Conquest From Behind These Walls: The Role of

Castles and Fortified Towns in the Anglo-Norman Occupation of Wales

by

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Abstract: From the Norman Conquest to the reign of King Edward I, the Anglo-Norman marcher lords carried out a gradual and improvised conquest of the Welsh princedoms through the usage of castles and fortifications. This paper will seek to uncover the military, political, and cultural significance of these castles, examining not only how they were used, but also what they meant to the people of the Welsh marches. In order to achieve this, this paper will draw upon a combination of historical chronicles and literary sources dating from the period. Ultimately, this paper will seek to prove that the castles used by the marcher lords to conquer and control territory had a huge impact on the military, political, and cultural aspects of life in the Welsh marches during the Anglo-Norman conquest.

In the year 1066 AD, strange men speaking a strange tongue appeared on the border of Wales. The arrival of these Normans initially seemed like good news for the Welsh princes. They had eliminated the Saxon threat that had plagued the Welsh for hundreds of years. Iestyn, king of Glamorgan (in southern Wales), believed they could help him solve yet another problem. Rhys ap Tewdwr, who was crowned king of Deheubarth (which included most of southwestern Wales and directly bordered Glamorgan) in 1077, had provoked Iestyn's wrath. Iestyn quickly rallied the support of two neighboring princes, along with a thousand men apiece. However, Iestyn quickly realized that he needed still more men to challenge his powerful neighbor, and for that he turned to a Norman mercenary, Sir Robert Fitzhamon, who provided him with "twelve knights, twenty-four esquires, and three thousand men."[1] With the help of these extra men, Iestyn and his Welsh allies handed Rhys a bitter defeat.

Not long after Fitzhamon's contract expired and he returned to England, Iestyn began to quarrel with his allies. Clearly impressed by Fitzhamon and his men, Iestyn's former allies sought out the mercenary for help in their dispute. In these negotiations, they made a fatal error: they successfully persuaded him not only of the ease of capturing Glamorgan, but also of the fertility and value of the land itself. Fitzhamon and his men were all too eager to return after hearing these claims, and battle soon broke out with Iestyn near Cardiff. In this battle, however, Fitzhamon arranged his forces so as to ensure that his Welsh allies would take the brunt of the casualties. Once Iestyn was defeated and the dust of battle cleared, the Welshmen came to the realization that

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[1] Taliesin Williams, trans., *Iolo Manuscripts. A Selection of Ancient Welsh Manuscripts, in Proposed as Materials for a New History of Wales,* comp. by Iolo Morganwg (Llandovery: W. Rees; Sold by Longman and Co., London, 1848*),* 377-378.

Fitzhamon now possessed the largest force in all of Glamorgan, and they were forced to concede the territory to him.[2] Thus the Normans gained a crucial foothold in South Wales and one of the first marcher lordships on Welsh soil was established.[3] Although Fitzhamon and his allies celebrated a great victory over a foe that day, the seeds had been planted for the fall of Wales itself.

The collapse of Welsh sovereignty was far from a foregone conclusion, though, and it would take several centuries before Wales finally lost its political autonomy. Although the conquest began shortly after the Norman invasion of England, it was not until the end of the thirteenth century, during the reign of King Edward I, that the Anglo-Normans finally suppressed the last major Welsh revolt, marking the end of Welsh independence. Indeed, William the Conqueror soon realized that he could not conquer the politically fractious and ruggedly mountainous Welsh countryside as he had England. The dense forests and rough terrain rendered his cavalry ineffectual, and any large army attempting to force a passage through would be slowed to a crawl. By the time that Fitzhamon had found great fortune in the capture of Glamorgan, the King of England had already dismissed all thoughts of a centralized invasion to bring his Welsh neighbors to heel. With Fitzhamon's surprising triumph, though, the Anglo-Normans stumbled across what would ultimately prove to be an effective and decisive means of not only defending this perilous border, but also of gradually expanding Anglo-Norman territory further into Wales. To this end, the King William created a

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[2] *Iolo Manuscripts*, 380.

[3] For an in-depth examination of the conquest of Glamorgan and the legends associated with it, See Alan Ralph Griffiths, "The Norman Conquest and the Twelve Knights of Glamorgan," in *Conquerors and Conquered in Medieval Wales* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 19-29.

special class of nobility, replete with unique rights and privileges: the marcher lords.

