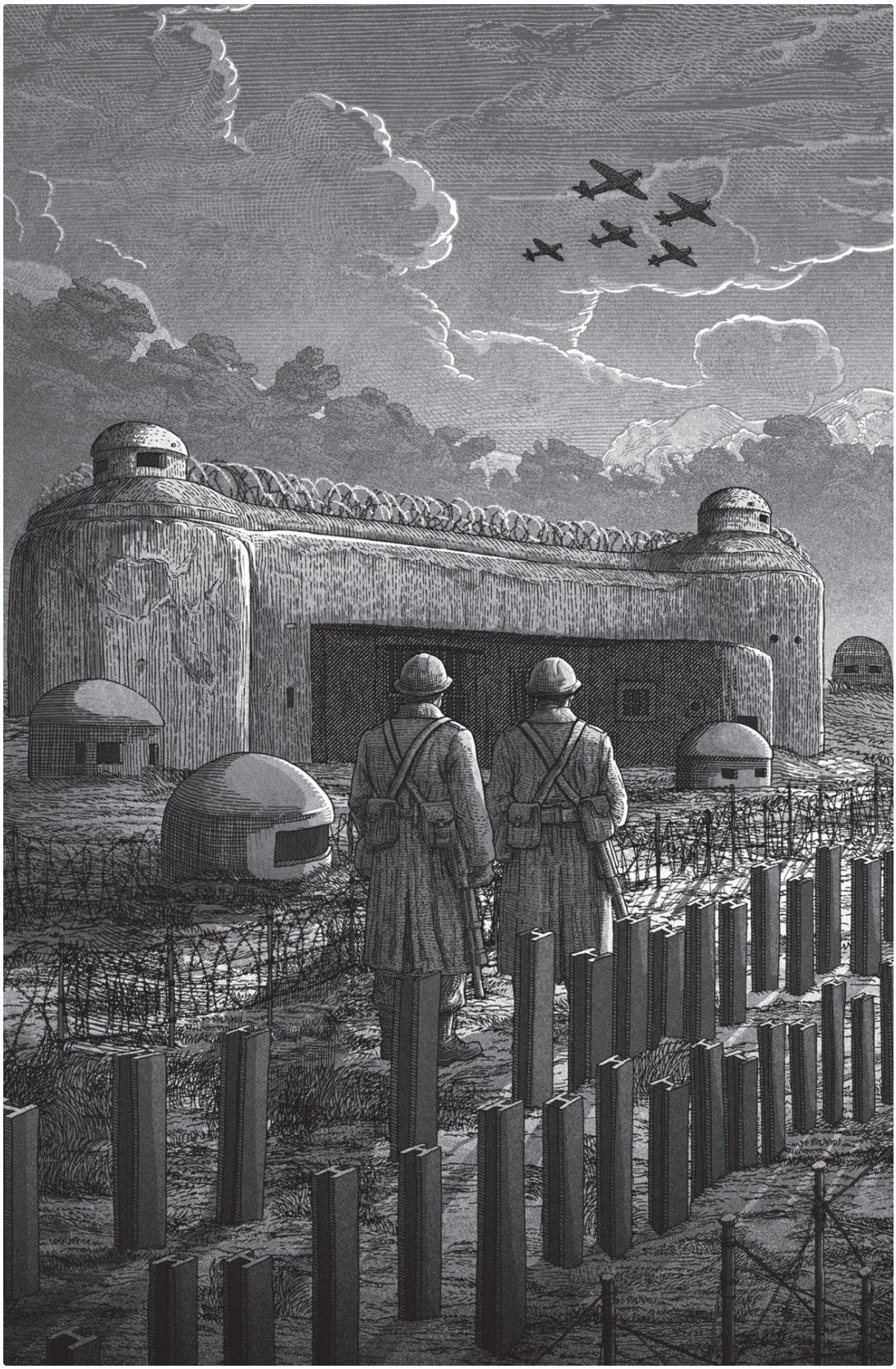
Castles had always been buildings where function and imagination commingled; here, imagination was everything, and what function lay beneath was concerned with profit and not war. Viewed sympathetically,

this was the happy ending to a dark tale. In Disney's hands, the castle symbolised the triumph of hope, no matter what degree of self-delusion it required. Here, then, was the fortress presented anew once more, as the guardian of the American Dream.

* The meal then typically taken between 12 noon and 2 p.m.
† Literally, cannonballs heated to high temperatures, designed to start blazes. Anticipatory of, rather than responsible for, the later southern exclamation and song lyric: 'Goodness gracious, great balls of fire!'
‡ In what is now north-east Haiti. Navidad was named for the Nativity, because it was founded on Christmas Eve. The Taino people who occupied that part of the island felt no festive goodwill: they slaughtered its inhabitants once Columbus had gone home.
§ If such a dwelling were built with similar techniques into a cliff-face in an area of outstanding natural beauty today, it would be considered the acme of sustainable architectural chic, and would likely command a realty value of tens of millions of dollars.
See chapter 9.
∫ Built in the 1750s during the Seven Years' War and known to the French as Fort Carillon.
Ω 'The Star-Spangled Banner' was officially adopted as the US national anthem during the presidency of Herbert Hoover, in 1931. It is not the only patriotic song inspired by the failure of a British (or English) army to win a battle. The unofficial Scottish anthem 'Flower of Scotland', written in the 1960s, is a cheerful reminder of the events of the battle of Bannockburn of 1314, when Robert the Bruce sent 'Proud Edward [II]'s armies homeward/Tae think again.'
≈ Perhaps the man most singularly obsessed with military technology since the days of Vegetius. His works included *Perpendicular Fortifications*, *A Historical Memoir on the Casting of Cannons*, *On the Rotation of Cannonballs*, *The Art of Defence is Superior to Attack*, and a history of Joan of Arc's siege tactics.
∂ A former aide-de-camp to Napoleon Bonaparte, who had been exiled from France following the battle of Waterloo.
π Between November 3rd and 7th 1861 a Union fleet under Samuel F. Du Pont blasted into surrender the two strongholds of Fort Walker and Fort Beauregard, which defended the river estuary at Port Royal Sound, Georgia. Du Pont ordered his ships to sail in a constant loop, keeping up a bombardment of both forts as they went.
Δ Named for the inventors of the rifling patterns used in the barrels: one was designed by Charles T. James, engineer, steam-mill pioneer and US Senator for Rhode Island; and Robert Parker Parrott, soldier and ironworks owner from New Hampshire.
** Ironclads appeared in 1859, when France launched the iron-sheathed *Gloire*. The first naval battle of the US Civil War to feature ironclads on both sides was the battle of Hampton Roads in March 1862, when the Union's USS *Monitor* fought the Confederacy's CSS *Virginia* (adapted from the captured USS *Merrimack*).
†† The six-barreled, hand-cranked Gatling gun was patented in 1862, and first deployed in combat at the battle of Petersburg.
‡‡ The Civil War effectively ended on April 9th 1865 when General Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to General Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, though it took until August 1866 for peace to be finally proclaimed.
§§ According to www.measuringworth.com/ such a fortune would be roughly equivalent to $51.5 billion in 2026 terms. (Even allowing for inflation, the rich are getting richer.)

Walter von Richthofen brought family money to the United States in the 1870s, expanded his fortune in silver mining, and subsequently contracted it with bad investments in streetcars and cattle ranching. His castle was both his house and a publicity stunt to advertise the Denver suburb of Montclair, which he developed on 320 acres of prairie land in the 1880s. He was an uncle of the First World War flying ace Manfred von Richthofen, also known as the Red Baron.

∫∫ At the time Disneyland was built the animated film *Sleeping Beauty* was in production, where it had been stuck since the late 1930s.



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AFTER CASTLES

Think of it like you're preparing for a long camping trip, albeit under a concrete and steel structure that will protect you from everything outside. . .

VIVOS XPOINT MARKETING LITERATURE

Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria, commander of the German Sixth Army, was a nobleman of ancient lineage,[*] an excellent soldier and a respected general. He also appreciated life's pleasures, and even during wartime he indulged in them. So although he led his men in action with distinction during the First World War – beginning with the battle of Lorraine in August 1914 – there were often moments of downtime to enjoy. At dinner in his officers' mess he served wine, schnapps and cigars. After dinner he would occasionally slip out of his quarters to meet young ladies and relax. In the winter he hunted for partridge and hare. And whenever the Sixth Army's movements on the Western Front allowed he would make time to visit and explore interesting historical sites.[1] The war was hard and demanding. But it afforded him the chance to see the world.

It was Rupprecht's appreciation for history that led him, in March 1917, to write to his superior, General Erich Ludendorff. At that moment, Ludendorff was directing German forces in a withdrawal from positions they had held during the previous year's gruelling battle of the Somme (July 1st–November 18th 1916). Hundreds of thousands of men were retreating to a newly built front, known as the *Siegfriedstellung* (also known as the Hindenburg Line), fortified with zig-zagging trenches, barbed wire, concrete bunkers and hidden machine-gun posts. As they went, they destroyed everything in their wake, scorching the earth so the Allied troops who followed would be forced to advance across a wasteland.

The destruction was terrible. The decorated German soldier and writer Ernst Jünger, who took part in it, saw villages that

> had the look of lunatic asylums. Whole companies were set to knocking or pulling down walls, or sitting on rooftops, uprooting the tiles. Trees were cut down, windows smashed; wherever you looked, clouds of smoke and dust rose from vast piles of debris. . . As far back as the Siegfried Line, every village was reduced to rubble, every tree chopped down, every road undermined, every well poisoned, every basement blown up or booby trapped, every rail unscrewed, every telephone wire rolled up, everything burnable burned.'[2]

Rupprecht was so appalled that he considered resigning. And there was one act of demolition he considered particularly wanton, which was what prompted his letter to Ludendorff.

Within the area of German retreat lay the fine medieval castle of Coucy: a magnificent legacy to medieval nobility, built by the proud Enguerrand III, lord of Coucy, in the 1220s and restored by architects including Eugène Viollet-le-Duc during the heyday of Gothic restoration in the nineteenth century. Since September 1914 German troops had occupied the chateau. But now they were leaving, Ludendorff considered it subject to the same ruination as the rest of the land. He had given orders that it should be packed with thirty-eight tonnes (roughly 80,000lbs) of dynamite and blown to pieces.