Together, in their efforts to seize and control territory in Wales, the marcher lords and

the King of England constructed an elaborate system of permanent fortifications in

order to both secure their existing lands from attacks and to project influence into new

and contested regions. These fortifications rapidly came to dominate the histories and

contemporary literature, where their true significance is made clear. In addition to

their strategic importance, the castles in the Welsh marches took on immense political

and cultural significance for the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh alike, and formed an

integral part of the shared political, military, and cultural experience caused the

conquest of Wales.[4]

Evidence of the massive significance of castles in the Welsh marches is available

from a wide variety of sources. Monks and educated men from both sides of the conflict

wrote extensive historical chronicles that sought to record the major political and

military events of the period, in which castles feature quite prominently. Many of these

chronicles were written several centuries after the events they sought to record, but

even these were typically based on earlier chronicles and surviving documents from

those who lived more or less contemporaneously with the events they recorded. Other

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[4] The last few decades have seen a surge in excellent scholarship on the Welsh marches. For any research on medieval Wales and the Marcher Lords, see R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change: Wales 1063-1415* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) or R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For accounts focused primarily on the Welsh experience during the period, see Roger Turvey, *The Welsh Princes: The Native Rulers of Wales, 1063-1283* (London: Longman, 2002), A. D. Carr, *Medieval Wales* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), and J. E. Lloyd's *A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest,* vol. 2 (London: Longmans, 1939). For an examination of the change in dynamic brought around by the Norman conquest of England, see K. L. Maund, *Ireland, Wales, and England in the Eleventh Century* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991).

forms of literature are important from the period provide insight, as well. The Anglo-Norman conquest and the castles that were used in it heavily influenced the fictional stories of the period, which reveal much about the cultural significance of the conflict. Other surviving evidence is somewhat more tangible than these written accounts, but proves just as useful. Many castles from the period survive either intact or in ruins, which have been the topic of a number of valuable archaeological surveys. Combined, these various sources provide a fairly solid picture of the castles and the marches they ruled, as well as the marcher lords who controlled them.

The term "marcher lord" itself refers to a specific group of Anglo-Norman nobles, though the general concept behind it was fairly widespread, and parallels existed in most European frontier regions. In medieval England, "march" was simply another word used to describe a border region, though the term came to define specifically the Welsh borderlands, after the creation of the marcher lords. Indeed, "marcher lord" refers exclusively to an Anglo-Norman noble with holdings in Wales, although such a lord typically also had land in England, Ireland, or even France. On a basic level, the marcher lords were effectively border guards specifically tasked with guarding the western edge of England, a role commonly filled in border regions all across Europe. In practice, however, the marcher lords proved to be quite unusual compared to their counterparts, due in large part to the instability both of the Welsh border and of post-Conquest England.

This history of this unique institution in Anglo-Norman Britain was heavily shaped by the actions of the first few men to hold the title. The earliest of these marcher lords was William fitz Osbern, one of William the Conqueror's most trusted

men, who was granted control over the border county of Herefordshire possibly as

early as 1067, though two other major earldoms were established soon after in

Cheshire and Shropshire.[5] In light of the risky and expensive nature of maintaining

these borderlands, King William provided a few added privileges to serve not only as

compensation, but also as an incentive to encourage the more militaristic lords to take

up lands on the frontier. These privileges were substantial indeed; A. D. Carr argues

that the sum of these powers amounted to traditional Welsh kingship for any Anglo-

Norman lord who could capture a territory in Wales.[6] That meant that a marcher lord's

lands were held in his own authority, not in fealty to the Crown, which provided a level

of power and security much greater than that accorded to land elsewhere in England.

Far more attractive than even that concession, however, were the freedoms associated

with it. The marcher lords also held the unrestricted right to castle construction in

their domains, as well as the authority to freely wage war with their neighbors,

ensuring that they could both expand their lands and consolidate their holdings without

restriction or limitation from the King of England.[7] William fitz Osbern and his fellow

marcher lords rapidly exploited these powers to increase their territories and

strengthen their positions, becoming so firmly entrenched that despite repeated

conflicts with the King of England, the unique privileges associated with the marches

lasted until the sixteenth century, centuries after the pacification of Wales.

From the earliest days of the marcher lords, the castle was arguably the most

important tool at the Anglo-Normans' disposal for projecting influence and securing

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[5] R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change: Wales 1063-1415* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 27-28.
[6] A. D. Carr, *Medieval Wales* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 36-37.
[7] Ibid., 37-38.

territory. Although such fortifications existed in England and Wales prior to the

Norman Conquest, they were relatively few in number and were only rarely, if ever,

constructed of stone. In Herefordshire, for example, the Domesday Book records seven

castles as of 1086, in addition to the city walls of Hereford itself.[8] Of these seven,

however, only three of them seem to have predated the Norman Conquest, though even

these were not without connections to the Normans. Ewyas Harold Castle in

Herefordshire was actually in ruins at the time of the Conquest and rebuilt in a Norman

style in the years immediately following the success at Hastings.[9] Another castle in the

region, Richard's Castle, was actually built by a Norman in the service of Edward the

Confessor more than a decade prior to the Conquest.[10] The third castle, Hanley Castle,

seems to have existed at the time of the Domesday Book, but it is best known for its

association with King John, who seems to have either renovated or replaced the

structure sometime in the early years of the thirteenth century.[11] With these three

exceptions, most of the other castles in the region are directly attributable to William

fitz Osbern and his men, though the marcher lords seem to have been far from finished

building castles at the time of the Domesday survey. According to R. Allen Brown's self-

admittedly incomplete list of castles across England, there were at least sixteen castles

in the county by the year 1154.[12] This rapid construction of fortifications was common

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[8] Ann Williams and G. H. Martin, eds., *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 493-518.

[9] George Thomas Clark, *Mediæval Military Architecture in England* (London: Wyman, 1884), 42.

[10] Ibid., 401.

[11] Emily M. Lawson, *The Nation in the Parish, Or, Records of Upton-on-Severn: With a Supplemental Chapter on the Castle of Hanley* (London: Houghton & Gunn, 1884), 10-11.

[12] R. Allen Brown, "A List of Castles, 1154-1216," in *Castles, Conquest and Charters: Collected Papers* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989), 102-127

throughout the Welsh marches, as the marcher lords exploited their unique privileges to bolster their somewhat delicate and conflict-ridden positions.

By comparison, the surveyors compiling the Domesday Book only identified a single castle in the border county of Cheshire, outside of Chester Castle itself, though that did not remain the case for long.[13] While the Domesday Book has something of a reputation for omitting reference to churches and castles, it seems unlikely that more than a handful of pre-Conquest castles in Cheshire would have been missed by the survey. Indeed, E. S. Armitage's remarkable investigation of late eleventh century fortifications only adds a single castle to the list for this county, though she does discover many others across the Kingdom of England.[14] By 1154, however, according to Brown's survey of Cheshire, the county contained at least five castles, most of which were concentrated near the Welsh border.[15] These castles were used to anchor a much shorter—and more stable—border than in either of the other early major marcher Earldoms that William I created. As such, though there were markedly fewer castles in this province than in Herefordshire, there were still enough produced to comprise a heavily fortified border region.

A similar survey of Shropshire's castles turns up somewhat more dramatic results, more closely resembling that of the county of Herefordshire on its southern border than its northern neighbor, Cheshire. Based on a composite of both the Domesday Book and Armitage's survey, Shropshire appears to have had a total of five

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[13] Williams, *Domesday Book*, 716-740.
[14] E. S. Armitage, *The Early Norman Castles of the British Isles* (London, 1912), 35. Armitage draws upon other contemporary documents to find castles missed in the Domesday Book.
[15] Brown, "List of Castles," 102-127.

castles by the end of the eleventh century, including at least two that were constructed

by the Normans post-Conquest.[16] These castles, too, were primarily intended to shore

up the western border, though this more extensive and volatile border region evidently

required even more extensive fortification; according to Brown's survey of castles,

Shropshire had at least seventeen active castles by the year 1154.[17] This dramatic

increase can largely be attributed to efforts of the marcher lords of this county to

consolidate and defend their holdings, though the Crown itself held and maintained

several of these castles. Indeed, the abundance of castles seen in Shropshire is largely

emblematic of the larger occupation of the marches and the heavily militaristic

approach of the marcher lords to territorial expansion and control.

It is worth noting that the extensive construction of fortifications was a common

project between the marcher lords and the Crown all along the Welsh border, not just in

Shropshire. King William built and probably controlled at least some of the castles in

each marcher county, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes the somewhat grandiose and

heavily exaggerated claim that "Wales was in his power, and he built castles there, and

he entirely controlled that race."[18] Despite that assertion, however, as R. R. Davies

points out in *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change,* the Marcher Lords were highly active in

castle construction, and were responsible for most of the castle construction and

maintenance in the region. According to Davies, under William fitz Osborn, the earl of

Hereford from around 1067 to 1071, "a line of castles had been built from Wigmore in

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[16] Williams, *Domesday Book*, 688-714, and Armitage, *Early Norman Castles*, 179, 217.

[17] Brown, "List of Castles," 102-127. In addition to the incomplete nature of any such list, Brown identifies at least one of the castles included in the Domesday Book account as belonging to a different county.

[18] Dorothy Whitelock and David Douglas, eds*., The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962)*,* 164.

the north to Chepstow in the south."[19] These castles generally were entirely funded and

maintained by the marcher lords and whichever vassals they granted ownership of

them to, while the king himself provided for the royal castles. The royal presence in the

border counties seems to be something of a contradiction, given that the marches were

technically sovereign in their own right, and indeed that problem led to frequent

conflict between the marcher lords and the Crown. Though the royal castles were

intended at least partially to serve as a check on the unruly and occasionally treasonous

marcher lords, they also comprised a vital portion of the line of fortifications designed

to keep the Welsh at bay.