Six months earlier, in October 1916, Rupprecht had visited the Chateau de Coucy on one of his excursions away from the front. It was magnificent, dominating the Ailette valley over which it loomed. Its 60m donjon, or central tower, with three floors of vaulted chambers, was the largest in Europe; each of its corner towers would have served wonderfully as the showpiece of a lesser castle. Before the war it had been a popular tourist attraction for Parisians, who could reach it in a couple of hours by train. Rupprecht had written in his diary that he thought the chateau ‘a unique sight, the proudest castle I’ve ever seen.’ Yet even then had felt a sense of foreboding: ‘it would be a great shame if the castle became a victim of this war.’[3] Now, thanks to Ludendorff, that fear was about to be realised. Rupprecht asked the general to reconsider. Dynamiting the castle would bring no advantage to the German cause, he argued. It ‘would only be a useless blow to our own side.’[4]

Ludendorff disregarded him entirely. Whether or not there was operational value to blowing up one of France’s finest medieval castles, there was certainly a spite dividend to be earned. So on the morning of March 20th two massive explosions tore through the site, and when the fine dust of vaporised limestone settled there was hardly any chateau left to see. A month after the dynamite went off, the English academic and politician Halford Mackinder visited the area and described it in a letter to the *Times* of London. ‘At Coucy-le-Château there stood the massive remains of a round tower, the keep of a Medieval castle,’ he wrote:

> This untenanted ruin was one of the most remarkable monuments of its kind in France, and indeed in Europe. I saw it myself only a few months before the war. It now exists no longer. The destruction of it is so complete that the remains are not in great fragments, as is usually the case when masonry of this kind is broken up, but have been reduced to their component stones, which now lie in an immense shapeless heap. There is no military excuse for this crime against history. . .

Mackinder continued his letter, describing the German destruction of French orchards, and concluded with a broad denunciation of the enemy, expressed in the robust language of the day. ‘The rage mounts in your throat,’ he wrote. He wished other *Times* readers to ‘realise the coldly scientific method of the Hun. The war is for him an act of commerce. It begins to appear that after all the result of it may not be a capital investment for himself, and therefore he destroys systematically the capital of his future competitor.’

Boiling with his patriotic fury, Mackinder may have been surprised to learn that the commanding officer of the German Sixth Army, Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, shared his dismay. But neither anger nor sadness could bring the Chateau de Coucy back. After the war the French government left it in ruins as a ‘memorial to barbarity’. And it was not the only fortification that served such a purpose, after the Great War was won.



On June 28th 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors in Louis XIV’s Palace of Versailles, a treaty was signed that officially ended hostilities in the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles formally charged Germany with war guilt, redrew territorial boundaries and imposed vast reparations on the German state. It was by design a punishment beating – but whether too severe or too lenient was a matter on which opinion divided. The economist John Maynard Keynes considered the treaty’s terms excessive and dangerous to future European stability. Others thought Germany ought to have been crushed beyond all resuscitation. But both camps came to the same conclusion. The French field marshal Ferdinand Foch – an advocate for harsher terms – was said to have declared: ‘This is not a peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.’

Whether because it was too soft or too hard, Versailles failed to bring harmony to the European continent and suppress German expansionism. The treaty went unratified by the US Senate, and successive US presidents equivocated about the prospect of American involvement in future European wars. Britain, too, entered one of its periodic spasms of ambivalence towards continental politics. In 1923 Germany defaulted on reparations payments and French and Belgian troops occupied the industrial heartland of the Ruhr. Then, in 1926, journalists discovered that Germany

was covertly rearming, in defiance of the treaty's terms. By the end of the decade, it seemed Marshal Foch's assessment of Versailles was accurate.

In 1929, therefore, anticipating another attritional *guerre de longue durée*, the French Supreme War Council adopted plans to build a pre-emptive *Siegfriedstellung* of their own: a line of fortifications protecting France's eastern flank, stretching around 800km (500 miles) from the border with Luxembourg to that with Switzerland. Named after the Minister of War, André Maginot, this barrier network consisted of around nineteen large, mostly subterranean, artillery forts, known as *gros ouvrages*, supported by thirty-two smaller infantry forts, or *petits ouvrages*. To the north, the Maginot Line continued in lighter defence works all the way to the North Sea coast; in the south, military bases oversaw the mountain passes into northern Italy. Collectively, these fortifications, in chain with natural obstacles such as the Ardennes Forest and the Alps, were designed to make the prospect of attacking France directly too daunting for any future German leader to contemplate, unless they were willing to drain their economy to exhaustion.

The fortifications of the Maginot Line were built at enormous cost and to the highest military specification, using concrete and steel and leaning into the understanding, derived from the First World War, that overwhelming mechanical firepower was vital to stopping an advancing army in its tracks. Fortress design proceeded from this insight. Thus, a *gros ouvrage* such as Fort Schoenenbourg, constructed between 1931 and 1935 in the village of Hunspach, was barely visible on the skyline. Its profile above-ground amounted to a heavily reinforced entrance block and a few domed, pop-up 'cloches' which rose to reveal machine-gun turrets, rapid-fire mortars, grenade-launchers and anti-tank guns. Below, sunk thirty metres into the earth, lay three kilometres of underground tunnels and rooms, served by an internal narrow-gauge railway and elevator shaft, with an electricity production facility, kitchens, sleeping and living quarters and an officers' mess. Fort Schoenenbourg could garrison up to 500 men, although the even bigger *ouvrage* of Hackenberg – the largest fortification on the Maginot Line – could house 1,000.

This disparity between the small visible 'face' of the fortress and its large subterranean body spoke to changes that were observable everywhere in the modern military. But in some senses, principles had changed less than appearances. In an essay written in 1922 the French general Marie-Eugène

Debeney considered how warfare had developed – or not – since the heyday of the medieval castle. ‘Modern machines may be compared with the knights of the Middle Ages,’ he wrote.

> The terrible lance, supported by the weight of armor and mount, crushed, pierced, overwhelmed with an irresistible power. The lance was the unit of strength and it was said, for example, “the Sire de Coucy has twenty-five lances with him”. But each knight required the assistance of several squires to put on his armour and help him into his saddle. . . It is the same today. A tank or an airplane represents fifty men, not simply two. The larger number is required to care for the precious engine when it returns from combat, to shelter it, repair it, lubricate it.[5]

The same, perhaps, was true of the castle. Certainly, the materials and technology used had advanced considerably since the Middle Ages. But the experience of manning one in the expectation of siege had remained as it ever had been: grim. In the *ouvrages*, men lived what one French soldier called a ‘troglodyte life’ in the chambers far below the ground, and for many, serving in these damp, cold, smelly quarters, far from fresh air and sunlight, brought on a form of mental and physical languor they called *bétonite*, or concrete fever.[6] This was not so far removed from the numbing experience of being stuck behind the walls of a medieval castle during a long bombardment. The great hope of the French, of course, was that a sunken concrete fortress like Schoenenbourg would be considerably more resistant to assault by twentieth-century munitions than the mighty walls of the Chateau de Coucy had been in 1917. But that could only be tested in practice.

On May 10th 1940 the test came. Germany was by this time under the command of Adolf Hitler, whose Nazi Party had risen to power in 1933. Under Hitler, German rearmament had ceased to be covert. The Nazis spoke openly of revenging the humiliation of Versailles, and Hitler had written in his manifesto-memoir *Mein Kampf* of ‘the necessity of a reckoning with France’, in order to provide ‘the rear cover for an enlargement of our people’s living space in [eastern] Europe.’[7] From 1936 this reckoning had been edging closer, as Nazi Germany put troops back into the demilitarised French border country known as the Rhineland, annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia, then, in September 1939, invaded Poland, which obliged France to go to war. For several months – a period known as the Phoney War – there was little activity on the French–German frontier. But by the

following May, the German invasion of France began, and the Maginot Line's viability was put to the question.

Its failure was swift and salutary. Rather than trying to break the fortification line where it was strongest, German forces simply thundered around its edges. The biggest German army group was sent through Belgium and Luxembourg, penetrating the Ardennes Forest, which French war planners had assumed would be impassable, so had left lightly defended. The Luftwaffe (German air force) bypassed the Maginot Line by flying over it. By May 20th German forces had reached the coast, and nearly half a million Allied troops were encircled on the beaches of Dunkirk. From there, a huge naval evacuation effort known as Operation Dynamo began, which rescued more than 338,000 of the stranded men.

As this took place, the Maginot Line's *ouvrages* stood helpless and even idle. They had succeeded in their purpose of preventing an armed assault along their route. But as it transpired, this was of no consequence in the face of Nazi *blitzkrieg*. Once French field armies had collapsed, German firepower was turned briefly on the Maginot Line. Fort Schoenenbourg was pounded with heavy bombardment from guns and aircraft, fired back thousands of rounds and was not significantly damaged. Indeed, all along the line, the *ouvrages* held out against the most fearful battering with German shells and bombs. All the same, on June 22nd 1940 France formally surrendered. The garrisons who emerged from their forts were sent away to be held in prisoner-of-war camps, in many cases until the end of the war.[8] They were victims not of poorly built fortifications, but of fortifications built for war fought at a different speed, in different places and by different means than war planners in France had imagined likely.



When Allied troops were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk between May 26th and June 4th 1940, the British vice-admiral Bertram Ramsay conducted operations from the 750-year-old medieval stronghold of Dover Castle, where his command headquarters lay in tunnels cut into the gleaming limestone of the famous White Cliffs. These tunnels were excavated at the height of the Napoleonic Wars between Britain and France, when the castle originally built by the Plantagenet king Henry II was

reinvented as an artillery fortress and barracks for 2,000 men, who would provide a first line of defence against French invasion.

In 1940, these tunnels were pressed into service again, and as the Second World War went on, they were expanded to include two new deep levels. In 1942 a level known as Annexe was fitted out as a hospital. The following year an even lower level opened. Dumpy level was a communications hub and combined headquarters for the army and navy presence in Dover. In 1944 preparations for Operation Neptune – the naval part of the Allied invasions of Normandy known as D-Day – were made in Dumpy level. There, too, was planned the elaborate deception operation named Fortitude South, which aimed to convince German command that the D-Day landings of June 1944 would happen around Calais, some 400km (250 miles) from their real destination, in Normandy.

After the war was over, Dover Castle's active military role was wound down, and its army garrison left in 1958. But in the 1960s, the castle that had been an Iron Age hillfort, medieval royal fortress and Napoleonic barracks was repurposed once again, this time for the nuclear age. Since the 1945 strikes on Japan that had ended the war in the Pacific, several countries, including the Soviet Union, had developed atomic weapons, and in the context of the Cold War it was considered prudent to set up command centres from which Britain could be governed in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. Dover was assigned to be one of eleven regional seats of government, and the Dumpy level tunnels were refitted as an underground fortress to stand ready for the day of Armageddon. Besides living quarters, a radio broadcasting studio was built, along with an air filtration system and radiation seals. Exactly how the region outside was to be administered was a matter that could only be left to the darkest conjecture. But if civilisation was to endure in southern England, there was at least a chance that it could be overseen from this fortification buried deep in the rock of the Kent coast.

This, then, became the model of the castle as a military asset in the nuclear age. In place of battlements and bastions came warrens of tunnels hidden as far below the earth's surface as technology would allow. And that is largely as it remains today. Where traditional castles still stand, they typically serve as stately homes, ceremonial palaces, museums or tourist sites. From Bronze Age archaeological sites and Viking ring forts, to castles from the ages of chivalry and crusading, to Gothic pleasure palaces and nineteenth-century artillery forts, castles are enormously popular with day-

trippers. According to a survey of Americans conducted by the polling group YouGov in 2025, castles were the most favourably regarded artefact of the Middle Ages, with a 77 per cent approval rating. (By way of comparison, monasteries had a 52 per cent approval rating, Gregorian chant 26 per cent and the Black Death a surprisingly high 9 per cent.)[9] Their military function, however, is now obsolete. Such state-of-the-art fortresses as do exist on the earth's surface are typically naval bases designed to service aircraft carriers and submarines, such as China's Yulin Naval Base at Sanya, on the island of Hainan, or the US Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia. The concept of the fortress is used as an analogy: in the war between Russia and Ukraine that is being fought at the time of writing, Ukraine has developed a 'Sky Fortress' acoustic detection system that listens for the signature sound of missiles and drones, and sends data to mobile anti-aircraft firing teams. And every major country in the world maintains nuclear bunkers for its leaders, which are, by design, either secret or inaccessible to the public, or both. In the worst eventuality, a world war in which atomic weapons are deployed will be directed by governments based in facilities far beneath mountain ranges, resistant to any payload detonated above them.

What sort of world would be left for the inhabitants of such a fortress to rule over, should such a war break out? The thought is not a pleasant one. But in a nuclear-armed world at the start of an artificial intelligence revolution against the background of increasing climate instability, some of the world's wealthiest private individuals are known to be building strongholds secure enough to give them a chance of finding out. In 2023, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Meta, was reported to be building a 1,400-acre compound on the island of Kauai, Hawaii: besides dozens of bedrooms, kitchens and entertaining rooms, planning documents also suggested it had an underground shelter, blast-resistant door, private energy and water supply and food-production capacity. In 2022, the Silicon Valley tycoon Peter Thiel was blocked by planning authorities in New Zealand from developing a comparably lavish and secure property by Lake Wanaka.

Yet 'doom-prepping' behind secure gates for nuclear war, environmental disaster, a deadly pandemic, an artificial intelligence that escapes human control or any other sort of social catastrophe is not solely the preserve of the super-wealthy. Twenty-first-century fortified compounds are also currently being developed and marketed to the merely moderately wealthy.

In 2026 a company named Vivos was marketing for sale individual bunkers on a former US Army site in South Dakota. ‘The Black Hills Army Base was originally built by the Army Corps of Engineers as a fortress to store bombs and munitions, from 1942 to 1967, when the base was completely retired,’ reads the marketing literature, which also notes that the site is within twenty-four hours’ drive of anywhere in the United States, away from ‘Riots, Violence, Targets and Submersion Zones’ and beyond the reach of ‘the marauders during the aftermath following a large scale cataclysm or catastrophic event.’[10]

The site, said to be three-quarters of the size of Manhattan, contains 575 individual bunkers, ‘buried and protected under thick berms of soil, reportedly designed and built by the Army to withstand a significant blast wave, while being strategically separated from the next bunker by 400 feet in all directions.’ At the time of writing, prices began at $55,000. Outfitting the bunker – for interior decoration has always been important to people in castles – is advertised as being similarly affordable: ‘you can create a very chic glamping bunker on a barebones budget. . . Think of it like you’re preparing for a long camping trip, albeit under a concrete and steel structure that will protect you from everything outside.’[11]

Technologically, even these barebones compounds – equipped with medicine dispensaries and ‘detention centres’, supplied by deep-water wells, off-grid electricity and chemical air filtration systems, and stockpiled with a year’s supply of fuel and toilet paper – are far more advanced than anything an Iron Age warlord, medieval baron or eighteenth-century Gothic revivalist could have imagined. But the underlying assumptions are roughly the same. Safety, status and luxury are things that can best be enjoyed from behind strong defences in secure locations. Protecting one’s person, family and property is the starting point of projecting power. The physical form of the castle has been evolving ever since the last Ice Age, when man marked out the perimeter of his hunting camp with mammoth bones. But the dream persists.

And of course, it is not impossible that the dream and the reality will catch one another up, should the defences of these nuclear-age castles ever be called into use. Even a $55,000 middle-class castle of the atomic age should be able to withstand a 20-megaton nuclear blast. But what then? The castle may protect humans, only to send us back to the beginning. In 1948 Albert Einstein, who had foreseen earlier than most people that

developments in nuclear physics might lead to ‘extremely powerful bombs’, was asked with what weapons a third world war would be fought. He replied with a variation on a popular quip of the post-war world: ‘I don’t know. But I can tell you what they’ll use in the fourth. They’ll use rocks!’[12]

* Prince Rupprecht, forty-seven in the spring of 1917, was the grandson of Luitpold, Prince Regent of Bavaria, who had taken over rule of the realm after Ludwig II, the builder of Neuschwanstein castle, was declared insane and deposed. See chapter 11.

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Notes

Introduction

1 John of Fordun and Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* volume 2, edited by Walter Goodall (Edinburgh: Robert Flamini, 1759), 83.

2 John Barbour, *The Bruce*, edited by William Mackay Mackenzie (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1909), 184.

3 Ibid. 186.

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Index

All page numbers refer to the print edition. Please use the links to navigate.

Abbasids, 79–93
  defeat Umayyads, 81–2
Abbeye aux Dames (Caen), 134
Abbeye aux Hommes (Caen), 134
  burial of William I, 144
Abd al-Rahman (Umayyad prince, became ruler of Iberia), 88–9
Abd al-Rahman II, 89
Abd al-Rahman III, 89, 90
Aberystwyth castle (Wales), 206, 209
Abu Bakr (successor to Muhammad), 81n
Abu Muslim (Abbasid revolutionary), 81–3
  death, 83
  governor of Khorosan, 82
Achilles (Greek warrior), 23
Acre, 165, 172, 187
  falls to Mamluks, 175
Actaeon (Theban hero), 281
Adam of Bremen (chronicler), 109
Adam, Robert (architect), 328
Adena culture (Ohio), 360
Aeneas (Trojan warrior), 14–15
Aeneid (Virgil), 28, 31
Aethelfrith (Northumbrian king), 205
Agamemnon (brother of Menelaus), 23, 35
Aggersborg (Danish ring fortress), 101, 112
Agricola (Roman general in Britannia), 49
agriculture, 19
  Scandinavia, 103
Ait Benhaddou (caravan town), 87
Ajax (Greek warrior), 23
Akasaka castle (Japan), 298–9
al-Andalus (Iberian peninsula), 88
al-Fihri, Yusuf (governor, al-Andalus), 88
al-Fustat (garrison town), 85
al-Jamali, Badr (architect), 85, 86
Al-Mansur (caliph), 83
al-Muazzam (Saladin’s nephew, Coradin), 175

al-Saffah (first Abbasid caliph), 82
al-Ukhaidir (desert fortress), 84
al-Walid II (caliph), 79
alcazabas (fortified palaces), 89
Alcock, Rutherford (British diplomat), 308
Alcuin of York (scholar), 104
Alexander the Great, 80
  and Aristotle, 276
Alexander VI (pope), 268–9, 271
Alexandra of Bavaria (princess), 331
Alexandra of Denmark (princess), 150
Alexandria (central Asia), 80
Alexios I Komnenos (Byzantine emperor), 163–4
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 150n
Alfred the Great (King of England), 110
Alfred's Castle (Oxfordshire), 55
Alhambra (fortified pleasure palace), 89–95
  Comares Palace, 92
  Gate of Arms, 92
  Gate of Justice, 92
  handed over to Ferdinand II and Isabella, 358
  UNESCO World Heritage Site, 95
Ali (fourth caliph), 81n
Allenby, Edmund (British general), 185–6
Altan Khan (Mongol leader), 243
Amboise (French village), 276
Ambrières (Norman siege castle), 133
American castles, 350–84
American Civil War, 358, 369
Amleth (Danish prince, prototype for Hamlet), 120–1
Anatolia, attacked by Muslims, 163
Anderson, Major Robert, 354–8
Andrew II, king of Hungary, 172, 173
Anglo-Saxon chronicle
  harrying of the north, 143
  Hereford Castle, 140
  on Norman castles, 130
  people of the north, 141
  William I ravages York, 142
Anne Bolyn, 148
Anselm (archbishop of Canterbury), 6, 258
Antinous (Hadrian's lover), 265
Antioch, 165
  surrenders to mamluks, 175
Antonine Wall (Britannia), 49, 235
Apulia (Italy), 152
Arabia, fortification of oases, 22
archaeology, development of, 60–1
Aristotle, 276
The Art of Defence Is Superior to Attack (Montalembert), 368n

Arthur, King, 56–60
  Ambrosius Aurelianus, 56
  Chrétien de Troyes, 194
  Glastonbury, 57
  timeline, 58
  and Yvain, 193–7
artillery
  Caernarfon, 212
  exploding shells, 244
  fifteenth century, 180
  hot shot, 357
  James rifles (cannon), 373
  Krak des Chevaliers, 186
  Ming wall, 244
  Parrott rifles (cannon), 373
  On the Rotation of Cannonballs (Montalembert), 368n
  Third System fortresses, United States
    impact of rifled cannon, 376
Arundell, Henry Lord, 328
Ascalon (Muslim city), 166
assassins
  Caligula, 47
  Guy Fawkes, 148
  Japan, 294
  Jin emperor, 229
  Norman lords, 132
  of popes, 267
  Syria, 172
Assertio inclytissimi Arturii regis Britanniae (Leland), 59n
Assur (kept the Viking watch), 106
Atrebates (Britannia tribe, clients of Rome), 47
Aurelian Walls (Rome), 266
author's background, 3–6, 8–9
Aztec Empire, 361
Azuchi Castle (Japan), 289–95