Of the Anglo-Norman castles built post-Conquest (or pre-Conquest, in the

unusual case of Richard's Castle), nearly all display the classic motte and bailey design

that the Normans brought with them from France. This particular construction enabled

the Normans to produce reasonably strong castles without resorting to stone walls and

keeps, therefore making them cheap and relatively efficient fortifications. This, in turn,

enabled the marcher lords to rapidly produce more castles without overtaxing their

finances, leading to the trends observed in Herefordshire, Shropshire, and, to a lesser

degree, Cheshire. Instead of using stone to construct these fortifications, motte and

bailey castles relied on earthworks to provide their strength. The keep or manor would

be placed atop a large, often palisaded mound, or motte, with a bridge or stairway

connecting it to another enclosed area, or bailey (Fig. 1). Both the motte and the bailey

would also typically be surrounded and reinforced by a ditch to lend additional strength

to the wooden palisades that served as the structure's primary defensive perimeter.

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[19] R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change*, 29.

However, such a structure was far from impregnable, and motte and bailey castles in

particularly important areas were often reinforced or replaced by more reliable stone

structures. Indeed, many motte and bailey castles were burned down, either partially

or completely, several times before they were finally replaced by stone fortifications.

As with the motte and bailey castle, the Normans drew upon existing knowledge

for stone fortifications. Back in France, there were a handful of pre-Conquest castles

incorporating the tower keep, or donjon, as a focal point of their designs, including

Rouen, Ivry and Brionne.[20] In such a castle, the donjon provided the greatest measure

of security and was typically the most potent and significant layer of defense. The stone

donjon held a number of fairly straightforward advantages over wooden keeps and

halls, not least of which was its resistance to fire, which was arguably the greatest

weakness of the traditional wooden defenses of a motte and bailey. Due to the great

expense and difficulty of construction, early donjons were only built in particularly

important castles, though as the Normans sought to consolidate their position, donjons

and stone fortifications became increasingly common in England and the marches post-

Conquest.[21]

The two styles of fortification were not mutually exclusive, however, and a

number of motte and baily castles across England were retrofitted with donjons, which

took the place of the original keep atop the motte. However, concerns about the ability

of traditional mottes to support solid stone keeps led to the creation of a somewhat

unique intermediate step before donjons were more universally implemented, known

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[20] R. Allen Brown, "The Norman Conquest and the Genesis of English Castles," in *Castles, Conquest and Charters: Collected Papers* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1989), 87.
[21] Ibid., 88-89.

as a shell keep. In a castle with a shell keep, rather than placing a heavy stone tower

atop the motte, Anglo-Norman engineers instead replaced the motte's wooden palisade

with a stone wall. From there, the internal rooms and structures could be built along the

walls with wood, creating a central open courtyard as a focal point of the shell keep.

This design was able to draw upon the formidable strength and fire resistance of stone

walls without risking the collapse of the castle's motte. The elevated placement of the

shell keep also served to mitigate the threat of undermining the stone walls through the

use of tunnels, though such tactics were rarely, if ever, employed by the Welsh, who

preferred quick hit-and-run tactics to the sluggish pace of siege warfare. In time,

however, the simple walls of the traditional shell keep were often expanded upon and

built upwards until they either morphed into a donjon, or were replaced by one.

As castles became increasingly strong and reliable structures through the

introduction of stone walls and towers, the marcher lords were able to utilize them in a

variety of new ways, in addition to their traditional roles. However, the traditional

Anglo-Norman usage of castles and fortifications was highly significant in shaping their

usage in the marches, and must be examined first. The iconic Anglo-Norman system of

castles was based on the Roman tradition of *castelli*, or walled cities. The Romans

utilized these fortifications for a "defense-in-depth" strategy, where the garrisons

would wait for a raiding army to pass a series of fortifications, and then link up with a

standing army to attack the raiders who would be slowed and laden with goods on their

way back. These *castelli* were also built strong enough to outlast short sieges, which

would serve only to tie down invading armies long enough for a larger force to

assemble and lift the siege.[22] The Anglo-Normans adopted this practice to serve a

similar role against the frequent Welsh raids.