Babylon Fortress (Egypt), 85
Badajoz, alcazaba, 89
Badger's Snout (China), 226
Baghdad, 79, 83–4
  becomes capital of Islamic world, 79–80
  fortress, 83–4
Baldwin IV, king of Jerusalem
  castle at Jacob's Ford, 158, 161
Balmoral Castle (Scotland), 345
Banchō Sarayashiki (Japanese ghost story), 314
Banqueting House, Whitehall, 320
battle at Ely, 140
battle of Hampton Roads (America), 376n
battle of Hastings, 127

attempted reversal, 138–40
commemorations, 149–51
battle of Ichi-no-tani (Japan), 299
battle of New Orleans, 367
battle of Pharsalus, 29
battle of Sekigahara (Japan), 303–4, 305, 307
battle of Tannenburg, 183
battle of the Somme, 390
battle of the Zab, 82
battle of Tours, 75
battle of Tumu (Ming vs Mongol), 242
battle of Val-es-Dunes, 132
Baybars (mamluk sultan), 175
Bayeux Tapestry, 132, 151
Baynard's Castle (Ludgate Hill), 136
Beaton, Cecil, 382
Beaumaris castle (Anglesey), 209
Beauregard, Brigadier General Pierre (military commander, Charleston), 355
Beefsteak dining club (London), 341
beheadings
al-Andalus, 88
battle of Sekigahara, 303–4
Cadbury Hill, 53
Crescentius the Younger, 267
Hattin, 169
Jerusalem, 165
Nobunaga, 291–2
samurai, 300
St Euphemia, 174n
Tower of London, 147, 148
Vlad the Impaler, 344
Beijing, first named during Ming dynasty, 241
Bell, Walter G. (newspaper journalist), 62
Bellifortis (Kyeser), 259
Benedict VI (pope), 267
Benin earthworks (Africa), 240n
Bentley, Richard (aesthete), 321
Benvenuto Cellini (artisan), 280
Beowulf, 103
Berlin Wall, 248
Bernard, Simon (French engineer), 368, 370
Bayreuth Festspielhaus (opera house), 332, 335n
Bilad al-Sham (region), 76
Biltmore House (North Carolina), 378
Bismarck, Otto von, 335, 339
Black Death, 216, 266–7
Black Hills Army Base (Dakota), 399–401
black magic, 73
Bluetooth (wireless connection), 100n
Boldt Castle (Lawrence River), 379–80

Bona of Savoy (duchess and regent), 274
Boniface IX (pope), 268
The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry (de Pizan), 263–4
The Book of the City of Ladies (de Pizan), 260–2
Borgia, Cesare, 275
Borgia family, 268
Borgring (Danish ring fortress), 101
Boston (America), 366
Boudicca (queen of the Iceni), 49
Bran castle (Romania), 344
Brandon Camp (Hertfordshire)
  Roman garrison, 54
Britannia, 41–2
  how britons live, 42–3
  Julius Caesar, 42
  political upheaval, 53
  tribute to Rome, 42
British Museum, Troy artefacts, 27
Britons, 42–3
bronze age cities, 10–36
Brown, R. Allen (castle scholar), 7
Brunelleschi, Filippo (artist), 257
Buckingham Palace, 220
Bülow, Cosima (daughter of Hans von Bülow), 333n
von Bülow, Hans (conductor), 333n
Burges, William (architect-designer), 346–7
burhs, England, 110, 130
burial mounds
  Jelling (Denmark), 107–8
  Virginia, 60
Burke, Edmund (political philosopher), 327
Burnswark (Roman town in Dumfriesshire), 55
Bury Hill hillfort, 46
Bute dynasty (Scotland), 345–7
Byron (Lord)
  swims hellespont, 16n
  vampire story, 343
Byzantium, 70, 72, 76
  Roman, 70
  war weary, 72

caches
  Maiden Castle, 51
  Troy, 32–6
Cadbury Castle hillfort (Somerset), 46, 52–4
  Durotriges occupation, 53–4
  and King Arthur, 57–60
  Roman garrison, 54, 55, 57, 60
  slingshot bullets, 60
  temple and church, 55

Caen (Norman military stronghold), 133–4
Caen stone, 137
Caerleon (Roman town in Wales), 55
Caernarfon castle (Wales), 210, 218, 328
  captured by Welsh, 213
Caerphilly Castle (Wales), 151
Caesarea
  castle, 167
  surrenders to mamluks, 175
Cahokia mounds (city, Illinois), 360
Cairo, Fatimids, 85–6
Caligula (Roman emperor), 322
Calvert, Frank (archaeologist), 33
Cambridge Castle, 141
Camden, William (antiquary), 59
camels, 72, 74, 87
Camels, and Camelot, 58
Camulodunum (Colchester), 48
Canaanites (occupants of Jericho), 21
Çanakkale (Troy), 36
Caratacus (of the Catuvellauni), 49
caravanserai, 76
Cardiff Castle, 151, 346
Carlo (anti-investiture song) (Dafydd Iwan), 220
Casimir IV (Polish king), 183
Cassius Dio (Roman author), 47, 48
caste system (Japan), 307
Castel Sant'Angelo, 254–7, 264–72, 279
  French invasion, 269
  Goth invasion, 266
  origin of name, 266–7
  struck by lightning, 271
Castell Coch, Wales, 4, 346
Castillo de San Marcos (Spanish fort in America), 364–5
Castle Dracula (Gothic, imaginary), 341–5
castle of Montpélerin (the Mount of the Pilgrims, Tripoli), 166
The Castle of Otranto (Walpole), 323–5, 327
Castle of the Kurds, 171
Castle Rock, Edinburgh, 1–4
castles
  a definition, 6–9, 257–8
  as tourist destinations, 398
Castrum filii Dei (Castle of God's Son), 173
Catherine Howard, 148
Catuvellauni (Britannia tribe), 47
Cefnllys fortress (Wales), 205
César Tower (Provins), 197
Chao (Chinese defensive wall), 232
charity and crusades, 170
Charlemagne (Frankish emperor)

fights war with Godfred, a Dane, 106
Charles II, King, Windsor Castle, 218
Charles III, British King, 220
Charles Martel, 75
Charles, Prince of Wales, 219–20
Charles the Simple (Frankish king), 130
Charles V (emperor and king of Spain), 271, 281, 362
Charles VIII, King, 269
chastity belt, 259
Château d'Amboise, 276
Château de Blois (France), 379
Château de Chambord (France), 277
Château de Coucy (Picardy), 202
Château de Pierrefonds (France), 334, 345
Château Gaillard, 197–202, 218
conquest, 202
Château Pèlerin (Castle Pilgrim), 163, 173, 187
evacuated, 175
Chester, burned by Aethelfrith, 205
Chestnut, James Jr (Carolina politician), 354–8
Chestnut, Mary (wife of American politician), 353–4, 376
Chi (Chinese defensive wall), 232
China, 22, 225–34, 296
invaded by Japan, 311–12
chivalric castles, 190–220
chivalry, 194
Chrétien de Troyes, 194, 202
Chrichton-Stuart, John (3rd marquess of Bute), 345
church wealth, raided by William I, 143
Churchill, Winston, 8, 381
Chute, John (aesthete), 321
Citizen Kane (Orson Welles), 382
Civil War (England), 329
Claudius (emperor), orders invasion of Britannia, 47
clay, mineral, Troad, 17
Clement V (pope), abolishes Templars, 178
Clement VII (pope), 271
Cliff Palace (Ancestral Pueblan), 360
Clifford's Tower (York), 141
clock, Windsor Castle, 217
Cnut (Viking warrior), 99–100
death, 100
Cnut the Great (Harald Bluetooth's grandson), 118–19
Cockspur Island (America), 370
coins
Abu Muslim, 82
Battle of Hastings special, 151
Britannia, 41
china, 232
Harald Bluetooth, 111

Norman, 131
Roman, 58, 60
stored in monasteries, 105
Collachium (Hospitallers' citadel, Rhodes), 180
Colossus of Rhodes, 179–80
Colosseum (Rome), 236
Columbus, Christopher, 358–61
Comares Palace (Alhambra), 92
commanderies (managed agricultural estates), 170
Confucianism (Chinese philosophy), 231
Conquest, Mary (Lady Arundell), 328
Constantinople, 70–5
Conwy castle (Wales), 206, 209
Cooper-Key (Sir Neill), 149
copper, mineral, Troad, 17
Coradin (Saladin's nephew), 175
Córdoba, 88, 89, 90
mosque, 91
seized by Christians, 91
Corfe Castle, 146
coronations
English kings, 146
William I, 128
Corps of Engineers (America), 370
Cortés, Hernán (Spanish conquistador), 361
Coucy castle, 390–2
Coucy lords, 203, 395
Crescentii family (Rome), 267, 268
Croeso '69 (Welsh tourism campaign), 219
Crown Jewels (Tower of London), 147
crusader castles, 154–88
styles, 178–9
crusader culture, 167
crusader states, 165
crusades
Clermont (start of), 163
and enrichment, 167
Crystal River earthworks (Florida), 359
Ctesiphon (Sasanian capital), 240
Cuauhtémoc (Aztec emperor), 362
Cuernacava conquistador castle, 362
Cyclopean Walls (Mycenae, Greece), 22–3
Cyprus, survivors from Templar fortresses, 175–9

da Montelupo, Raffaello (Michelangelo apprentice), 279
da Sangallo, Antonio, 257
da Vigevano, Guido, 259
Daffyd ap Gruffudd, 207
Daily Telegraph, on *Dracula*, 343
daimyo (military lord, Japan), 289, 306

castles, 309
Damascus, 71, 74, 76, 79, 88
caliphate, 69
capture of, 76
Christians sold into slavery, 162
Damietta (Nile delta), 173
Danebury hillfort (Hampshire), 45–6
excavation, 61
Danevirke (fortification line in southern Jutland), 111, 119
Danish invasion of England, 142
Dardanelles, 16–17
Davies, Marion (actress), 381
Davis, Jefferson (US Confederacy president), 354, 371
de Gaulle (French president), 150
De Haar Castle (Netherlands), 345
de Pizan, Christine, 260–4, 284
De regimine principum (On the Rule of Princes, Giles of Rome), 258–9
Debeney, French general Marie-Eugene, 394
delle Colonne, Guido, 16
Denmark
founding, 108
Thyra and Gorm, 99–100
Derbent wall (Sasanian Empire), 238
desert castles, 75–6
Deva (Chester), 54
Devil's Dyke (Cambridgeshire), 237
Dickens, Charles, 256
Diocletian (Roman emperor), 85
Disney, Walt, 382
Disneyland (California), 382–4
Dissolution of the Monasteries, 56
diwan (audience chamber)
Hisham's Palace, 78–9
Dolní Věstonice (Czech Republic), 19
Domenico da Cortona (architect), 277
Domenico Ghirlandaio (artist), 280
Domesday Book, 129, 143
Domfront (Norman siege castles), 133
Domus Aurea (Nero's Golden House), 279–80
donations
Hospitallers, 172
Japanese fortresses, 303
Priam's treasure, 34
double-helix staircase (Chambord), 277
Dover, 139–40, 397
Dracula (Stoker), 341–5
Drinkwater, John (poet, playwright), 61
Du Pont, Samuel F. (Union fleet commander), 371
Dublin Castle, 151
Dürer, Albrecht (painter, engraver, scholar), 283–4

Durham Castle (England), 135, 143
Durotriges, Cadbury Castle, 53–4
Dutch colonists in America, 364
dynamite in archaeology, 34
The Dynasts (Hardy), 64
Dionysus I of Syracuse, 261

Eadric the Wild (Saxon nobleman), 140
ear- wax scoops, 51
early human settlements, 19
Eboracum (York), 54
Edessa, 165
Edinburgh Castle, 1–4
Edmund (brother of Edward I), 206
Edo (Japan, becomes Tokyo)
  castles, 306, 309, 311
  period, 307–8
Edward Aetheling, 141
Edward 'Black Prince,' 217
Edward I Longshanks, Hammer of the Scots (king of England), 203
  cost of castle building, 209
  at Glastonbury Abbey, 207
  invades Wales, 205–6
Edward II (king of England), 213
  deposed and tyranny, 214–15
Edward III of England
  tournament at Windsor Castle, 214
Edward IV, King
  Windsor Castle, 218
Edward of Caernarfon (Prince of Wales)
  becomes king Edward II, 213
Edward the Confessor, 127, 135
  descendants resist Norman regime, 141
Egypt, military outposts, 85
Einstein, Albert, 401
Eleanor de Montfort (planned bride of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd), 205
Eleanor of Aquitaine (wife of Henry II), 198
Eleanor of Castile (wife of Edward I), 207, 213
Eleanor of Provence (wife of Henry III), 146
elephants, 48, 239
elites
  British, 41–2
  Corps of Engineers, 370
  European castles, 257
  Hollywood, 381
  Jin dynasty, 225
  Knights Templar, 159, 169
  Kyz Kala (fortified residence), 82
  Normans, 129
  Round Table, 214, 215

samurai, 298
Silk Roads, 76–7
Troy, 24–5
Umayyads, 76–7
Elizabeth I (Queen), 148
tax on gold and silver, 363
Elizabeth II, Queen, 219
Emishi (toad barbarians, Japan), 296
end times (Umayyads), 72
England, mosaics depicting Trojan war, 28
English Channel, as boundary, 41
English garrison, Castle Rock (Edinburgh), 2
Enola Gay (B-29 bomber), 312–13
Eos, mother of Memnon, 28
Epeius (Greek warrior), 14
Epic Cycle (Homeric era texts), 24, 27
Erik VII (king of Denmark), 121–2
Erk Kala (Fortress City), 80–1, 82
Etowah Indian Mounds (Georgia), 360
Eugene Viollet-le-Duc (French architect and author), 346
Eustace of Boulogne (invader of England), 138–40
executions, Tower Hill, 147
Exeter, siege, 140

Falkenstein fortress (Bavaria), 338
Falkland Palace (Scotland), 346
fantasy castles, 316–48
Fatimids, 85–6
wrestled power from Abbasids, 85
faubourg (crusader castle design), 167–8
fear as weapon of conquest, 138
Ferdinand II of Aragon, 93
Ferdinand III of Castile, 91
feudalism
abolished in China, 232
castles, 7
crusader states, 163
Japan, 297, 310, 311
Latin-speaking west, 165
Richard I (Lionheart), 199
fifth crusade, 173–6
Figsbury hillfort, 46
Filarete (Florentine architect), 274
Fimbria (Roman general), 29–30
fire
British troops in Washington, 366
Chester, 205
Danebury, 46
Edo, 309
Forbidden City, 246

Genghis Khan, 229–30
Glastonbury, 57n, 207
Greek, 71–2, 73
Himeji castle, 313
Honnō-Ji, 294
Ingjald, king in Sweden, 103n
Kasagi castle, 298
Kumamoto castle, 311
Kyoto, 294
of London, 136n
Malbork, 185n
Osaka castle, 311
Otto II, Frankish king, 109–10
Saladin I, 161
Siegfried Line, 390
Troy, 14
Vlad the Impaler, 344
Widdrington Castle, 328
William I, 128, 129, 132, 141
first crusade, 163–9
First System (American fortresses), 367
Flint castle (Wales), 206, 207
Florence, defence and starvation, 280–1
Foch, field marshal Ferdinand, 393
Forbidden City (China), 241
Ford, Alexander Hume (writer), 313
Fort Adams (Rhode Island), 368
Fort Amsterdam (America), 364
Fort Beauregard (Georgia, America), 371
Fort Calhoun (became Fort Wool, Virginia), 371
Fort Carillon (French fort, America), 366
Fort Carol (Baltimore harbour), 371
Fort Independence (Boston), 368
Fort Jackson (New Orleans), 376
Fort Macon (North Carolina), 376
Fort McHenry (Baltimore), 366, 367
Fort Monroe (Chesapeake Bay), 368, 371
Fort Philip (New Orleans), 376
Fort Pulaski (Cockspur Island, Savannah), 370–5
surrender, 375
Fort Schoenenbourg (Maginot Line), 394, 396
Fort Sedgwick (Petersburg), 377
Fort Stanwix (America), 366
Fort Sumter (America), 353–8, 376
Fort Ticonderoga (Boston), 366
Fort Walker (Georgia, America), 371
Fort Wood (Second System fort), 368
Fort Wool (Virginia), 371
Forte Sant’Andrea (Venice), 282–3
Fortitude South (D-Day deception operation), 397

Fountain Castle (tale of Yvain), 196
Francesco di Giorgio Martini (artist), 257
Francesco Filelfo (cousin of Leonardo), 272
Francis I (French king), 275–6
Francis, William (guide to Edinburgh Castle), 2–3
Franco-Prussian war, 335
Franks, 30, 75, 109
  extent of power, 109
  Muslim term, 165
Fredegar (chronicler), 30
French invasion of Rome, 269, 271
French Revolution, Rouen, 134
Fróis, Luís (Jesuit writer), 293
Fulcher of Chartres (chronicler), 167
Fulk of Jerusalem (king), 168
Fushimi castle (Japan), 303
Fyrkat (Danish ring fortress), 112, 115

Gallic wars, 235
Gardeny (fortress), 177, 179
Gate of Arms (Alhambra), 92
Gate of Justice (Alhambra), 92
Gatling gun, 376n
Gaul, 41
Gaza castle, 166
Generalife (Grenada), 93
generals fight the last war, 369
Genghis Khan, 226–30
  and Jin, 227
  unites Mongol clans, 227
Genpei War (Japan), 296–7, 299, 301
Geoffrey Martel (count of Anjou), 133
Geoffrey of Monmouth (Welsh writer), 30–1, 194
George IV, King, Windsor, 218
George V, King, Windsor, 219
Gerald of Wales (chronicler), 201n, 204
  on invading Wales, 206
Germany, defaults on reparations payments after WW1, 393
Ghalib ibn Abd al-Rahman (protégé of Abd al-Rahman III), 90
Gifu castle (Japan), 303
Giles of Rome (archbishop of Bourges), 258
Gillette Castle (Connecticut), 380
Gillmore, Captain Quincy Adams (Union commander), 372–6
Gilpin, William (clergyman), 329
Girolamo Siciolante da Sermoneta (artist), 280
Glastonbury, and King Arthur, 57, 207
Gloire (ironclad battleship), 376n
Go-Daigo (Japanese emperor), 301
Godfred (Danish king), 106
von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, 255–6

gold, Troad, 17
Gorm (king of Denmark), 99–100, 120
  aim to unite Denmark, 107
  death, 107
Gormaz (hilltop fortress, Cordoba), 90–1
  main gatehouse, 90–1
Gothic horde (Voltaire), 326
gothic style, 326–8
Goths
  Johnson's *Dictionary*, 326
  rehabilitation, 326–7
  sack of Rome, 266
Granada, 89–94
  civil war, 93
  end of Muslim rule, 94
Grant, Union commander, General Ulysses S., 377
Great Wall of China, 230, 233–4, 240–6, 247–8
Great Wall of Gorgān (Sasanian empire), 238–9
Great Wall of Korea, 240n
great walls, 222–49
Greek fire, 72, 73
Greeks. *see also* Trojan Horse; Trojan War; Troy
  and Britannia, 42
Grimspound, Dartmoor, England
  granite wall, 22
Guiliano de'Medici (Florence), 254n
Guiot de Provins (poet), 193–7
gunboat diplomacy, 308
Gundolf, Bishop of Rochester (supervisor of Tower of London), 137–8
gunpowder, 255
Guy Fawkes, 148
Guy of Jerusalem (king), 168–9
Gyaur Kala (Infidel city), 81

Haakon IV (king of Norway), 144–5
Hadrian
  Germanic frontier, 235–6
  return to Rome, 264–5
Hadrian's Mausoleum (becomes Castel Sant'Angelo), 255, 265
Hadrian's Wall (Britannia), 49, 234–7
  and soldier discipline, 235–6
Haifa, surrenders to mamluks, 175
Hakon of Hlathir (Norwegian earl), 117
Hakuro-jo (Japan), 304
Halicarnassus Mausoleum, 265
Hall of Ambassadors (Alhambra), 92
Hall of the Boat (Alhambra), 92
Hall of the Exchequer (Caen), 134
Hamlet (Shakespeare), 121
Hampstead (London, *Dracula*), 342

Han Chinese, 241
Hannibal, 48
Harald Bluetooth (Viking warrior), 99–122
  and Christianity, 108, 110, 116
  death, 118
  surveys Iceland, 117
  transforms Jelling, 107–8
Harald Klak (Danish chieftain), 107
Harker, Jonathan (*Dracula* protagonist), 341–2
Harlech castle (Wales), 209
Harold Godwinson (King of England)
  battle of Hastings, 127
  son resists Norman Regime, 141
  in Wales, 205
harrying of the north, 143
Hearst Castle (California), 381–2
Hearst, William Randolph, 381
Hébert, Ludovic (French author), 247
Hector (Trojan warrior), 23
Hedeby (trading port on Baltic Sea), 109, 111
Heike clan (Japan), 299
Helen (Queen of Sparta, bride of King Menelaus), 13, 23, 27, 28
  Jewels of, 33
Hembury (Devon), Roman garrison, 54
Henan (Chinese defensive wall), 232
Henry I (count of Champagne), 197
Henry II (king of England), 198
Henry III (king of England), 144–5
  takes refuge in Tower of London, 146
  Windsor Castle, 218
Henry VIII (king of England)
  Round Table, 204n
Hephthalites (White Huns), 239–40
Herculaneum, 60
Hereward the Wake (East Anglian rebel), 140
Hermuthruda (Scottish queen), 120
Herodotus (Greek historian), 27
Herrenchiemsee palace (Bavaria), 338
Hess, Rudolf, 148
Hideyoshi, Toyotomi (Nobunaga's protégé), 302
hillforts, 41–64. *see also* Cadbury Castle hillfort (Somerset); Danebury hillfort (Hampshire); Maiden Castle hillfort (Dorset)
  in Britannia, 42–3
    first appearance, 44–5
  and geology, 44
Himeji fortress (Japan), 302, 304–5, 311, 313
  UNESCO World Heritage Site, 314
Himeyama fortress (Japan), 301–2
  becomes Himeji, 302
Himiko (Japanese ruler/witch), 295