In some cases, this Anglo-Norman adaptation of Roman practices took on a very

literal sense; during the Roman occupation of Britain, the Romans had established a

system of fortifications to defend the very region the marcher lords occupied. The

Roman defensive network extended quite far into Wales, with one recent archeological

survey locating eleven probable Roman fortifications in the extreme northwestern

corner of Wales.[23] Closer to the English border, however, a number of former Roman

garrisons were actually later replaced with Anglo-Norman castles. Colwyn Castle in

Radnorshire, a traditional motte and bailey castle, was built over the remains of an old

Roman fort by the middle of the twelfth century.[24] Similarly, Caerleon Castle, in the

southern county of Gwent, was built adjacent to the ruins of a sizable Roman legionary

camp. Caerphilly Castle in Glamorgan was built near the remains of a Roman fort in the

latter half of the thirteenth century in an effort to secure the defiant northern reaches of

the county. These fortresses were intended to directly replace the former Roman

garrisons and assume their role in the overall defense of the marcher lords' territory.

Much like the original system created by the Romans, these fortifications served

multiple roles in the defense of the surrounding lands. Perhaps the most

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[22] Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *De Re Militari: The Classic Treatise on Warfare at the Pinnacle of the Roman Empire's Power* (Oakpast Ltd., 2012), 69-70*. *The *De Re Militari* was actually more highly valued by kings and lords in the Middle Ages than it was the late days of the Roman Empire, when it was originally written to reform the Roman armies.

[23] David, J. Hopewell, Burman, J. Evans, M. Ward, and D. Williams, "Roman Fort Environs in North-West Wales," *Britannia* 36 (2005): 225-27.

[24] For an account of excavations performed at the site, see Sheppard Frere, "The Roman Fort at Colwyn Castle, Powys (Radnorshire)," *Britannia* 35 (2004): 115-20.

straightforward of these roles was the use of fortifications as a refuge and a stockpile

for civilian and military provisions, ranging from food to trade goods to weapons, for

the surrounding areas. In times of war, people and goods could be gathered from the

nearby countryside to wait out invaders and mitigate the damage caused by a raid. The

simple motte and bailey castles found along the marches were generally sufficient at

performing this role when faced with relatively small raiding parties, but were often

found wanting during major Welsh uprisings. In 1094, one such uprising struck the

marches hard. According to John of Worcester, an English monk writing during the first

half of the twelfth century, "Assembling a multitude of men, they razed the castles

which had been built in West Wales, and often ravaged townships in Cheshire,

Shropshire and Herefordshire, taking booty and killing many of the English and

Normans."[25] At times such as these, the weaknesses of the basic wooden motte and

bailey became quite clear. Although they served well against small forces, larger groups

of invaders could easily turn these refuges into deathtraps. Roger of Wendover, writing

about a century later, describes the same events in much a similar way, though he

seems to suggest they occurred the year before. According to his account, "the Welsh

during the preceding year had slain many of the Normans, broken the strongholds of

[King Williams's] nobles, destroyed Montgomery Castle, slain its inhabitants, and

destroyed the whole neighborhood with fire and sword."[26] Here the added specificity of

the account provides a bit more clarity as to the fate of the castle dwellers. It seems that

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[25] John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. and trans. by P. McGurk, vol. III (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998)*,* 73.
[26] Roger of Wendover. *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History, Comprising the History of England from the Descent of the Saxons to A.D. 1235; Formerly Ascribed to Matthew Paris*, trans. by J. A. Giles (London: H.G. Bohn, 1849), 366.

the outer bailey was breached in this assault, as was the inner motte where the castle's

residents were subsequently trapped and made their final stand. The surrounding

countryside did not prove more fortunate, though. Both accounts indicate widespread

destruction specifically targeting the outlying townships, which, when paired with the

collapse of the castles themselves, indicate a complete failure of their defensive

purposes. Interestingly, though, the Anglo-Normans did not regard this failure as

catastrophic; within a few years at most, these motte and bailey castles had been rebuilt

in much the same way as before, ready to resume protecting their inhabitants.

On many occasions, however, the wooden fortifications held long enough for the

assailants to lose interest or be driven off. The *Brut y Tywysogion*, a Welsh chronicle

composed during the twelfth century, and subsequently added to until the mid-

fourteenth century, details a series of Welsh assaults on castles in the year 1113 led by

Gruffydd ap Rhys, the son of Rhys ap Tewdwr and king of Deheubarth.[27] Gruffydd

appears to have only limited success in this campaign; the *Brut* suggests that he burned

down only two of the castles he assailed, and was rebuffed by at least four others after

breaching their outer wards, leaving the central keeps, with their garrisons, more or

less intact.[28] Even in these instances, however, the Welsh forces burned the outer

defenses and ravaged the baileys before swiftly moving on.

Welsh raids such as these relied on speed and surprise in order to achieve the

most success, and the Anglo-Normans were rarely given much warning before the

[27] The *Brut* is a translation of a lost Latin text, the *Cronica Principium Wallie*, though the twelfth century monk Caradoc of Llancarvan is thought to the author of an extension to around 1150, which, in turn, received additions from the monks of Strata Florida Abbey until sometime around 1332, when the chronicle ends.
[28] John Williams, ed. and trans., *Brut Y Tywysogion; Or, the Chronicle of the Princes* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 123-127.