Hindenburg Line, 390
Hiroshima castle (Japan), 313, 314
Hisarlik (Place of Fortresses, location of Troy), 17, 23, 24
  Heinrich Schliemann, 31–6
Hisham (caliph), 77
Hisham's Palace, 78
Hitler, Adolf, 395
Hittites, and Troy, 25
Hod Hill (Dorset)
  ballista, 50
  Roman garrison, 54
  slingshot bullets, 50
Hohenschwangau (castle in Bavarian Alps), 330, 332, 335, 340
Homer, Trojan War, 23
Hongwu (founder of Ming dynasty), 242
Honi soit qui mal y pense, 217
Honnō-Ji (Japanese fortified temple), 294
Honoré Bonet, 259
Hoover, Herbert (US president), 366n
Hopewell culture (Ohio), 360
Horik, 107
Horns of Hattin, Muslims crush crusader army, 162
horses, Troy, 24
hot shot (heated cannon balls), 357
Houghton Hall (Norfolk), 322
House of Lamentations *(Bayt al-Ahzan)*, 157
House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, 219
Hova (ironmonger), 212
Hugo, Victor (novelist), 277–8
Hundred Years War, 216, 217
  Rouen, 134
Hunin castle (road to Damascus), 159
Hunter, Major-General David, 375
Huntingdon Castle, 141
Hurd, Richard (bishop), 327

Ibn Khaldun, 87
Iliad (Homer), 26–7
Imams, 81n
impalements, 344
infidel tax, 84–5
Ingjald (Swedish king), 103
Inigo Jones (architect), 320
Inverary castle (Scotland), 328
Iran, as a walled garden, 239
Iron Age
  Britannia, 50, 52
  Cadbury hillfort, 57
  Danebury, 1
  Edinburgh, 1

hillforts, 38–64
Scandinavia, 103
ironclads (warships), 376
Irving, Henry (actor), 341
Irving, Washington, visits Alhambra, 94
Isabella I, 93
Islam
desert faith, 75
Qur'an and Hadith, 84
main sectarian dispute, 81n
Islamic art, 77–9
islamic castles, 66–95. *see also* muslims
Israelites, storming of Jericho, 21n
Itinerary (Leland), 56–7
Iwan, Dafydd, 220

Jackson, Andrew (US president), 367
Jacob (prophet), 157–8
Jacobite rising, 322n
Jacob's Ford (crusader castle), 158–62, 168
James II (spanish king), 176–7
James rifles (cannon), 373
Jamestown (Virginia), 364
Jane Grey (queen), 148
Jank, Christian (scenic painter), 334, 338
Japan, 286–314
appraisal (Adcock), 310
invasion of Manchuria, 312
Pearl Harbour, 312
rival emperors, 301
Jaques de Molay (Templar Grand Master), 178
Jarrow (Northumbria), 104
Jefferson, Thomas, 60
Jelling (Denmark), 106–7
Jericho (Tel es-Sultan), 20–1
Joshua 6:1-27, 21n
Jerusalem
falls to Muslims, 162
first crusade, 165
First World War, 186
Jewels of Helen, 33
Jin Dynasty (China), 225–30
defences and army, 227–8
Jin Great Wall (China), 225–6, 240
John (king of England), 202
John XVI (antipope), 267
Jones, William (Welsh gentleman), 328
Jordon, Umayyad castles, 85
Judea, jewish revolt, 235
Julius Caesar, 42, 43–4

battle of Pharsalus, 29
and Britannia, 42, 52
I came. . ., 44
on Troy, 28–9
walls as siege tactic, 235
Junger, Ernst (German soldier and writer), 390
Jurchen (China), 225–6

Kairouan (Tunisia), 86
Kannonji fortress (Japan), 291
Kano Eitoki (artist), 292, 293
Karakum Desert, 80
Kasegi castle (Japan), 298
Kenilworth Castle, 146
Kerak castle, 168
Kerak castle (Transjordan), 167
Keynes, John Maynard, 392–3
Khalid al-Walid (key lieutenant of Muhammad), 76
Khanbaliq (was Zhongdu, becomes Beijing), 241
Khirbat al-Mafjar (desert castle) (Hisham's Palace), 78
Khorasan (staging post on Silk Road), 80, 83
Khosrow II (Sasanian ruler), 238n
Khruschev, Nikita (Soviet leader), 248
Khosrow I (Sasanian ruler), 239
King Arthur's Causeway, 60
King Arthur's Well, 60
King James VI and I (of England and Scotland), 148
Kinojo castle (Japan), 296
Knights Hospitaller, 169
Castle of the Kurds, 171
Hattin, 169
Malta, 180–1
Rhodes, 5, 179–80
third crusade, 170
Knights Templar
Hattin, 169
Jacob's Ford, 158–61
lose Krak des Chevaliers, 175
rulebook, 173
starvation and abolition, 177–8
third crusade, 170
Kokura castle (Japan), 312
Konon (Leo III) (proposed Arab client emperor in Constantinople), 73–4
Korea, 230, 240n, 296
köshk (fortified residence), 82
kotenshu (keep, Japan)
Himeji, 304
Krak des Chevaliers, 163, 170–3
surrenders to Mamluks, 175
Syrian civil war, 186

UNESCO World Heritage Site, 186
water management, 172
Kray, Reginald, 148
Kray. Ronald, 148
Kronberg (Castle, setting for Elsinore), 120
ksar (fortified caravan town), 87
Kublai Khan (grandson of Genghis Khan), 241
Kumamoto castle (Japan), 306, 311
Kyeser, Konrad (German military engineer), 259
Kyz Kala (fortified residence), 82

lance, as military weapon, 394–5
Lane-Fox, Augustus Henry (Pitt Rivers), 61
Langley, Lesley (Miss World champion), 150
langues (national groups within Hospitallers), 180
Laparelli, Francesco (Michelangelo's assistant), 279, 284
Larnach Castle (New Zealand), 347–8
Larnach William (New Zealand businessman/politician), 347–8
Last Supper (Leonardo), 274
Late Bronze Age collapse, 25
Launceston Castle (Cornwall), 135
Lawrence, T. E., 184–5
Lawrence, T. E. (Lawrence of Arabia), 61
Laws for Military Households (Japan), 307
Leander, swims Hellespont, 16n
Lee, Robert E., 370–2
"left not one that pisseth against a wall" (Harald Godwinson), 205
Legalism (Chinese philosophy), 231
Leland, John (English scholar), 55–9
Tasked by Henry VIII to audit monasteries, 56
Leland, Thomas (Irish clergyman), 327
Leonardo da Vinci, 257
letter to Lodovico Sforza, 257–8
Sforza castle, 274–5
Letters on Chivalry and Romance (Hurd), 327
Li Zicheng (former postman, China)
captures Beijing, 245
captures Xi'an and forms Shun dynasty, 245
limes arabicus (Roman frontier), 76
Limes Germanicus (Roman frontier), 235
Lincoln, Abraham (US President), 354
Lincoln Castle (England), 141
Linderhof hunting lodge (Bavaria), 338
Lindisfarne (island off Northumbrian coast), 104
Lion Gate (Mycenae, Greece), 22
Lives of the Artists (Vasari), 326
Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (Prince of Wales), 205, 206
killed, 208
Lodovico Sforza (duke of Milan), 257
Lohengrin (Swan knight), 330–1

Lohengrin (Wagner), 332
London, submits to William, 128
longhouses, 103
Longsword, Earl of Salisbury: An Historical Romance (Leland), 327
Lorenzo de'Medici, 254n
Louis XV (French king), 365
Louisbourg (French castle in America), 365
Lucan (Roman poet)
  on Troy, 29
Ludendorff, Erich (german general), 203, 390
Ludwig I (King of Bavaria), 330
Ludwig II (King of Bavaria), 330–41
  becomes unhinged, 339–40
Luitpold (Ludwig II's uncle), 339, 389
Luther, Martin, 283
Lyndhurst mansion (New York), 379

Mabinogion (Welsh writings), 211
Machiavelli, Niccolò, 275, 278
machicolations, 171, 201, 356
Machiu Picchu (Inca site), 361
MacKinder, Halford (English academic and politician), 391–2
Macsen Wledig *(Mabinogion)*, 210–11
Madinat al-Salam (Baghdad), 83
Madison, James (American president), 368
Maginot Line (France), 5–6, 248, 393, 396
Magnus Maximus (Roman emperor), 210–11
Maiden Castle hillfort (Dorset), 46
  attacks, 52
  Mortimer Wheeler, 61–3, 64
  Roman invasion of, 63
  sling ammunition, 50–1
  war cemetery, 51–2
Maiden Castle's Last Secrets (Bell), 62
Malbork (Marienburg, Teutonic castle), 182
  becomes Teutonic headquarters, 182
Mali, 285n
Malta, 152, 163, 181
mamluks, 174–5
Manchus
  Beijing, 246
  establish Qing dynasty, 246
Manhattan Island, 364
Mann, Horace (British envoy), 319
Mao Zedong, 247–8
Marco Polo, 241
Margaret of Wessex (Scottish queen, St Margaret), 1, 3
Margat (castle, Syria), 172
Marghab River (Karakum Desert), 80
Marie, dowager queen (Bavaria), 334

Marrakesh, 87
Mary Godwin (later Shelley), 343
mascarons (Japan), 292
Maslama (Arab general tasked with assault on Byzantium), 72
Master James of St George (mason), 208, 209
Matilda of Flanders (wife of William I), 134
Maximillian (King of Bavaria), 330
Mehmet II (Ottoman sultan), 253–4
Meiji Restoration (Japan), 310, 311
Mein Kampf (Hitler), 395
Mellerstain House (Scotland), 328
Memnon (African king, slaughtered by Achilles), 27–8
Menelaus, 23
Mérida, alcazaba, 89
Merv, oasis and cities, 80, 82, 83
  White Huns, 239
Messalina (Claudius' wife), 47
Michelangelo Buonarroti, 256–7, 280–1
military-spiritual complex, 170
Minamoto clan (Japan), 297, 299
Ming dynasty, 241–6
  last emperor hanged himself, 245
Miravet (castle above river Ebro, Spain), 176–8, 179
mirrors for princes, 260
Mitsuhide, Akechi (Japanese general), 294
Mittelsburg (Teutonic castle), 182–3
Monastir ribat (Ifriqya), 86
Mongols
  destruction of Merv, 83n
  extent of federation, 230
  overcome Jin empire, China, 225–30
Monroe, James (American president), 368–9
Montalembert, Marc René, marquis de, 367–8
Monte Alban (Zapotec settlement), 360–1
Montfichet Tower (Ludgate Hill), 136
Montgisard (Levant), 159
Monty Python's Life of Brian, 86n
Monzón (fortress), 177, 178, 179
Moray, earl of. *see* Randolf, Thomas (earl of Moray)
Morgan, Julia (architect), 381
Morocco, 87
Mortimer, Roger (English baron), 205
motte-and-bailey castle, 132
Mount Stuart House (Isle of Bute), 346
Mozi (Chinese philosopher), 231
Mozi (Chinese text, how to defend a city), 231
Mu'awiyah I (caliph of Damascus), 69n, 76
Muhammad (prophet)
  armies push into Sasanian empire, 240
  first Islamic state, 70

revelation of God's word, 69–70, 75
Muhammad I ibn al-Ahmar (Nasrid ruler of Granada), 91
Muhammad II (Alhambra), 92
Muhammad V (Alhambra), 92–3
Muhammad XII (Boabdil), 94, 95
captured and ransomed back, 93
The Muqaddimah (Ibn Khaldun), 68
Muqali (Genghis' lieutenant), 228
muqarnas vaults (Alhambra), 93
mushakakushi (samurai hiding place), 304
Muslims
failed assaults on Constantinople, 71–4, 77
faith, 84
five tenets of Islam, 92
at Jacob's Ford, 159
might of Allah, 92–3
military conquests, 70–1, 240
willingness to learn, 75, 88
Mycenae, 22–3
Lion Gate, 35
Schlieman, 22–3

Nagoya castle (Japan), 306, 309, 311, 312, 314
Napoleon Bonaparte
seizes Malta, 181
and Venice, 282
Napoleon III, 61
Naryn-Kala fortress (Sasanian Empire), 238
Nero (Roman tyrant), 254
Neuschwanstein castle (Bavaria), 330, 335–41, 345
New Wardour Castle (Wiltshire), 328
New York, 364
Nicholas III (Orsini, pope), 267
Nijō castle (Japan), 306
Nobunaga, Oda (Japanese Warlord), 289–95, 301, 302, 314
death, 294
orders destruction of hundreds of castles, 294
Nonnebakken (Danish ring fortress), 112
Norimura, Akamatsu (military governor, Japan), 301
Norman castles, 124–52
family homes, 131
plan, 167
purpose, 130
wooden castle outside London, 128 (*see also* Tower of London)
Norman conquest, 129
Norman politics, 132
north Africa, Fatimid dynasty, 85
North Anatolian fault line, and Troy, 25
North Carolina, 363
Norwich Castle (England), 135

Nottingham Castle, 141
Naozane (Minamoto samurai), 299
nuclear weapons, 397–9
Nymphenburg (Bavarian palace), 330

Odysseus (Greek warrior), 14–15
Offa's Dyke, 204–5, 237
Ögödei (son of Genghis Khan), 230
Okayama castle (Japan), 312
olive oil, 270
Ollantaytambo (Inca site), 361
Olmstead, Major Charles (commander, Fort Pulaski), 371–2
On the Rotation of Cannonballs (Montalembert), 368n
One O'Clock Gun, Edinburgh, 4
Onojo castle (Japan), 296
oppida (hillforts), 43
ordensburgen (Teutonic fortifications), 182
order of Calatrava, and Templar castles, 179
Order of Christ (Portugal), 179
Order of Montesa, 179
order of Santiago, and Templar castles, 179
Order of the Bath, 146
Order of the Garter, 216–17, 220
Orderic Vitalis (chronicler), 142, 143
Ordinance for the Keeping and Disposal of the Country's Castles (Japan), 311
Ordovices, 49
Orsini family (Rome), 267
Osaka castle (Japan), 305, 306, 311, 314
Otranto castle (Italy), 324
Otto II (Frankish king), 109–10
Oxford Castle, 142

Paine, James (architect), 329
Palace of the Lions (Alhambra), 93
Palacio de Cortes, 362
palladian (Italian Renaissance style), 329
palisades (America), 360
Palmanova (Venetian Republic), 284–5
Palmyra, 77
Pantheon (Pome), 237
Paris (Trojan Warrior, King Priam's son)
  and Helen, 23
Paris, Siege joined by Rollo, 130
Parmigianino (painter), 281
Parrott rifles (cannon), 373
Passetto di Borgo (escape tunnel, Rome), 268, 269
Paul III (pope), 271
Pax Mongolica, 241
Pearl Harbour, 312, 369
Peasants' Revolt, 147
Pembroke Castle, 151

Poenari castle (Transylvania), 344–5
Percy, Thomas (author), 328
Pergamon, falls to Maslama's army, 73
Perino del Vaga (painter), 271
Perpendicular Fortifications (Montalembert), 367n
Perry, Matthew (Commodore), 308
Persia, and Baghdad, 84
perversity of men, 262
Peter of Savoy (Edward I's cousin), 208
Petersburg (Virginia)
  trench warfare, 377
Pevensey Castle (England), 135
Pharaohs
  Amenhotep III, 27–8
  Djoser, 21
Philip II Augustus (French king), 199, 201, 202
Philip III (French king), 258
Philip IV (French king)
  accusations against Templars, 177
Philosophical Dictionary (Voltaire), 247
Pickering Castle, 143
Pickersgill, Mary (seamstress of star spangled banner), 366
picturesque style, 329
Pierleoni family (Rome), 267
Pinturicchio (The Little Painter), 270–1, 280
Pitt Rivers, Augustus, 61
Pius IV (pope), 279
plague. *see* black death
Plaid Cymru, 220
Plautius, Aulus (Roman general commanding invasion of Britannia), 47–8
polar bears, 144–5
Polidori, John William *(Vampyre)*, 343
Polyxena (Priam's daughter), sacrifice by Greek captors, 27
Pompeii, 60
  images from Troy, 28
Pons Aelius (Rome), 265
  becomes Pons Sant'Angelo, 269
Ponte Sisto (bridge in Rome), 253
Pontefract Castle, 143
Pope Gregory X, 208
popes, and secular politics, 267–8
portcullis, 196, 212, 259
Portugal, 163
Poverty Point earthworks (Louisiana), 359
Priam, king of Troy, 14
Priam's Treasure, 34
Princes in the Tower, 148
Princes of Wales, 205, 213, 219–20
Procopius (chronicler), 266
pyramids (Egypt), 247, 265

as building material, 85
Pytheas (Greek explorer), on Thule, 103

Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (desert fortress), 77, 78
Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (desert fortress), 77–8
Qasr Amra (desert fortress), 79
Qin Long Wall, 233–4
Qin Shi Huang (China's first emperor), 232
mausoleum, 233
Qing dynasty (China), 246, 308
Quarley hillfort, 46
Queen's House, Greenwich, 320

Rahab (collaborator of Israelites), 21n
Raleigh, Sir Walter, 363
Lost Colony, 364
Raleigh, Walter, 148
Ran (Akira Kurosawa, film), 314
Randolf, Thomas (earl of Moray), assault on Castle Rock, 1–4
Ranulf Flambard (bishop of Durham), 138, 147–8
Raphael (artist), 279
Rashidun (Rightly Guided caliphs), 69n
Ravengar (William's henchman), 128
Ravning (Jutland), 111
Raymond IV of Saint-Gilles (crusader), 166
Raymond of Aguilers (chronicler), 165
Raymond of Guardia (acting Knights Templar master in Aragon), 176
Reagan, Ronald, 382
Reconquista, 176
Red Snake (Great Wall of Gorgān), 238–9
Reisen (yearly Teutonic campaigns), 182
renaissance castles, 250–85
revolt of the Red Turbans (China), 241
Revolutionary War (North America), 365
Rhodes, 163
Rhuddlan castle (Wales), 206, 207, 208
ribats (small borderland fortresses), 86–7
Richard I (Lionheart), 169, 187–8
ballad written as prisoner, 198–9
birth and training, 198
Chateau Gaillard, 197–202
death, 202
massacre of Muslims, 188
Richard II (king of England), 147
Richborough, 47
Richmond Castle, 143
Richthofen Castle (Colorado), 380
Riedel, Eduard (architect), 334
rifled cannon, 373–5
Ring cycle (Wagner), 332
Roanoke Island (North Carolina), 363

Rocca Sanvitale (near Parma), 281
Rochester Castle, 146
Rollo (Viking warlord), 130
Roman castles, 167
Romans
  deaths of emperors, 265–6
  decorations, 77–8
  military training, 43
  walls, 71
    London, 135–6
Rome
  Servian walls, 43
Romorantin (Leonardo castle), 276
ronin (reduced status warriors, Japan), 307
Rouen (city of the Danes), 131
Round Table (Winchester Castle), 204
Round Table societies, 214–16
royal mint, 147
runestones
  Harald Bluetooth, 108
  King Gorm, 107
Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria, 389–91, 392
Ruthin castle (Wales), 209

Sacsayhuamán,(Inca site), 361
Saladin, 158, 168
samurai, 297–300
  castles, 286–314
  wives and children, 306
San Juan de Ulua fort (Cortéz fort in Mexico), 361
sanhetu (lime-based concrete), 244
Sanmicheli, Michele, 281–2, 284
Santa Maria (Columbus' ship), 359
Santa Maria de Popolo (church in Rome), 254
Saratoga campaign, 366
Sasanian dynasty, 238n
Saxo Grammaticus (wrote history of Danish people), 119, 120
Saxon churches, 129
Saxon Shore, 237
Sayf Allah (Khalid al-Walid), 76
Scamander, river, 17
Scandinavia, 102n
  adventurers, 105
  arrival of humans, 102
  farming and fishing, 103
  integration, 108
  Iron Age, 103
  isolation, 103
  longhouses, 103
  Norse myths, 31

religions, 101, 103, 104
trade, 102
uniting, 100n
Schliemann, Heinrich, 31–6, 60
Schliemann, Sophia, 32–3, 34
Schloss Berg (Bavaria), 340
Second System (American fortresses), 367
Secotan tribe (North Carolina), 363
Segontium (Roman Caernarfon), 210
Seppuku (ritual disembowelling), 294
seven heavens (Islamic script), 92–3
Sforza castle, 274
Sforza dynasty (Leonardo), 274
Sforza, Ludovico (duke of Milan), 272–4
Shah Murad, 83n
Shandong (Chinese defensive wall), 232
Shang Yang (Legalistic philosopher), 232
Sherman, Brigadier-General Thomas W., 373
Sherman, General William Tecumseh, 375
Shia Muslims, 81n
shields
Constantinople, 86
Hisarlik, 32
Roman 'tortoise,' 48
Trelleborg, 114
Shimao (Chinese walled city), 231–2
Shirasagi-jo *(Japan)*, 304
shogun (Japan), 297
Sicily, fusion of Arab and Norman styles, 87, 152
Sidon, 165
Siegfried von Feuchtwangen (Teutonic grand master), 182
Silk Roads, 76
Simoeis, river, 17
Simon de Montfort, 146
Sinon (Greek liar), 13–14
Sistine Chapel, 256
Sixtus IV (pope), 268
Sixtus IV (Pope), 253–4
Sky Fortress (Ukrainian acoustic detection system), 398–9
slaves
Christians in Damascus, 162
Horns of Hattin, 169
Mamluks, 174
negro servants, 355
trading castles, Africa, 9
Viking traders, 100, 105
Sleeping Beauty Castle (Disneyland), 383
sling (weapon used by Britons), 50
Cadbury Hill, 60
Hod Hill, 50