Welsh raiders appeared. These rapid assaults served a number of different purposes

for the Welsh. The rough terrain of the countryside that confounded the Anglo-Norman

knights and armies meant that most of Welsh warfare was based around relatively

small and swift raids, both against the Anglo-Normans and each other. As such, these

raids ranged in purpose from attempts at minor territorial acquisition, to revenge for a

slight, to the all-important acquisition of loot, which usually played a part regardless of

the existence of other objectives. This emphasis on looting meant that while the Welsh

warriors were able to strike their targets hard and fast, the return journey was often a

completely different story. Bands of Welshmen, heavily laden with plunder and

rendered incautious by their successful assault ran the risk of being hunted down by

the surviving castle garrisons. The *Brut* details exactly this situation later in the same

entry for 1113. A terrible misfortune befell a raiding party led by Owain ap Cadwgan, a

prince of the Kingdom of Powys, when a company of Flemish soldiers marching

towards a nearby castle encountered villagers fleeing the carnage.[29] According to the

Brut, "Not expecting any opposition, Owain took his course slowly; and [the Flemings]

in pursuing him, came speedily to the spot where he was with his booty."[30] The Welsh

raiders were scattered and slaughtered in the ensuing skirmish, having fallen prey to a

rapid counterattack, one of the greatest weapons of the defense-in-depth strategy

utilized by the marcher lords. Similarly, a Welsh account of the uprising of 1094 relates

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[29] These Flemish soldiers were likely immigrants relocated to the marches by Henry I, who, in response to a surge in Flemish immigration, decided to resettle the Flemings already scattered throughout England on the Welsh border. For an primary source account of this policy, see William of Malmsbury, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England: From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen*, trans. by John Sharpe, ed. by J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), 435.
[30] John Williams, *Brut*, 139.

a comparable effort made by the defenders of Castle Aberlleiniog, though with

somewhat less success. After killing a number of the castle's defenders and plundering

its outer reaches, Gruffydd ap Cynan, the King of Gwynedd who had only recently

escaped imprisonment at the hands of Earl Hugh of Chester, withdrew from the fight.

However, despite suffering heavy losses, the defenders were not content to simply let

him leave, as *The History of Gruffydd ap Cynan* proclaims, "The men of the castle and the

men of Mon pursued him throughout the day, fighting behind him valiantly."[31] Though

Gruffydd ap Cynan did not meet with quite the same fate as the unfortunate Owain ap

Cadwgan, he was still unable to make a clean escape and was forced to retreat under

heavy pressure. In both instances, however, the castle's ability to withstand attack

enabled the Anglo-Norman forces to mount determined counterattacks on the Welsh

raiders.

　　　　Although castles are traditionally regarded simply as static defenses, the

marcher lords also cleverly utilized them as an offensive weapon for expanding their

territory outwards. In 1096, King William II led his third major punitive raid into Wales

in response to a Welsh uprising. Instead of attempting to raze to Welsh countryside as

he had on his previous raids, which only inflicted a limited amount of temporary

damage, he decided to attempt a more permanent solution. On this third raid, English

and Welsh chroniclers differ as to the main objectives. According to Roger of Howden, a

chronicler from Yorkshire writing near the end of the twelfth century with apparent

sympathies towards the King of England, William set out "…with the intention of

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[31] Arthur Jones, trans., *History of Gruffydd Ap Cynan: The Welsh Text with Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (Manchester: Univ. Press, 1910), 139. The work seems to have been originally composed by a contemporary of Gruffydd, with the oldest surviving manuscript dating to the thirteenth century, and was written entirely in Welsh.

destroying all persons of the male sex. However, he was unable to take or slay hardly

any of them, but lost some of his own men, and a great number of horses."[32] John of

Worcester, an English monk who lived in Worcestershire in the twelfth century, wrote

an account that reads much the same, with only minor differences in wording.[33] The

Brut y Tywysogion, however, states that the Anglo-Normans "…encamped against the

isle of Mona, in the place called Aber Lliennog, where they built a castle. And the

Britons,[34] having retreated to their strongest places, according to their usual custom,

agreed in council to save Mona."[35] The Welsh princes realized that if they did not act to

eliminate this fortification quickly, they stood to lose control of the island to the Anglo-

Normans entirely. Indeed, after much hard fighting, the Welsh proved unable to

dislodge the Anglo-Normans from the island and were forced to withdraw, leaving the

castle intact and in Anglo-Norman control. What had started as a mere punitive raid

soon turned into an effort to claim an entirely new territory permanently.

Such a strategy was not entirely new, either. The marcher lords had been

utilizing similar tactics to gradually extend their area of influence farther into the Welsh

countryside. As is seen in Robert Fitzhamon's conquest of Glamorgan, one of the first

steps taken by a would-be conqueror after a military victory was to refortify existing

castles and, if necessary, construct new ones. After the battle with Iestyn, the former

king of Glamorgan, Fitzhamon used his numerical superiority to assert his authority to

decide which lands to grant to each of the victorious allies. Naturally, he deliberately

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[32] Roger of Howden, *The Annals of Roger De Hoveden. Comprising the History of England and of Other Countries of Europe from A.D. 732 to A.D. 1201*, trans. by Henry T. Riley (London: H.G. Bohn, 1853), 186.

[33] John of Worcester, *Worcester,* 85.

[34] The Welsh often referred to themselves as Britons in their chronicles.

[35] John Williams, *Brut,* 61.

granted the poor, hilly land to his Welsh allies while claiming all of the province's major

castles for himself.[36] Similarly, two months after the Anglo-Normans slew Rhys ap

Tewdwr, the king of Deheubarth in 1091, " [They] came into Dyved and Ceredigion,

which they have still retained, and fortified the castles, and seized upon all the land of

the Britons."[37] In the chronicles, since the act of fortifying these castles is so deeply

connected with the act of claiming territory, the two appear almost indistinguishable.

In other instances, the Anglo-Normans had to build entirely new fortresses upon

reaching a new territory, as was the case with Pembroke. When the marcher lords

reached Pembrokeshire around 1093, they erected the formidable Pembroke Castle,

which, despite originally being constructed as a simple wooden motte and bailey, never

once fell to the Welsh princes.[38] Pembroke Castle became the foundation for an entirely

new and remarkably successful marcher lordship, and in turn, led to the creation of a

series of other castles gradually pushing further into Welsh territory, a tactic employed

across all of the Welsh marches.

　　This particular usage of the castle continued until the end of the conquest of

Wales, and several prime examples of the castles created for this purpose can still be

readily observed. Perhaps one of the most famous of these fortifications is Conwy

Castle, which was built by Edward I toward the end of the thirteenth century in North

Wales. The town of Conwy was first occupied by Edward in 1283 as part of one of his

major offensives into Wales, with the goal of ultimately breaking the last remnants of

Welsh resistance. Edward soon moved his headquarters to the strategic position

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[36] Taliesin Williams, *Iolo Manuscripts*, 380-81.
[37] John Williams, *Brut,* 55.
[38] Carr, *Medieval Wales*, 34-35.

occupied by Conwy, which enabled him to strike deep into the rugged and wild region

of Snowdonia.[39] The fortification itself came later, however. Once Edward achieved his

campaign objective with the surrender of the Welsh at Bere Castle, he immediately

sought to control the region through aggressive usage of castles. Foremost amongst

these new castles were Conwy and Carnarvon, which became part of ring of castles

designed to exert heavy influence over the nearby region of Snowdonia.[40] Much like in

Glamorgan and Pembroke, Cowny Castle was built to consolidate power after a

sucessful invasion, though with the clear purpose of extending the reach of the Anglo-

Normans' influence to threaten even more distant territory, and perpetuate the cycle

once again.

      This aggressive strategy was not without its risks, however. In some instances,

the marcher lords overextended themselves in their efforts to claim territory, and the

enterprising Welsh princes saw these isolated and vulnerable forward castles as

opportunities to shore up their own positions. In some cases, the capture of Anglo-

Norman castles seems to have been enough to flip control over entire counties back to

the Welsh. When Gruffydd ap Cynan was captured and imprisoned by Earl Hugh of

Chester in 1081, "Earl Hugh came to his domain in great force and built castles and

strong places after the manner of the French, and was lord over the land."[41] Earl Hugh

used these castles to suppress the Welsh populace of Gruffydd's former kingdom of

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[39] John Edward Morris, *The Welsh Wars of Edward I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901), 191-92.
[40] Ibid., 198-99.
[41] Jones, *Gruffydd Ap Cynan*, 133.

Gwynedd for well over a decade[42] before Gruffydd escaped and his reign fell apart. The

History of Gruffydd ap Cynan places Gruffydd at the head of the 1094 revolt that brought

William II into Wales, and led to his adoption of the castle as an offensive weapon,

although it seems more likely that the uprising took place in 1092.[43] More importantly,

however, that same account claims, "He delivered Gwynedd from castles and took the

kingdom to himself and duly repaid his opponents."[44]   The interesting wording of this

passage not only indicates Gruffydd's liberation of the kingdom from the infamously

cruel Earl Hugh of Chester, but also from the Anglo-Norman castles themselves.[45] By

capturing these symbols of Anglo-Norman power, Gruffydd ap Cynan seems to have

absolved them of their hated association with the men who originally built them.