Maiden Castle, 50, 62
Snow White castle (Disneyland Florida and Tokyo), 383
Sønderborg (Danish castle), 120
Song dynasty, 240
Sousse ribat, 86
Southwold Earthworks (Ontario), 360
Spain, 163
Spain (North Carolina), 363
Spice Islands, 362
Spotsylvania, Virginia
trench warfare, 377
Sprogø (Danish castle), 120
St Euphemia, 174
St Georges d'Espéranche castle (Savoy), 208, 211
St Margaret's Chapel (Edinburgh), 3
St Peter ad Vincula (chapel in Tower of London), 146
Stanegate (Roman fortified boundary in Britannia), 49
star-shaped artillery fort, 279
Star Spangle Banner (US national anthem), 366
Statue of Liberty, 368
statues
Amenhotep III, 27–8
Baghdad, 83–4
Caernarfon, 212
Hadrian's Mausoleum, 265, 266, 269, 270
Hisham's Palace, 77–8
Rhodes, 179–80
Roman empire, 77–8
Troy, 30
Statute of Rhuddlan, 208, 209
Sthenelus (Greek warrior), 14
Still Digging (Wheeler), 63
Stoker, Bram (touring manager and author), 341
stone age towns, 20
Stow, John (on Camelot), 59
Strawberry Hill, 320–2
Stukeley, William (antiquarian), 60
sublime (style), 327, 329
Sulayman ibn al-Malik (Arab caliph), 69–74
Suleiman the Magnificent
captures Rhodes, 180
Sultan Kala (Royal City), 81, 82
Sunni Muslims, 81n
Sweyn (Harald Bluetooth's son), 117–18
Syria, 186
civil war, 186
mosaics depicting Trojan war, 28

Tacitus (Roman historian), 49
on Suiones, 103–4

Taira fortress (Japan), 299
Takamatsu castle (Japan), 306
The Tale of the Heike (Japanese chronicle), 299–300
Tamonyama Castle (Japan), 293
Tanabe castle (Japan), 303
Tannhauser (Wagner), 332
Taoism (Chinese philosophy), 231
tax
  Elizabeth I, 363
  European castles, 257
  infidel tax, 84
  Japan, 297, 310
  Ming state, 245
  ring fortresses, 115
Temple of Roma (Rome), 265
Temple of Venus (Rome), 265
Temüjin (Genghis Khan). *see* Genghis Khan
Tenochtitlan (Aztec city), 361, 362
tenshu (keep, Japan)
  Azuchi, 290
  Edo, 306, 309
  Himeji, 302, 304–5
Terrace of the Angel (Rome), 255
Terracotta Army, 233
Terricus (Templar), 169
Teutonic Knights, 170, 181–2
Texarus regis francie (da Vigevano), 259
That a flower (Japanese poem), 314
The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today (Twain, Warner), 378
Theodosian Walls (Constantinople), 70–1, 212
  first crusade, 164
Theodosius III, 73
Thessandrus (Greek warrior), 14
Thiel, Peter (Silicon Valley tycoon), 399
third crusade, 169–73, 198
Third System fortresses, United States, 5, 355, 367, 368, 370, 376, 378
  impact of rifled cannon, 376
Thomas Cromwell, 148
Thomas More, 148
throne room, Qasr Amra, 79
Thucydides (Greek historian), 27
Thule, 103
Thyra (queen of Denmark), 99–100, 120
  death, 107
Tiryns (Greece)
  Schlieman, 35
Tokugawa Ieyasu (Shogun, Japan), 304
  family, 307
Tokyo (formerly Edo, Japan), 312
Toledo, alcazaba, 89

Tomar (Templar headquarters in Portugal), 179
Torre Massimiliano (Venice), 283
tortoise, 48n
torture
  Castel Sant'Angelo, 280
  Guy Fawkes, 148
  Jerusalem, 165
  Nobunaga, 291
  Templars, 178
Totten, General Joseph G., 370
Tower House (London), 347
Tower of London, 135–8
  armoury and store, 147
  extension, 145–6
  royal menagerie, 145, 147
Transjordan, 168
Transylvanian castle *(Dracula)*, 342
Treaty of Ghent (US/Canada border), 367
Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, 131
Trelleborg (Danish ring fort), 113, 115, 118
trench warfare, 370, 377
Tripoli, 165–6
  falls to Mamluks, 175
Tripoli–Homs trade road, 172
Tristan und Isolde (Wagner), 332
Troad (region of Anatolia, location of Troy), 16–18
  economic slump, 29
Troilus and Criseyde (Chaucer), 16
Trojan Horse, 13, 23
Trojan War, 13–16, 22, 23
  in art, 31
trompe-l'oeil
  Sforza Castle, 235
  Strawberry Hill, 322
Troy, 13–36
  alternative names, 17
  attack by Fimbria, 29–30
  descendants of, 30–1
  end of, 25–6
  first settlers, 17–18
  fortifications, 18–19
  Heinrich Schliemann and treasure trove, 31–6, 60
  location, 16–17
  population, 25
  prestigious buildings, 24
  Roman buildings, 30
  trade and hospitality, 17–18, 25
  Troy I, 18–19
  Troy II, 34
  Troy VI, 27

Troy Museum (Hisarlik)
  Troy artefacts, 27
A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork (Hardy), 63–4
Tulum (Mayan city), 361
Tunisia, 86
Twain, Mark (author), 378
Tybee Island (Union position), 371–2
Tyre, 165

Uccialì, 279
Ulrich von Jungingen (Teutonic grand master), 183
Umar ibn al-Aziz (caliph), 74
Umayyads, 69–89
  overthrown by Abbasids, 79
Urban II, Pope, 163, 176
USA southern border, 249
Utopia (More), 284

Valdemar I (Danish king), 119–20
Valetta, 181, 279
valiant men, 202
Valignano, Alessandro (Italian Jesuit), 289
vampires, 341–3
Vampyre (Polidori), 343
Vanderbilt, Cornelius, 378
Various Lessons on the Fortification of Cities, Castles, and Localities (Dürer), 283–4
Vasari, Giorgio (painter), 326
Vatican palace (Rome), 268
Vauban forts, 285n
Venice
  and Napoleon Bonaparte, 282
  Teutonic headquarters, 182
Verona, 282
Versailles
  conference following Franco-Prussian war, 335
  Treaty following First World War, 335, 395
Versailles palace (France), 334
Vespasian (senior commander in invasion of Britannia and future emperor), 49
Vexin (borderland in France), 199
Via Maris, 157, 158
Viking ring fortresses, 96–122
  description, 101
  locations, 101
Vikings
  age, 103–5
  besiege Constantinople, 105
  raid Jarrow, 104
  raid Lindisfarne, 104
  raid widely, burn Paris and London, 104–5
  river Loire, 105
  ships, 105

Villa de Navidad fort (Haiti), 359
Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (Cortéz town in Mexico), 361
Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène (architect), 334
Virginia, 363–4
Vita Anskarii (Danish history), 106–7
Vivos (supplier of underground bunkers), 399
Vlad III (prince of Wallachia, the impaler), 344
vodka (consumed by author), 5
von Richthofen, Manfred (Red Baron), 380
von Verschaffelt, Peter Anton (Flemish sculptor), 279
Vorderhohenschwangau castle (Bavaria), 333
Vorderhohenschwangau castle (Bavaria), 333
Vordingborg (Danish castle), 119

Wa (Japanese kingdom ruled by a witch), 295
Wagner, Richard, 331
Wakamatsu castle (Japan), 311
Wakayama castle (Japan), 306, 312
Walpole, Horace (English aristocrat), 319–28, 330, 337, 341, 345, 347.348
Walpole, Sir Robert (British prime minister), 319
Wan Sitong (Chinese historian), 247
Wansdyke (between Wiltshire and Somerset), 237
Wanyan Chandu, 227
war cemetery
  Maiden Castle, 51–3
  Malbork, 184n
  Trelleborg, 115–16, 118
Wardour Castle (English Civil War), 329
warfare, conduct of, 257–64
  Leonardo, 273–4
Warner, Charles Dudley (author), 378
Warring States period (China), 231
  victory by Qin kingdom, 232–3
Wartburg castle (Thuringia), 334
Warwick Castle, 141
Washington, George, 366
water, 270
Watson Brake (Louisiana earthworks), 359
Wedderburn Castle (Scotland), 328
Wends (enemies of Denmark), 119
West Point, 368
  fortress system (America), 366
Western Zhou (China), 226
Wheeler, Mortimer, 51
  Maiden Castle, 51, 61–3
Whitby (Yorkshire, *Dracula*), 342, 344
White Huns, 239–40
Widdrington Castle (Northumberland), 328
Wigfall, Colonel Louis (Confederate negotiator), 357
Wild Fox Ridge (China), 226

William, Archbishop of Tyre, 166
William of Jumièges (chronicler), 132
William of Malmesbury, 143
William of Newburgh (chronicler), 201
William, Prince of Wales, 220
William the Breton (chronicler)
  on Château de Gaillard, 200
William the Conqueror, 127–46
  birth, 131
  bleeds country dry, 144
  coronation, 127–8
  death, 144
  raids church wealth, 143
  suppression of Saxon England, 135–44
Willson, Millicent (dancer), 381
Winchester Castle, 142
Windridge Farm (Britannia)
  slingshot bullets, 50
Windsor Castle, 146, 214–17, 220
women
  chivalry, 194
  Norman, 141–2
Woodstock (site of royal menagerie), 145
World War 1, 389–91
  Allenby, Edmund (British general), 185–6
  architectural styles following, 347
  Château de Coucy, 203
  Palmanova, 284–5
  trench warfare, 377–8
World War II, 395–8
  Berlin Wall, 248–9
  Caen, 134
  Hastings, 149
  Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 314
  Japan, 312–13
  Malbork, 183
  Mortimer Wheeler, 62–3
  Troy treasure captured by Soviet troops, 34

Xi Jinping (Chinese President), 248
Xi’an (China), 245

Yamashiro (mountain castle), 298, 302
Yamato emperors (Japan), 296–7
Yangtze River valley (China), 22
Yankee states, 356
Yazdegerd (last Sasanian ruler), 240
Yayoi period (Japan), 296
Yen (Chinese defensive wall), 232
Yonghe (Hongwu’s successor), 242
You Only Live Twice (James Bond film), 314

Yuan dynasty (Mongols), 241
Yusuf I (Alhambra), 92, 93
  death, 93
Yvain (Welsh prince, Knight of the Lion), 194–7

Zaragoza, alcazaba, 89
Zealand (Danish ring fortress), 112
Zhang Guolao (Taoist immortal), 292
Zhongdu (Beijing), 226, 227
  falls, 229
  renamed Khanbaliq or Dadu by Mongols, 241
Zhu Yuanzhang (founder of Ming dynasty), 241
  becomes Hongwu, 242
Zirids (Berber dynasty), 91
Zuckerberg, Mark (founder of Meta), 399



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