In other instances, these castles became focal points of Welsh resentments,

prompting targeted counterattacks. The gains made by the marcher lords in 1091 in

the provinces of Dyved and Ceredigion were targeted in the following year. According

to the *Brut,* "towards the close of that year the Britons demolished all the castles of

Cerdigion and Dyved, except two, to wit, Pembroke and Rhyd y Gors. And the people

and all the cattle of Dyved they brought away with them, leaving Dyved and Ceredifion a

desert."[46] Though the Welsh on this occasion proved immensely successful, it is worth

noting that they still conceeded the territory as lost to the marcher lords, evidenced not

only by their failure to capture and occupy the castles, but also by their removal of the

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[42] The *History of Gruffydd ap Cynan* contradicts itself on exactly how long he was imprisoned, first claiming twelve years, but later sixteen.
[43] Jones, *Gruffydd ap Cynan,* 137-141.
[44] Idid., 139.
[45] Earl Hugh committed a number of atrocities against the Welsh that are documented in chronicles from both England and Wales. For an account of his mistreatment of Welsh prisoners and a Welsh priest in 1098, see John of Worcester, *Worcester*, 87.
[46] John Williams, *Brut,* 57.

people and livestock of the county. One can only wonder how the peasantry of the

counties, only newly conquered by the marcher lords, received the Welsh raiders and

their subsequent removal back to sovereign Welsh territory. Indeed, their misery was

far from over; the lingering resentments caused by the capture and fortification of these

regions frequently boiled over into armed conflict. The *Brut* indicates that these

counties were a major source of contention, subject to attacks almost every year at least

up through 1107, when additional castles were constructed by Gilbert, son of Rickert,

who was granted the county of Ceredigion by King Henry I .[47] These castles seem to

have enabled him to solidify his position enough to resume extending the borders of the

marcher lordship outwards.

In addition to their usage for aggressively claiming territory, castles were also

highly significant for their role as forward bases and rally points for invading territory.

In many instances, castles and fortified towns were used to shelter stockpiles of men

and supplies in preparation for invasions and raids. Hilary Turner calls attention to a

bizarre phenomenon seen across the marches, where a surprising number of vulnerable

towns near the border did not receive murage grants to provide funding for walls until

after years of being sacked repeatedly.[48] Even stranger, however, was that these grants

rarely followed on the heels of Welsh raids, and in other cases, grants were issued to

towns left unscathed by the incursions. Turner draws the conclusion that these towns

were granted murage so that they could serve as military bases for extended

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[47] Ibid., 105.

[48] Hilary L. Turner, *Town Defences in England and Wales: An Architectural and Documentary Study AD 900-1500* (London: John Baker Ltd, 1971), 75-76. A murage grant was effectively royal permission for a municipality to collect a toll on goods entering the town for sale, with all proceeds directly providing for the town's defenses.

campaigns, since it would make little difference to the marcher lords whether they used

a fortified town or an actual castle for that purpose.[49] In some cases, they used both

castles and walled towns to encamp their armies and stockpile for campagins. The

town of Conwy also received impressive walls in addition to its formidible castle,

demonstrating the strategic importance of the town as a forward military base.

Interestingly, this line of reasoning implies that, in certain cases, town and territory

defense was a secondary objective for the marcher lords, and was less important than

the offensive campaigns conducted against the Welsh.

Perhaps an understated and undervalued aspect of the usage of castles by both

Anglo-Norman and Welsh lords alike was as a symbol of power and authority. That

castles came to be synonymous with the cities and towns they overlooked is abundantly

clear, though in some bizarre instances, as at the Battle of Lincoln in 1217, the two were

in conflict.[50] In most cases, though, whoever controlled the castle effectively controlled

the town surrounding it, and vice versa. Less clear, but no less significant, is the

relationship between the castle towns and the surrounding lands. The castles of Wales

came to be so closely associated with the nearby countryside that they seem to have

become almost a part of the natural landscape itself. In the description of the rivers and

mountains of Wales provided by Gerald of Wales, he frequently relates them to the

castles of the region, using the castles to provide geographical context and significance

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[49] Ibid., 76.
[50] For account of the battle and the unusual circumstances surrounding it, see Sidney Painter, *William Marshall: Knight-Errant, Baron, and Regent of England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 213-19.

to the natural features of the region.[51] In this description, the castles seem to have taken the place of natural landmarks, and indeed the region seems oriented around them. Though these castles were originally built strategically to take advantage of the physical landscape, occupying hilltops and riverbanks across the countryside, they rapidly surpassed in importance the natural features they relied upon, at least in the eyes of the marcher lords and the chroniclers who wrote of them.

Strange though it may be to imagine a natural landscape physically dependent on man-made fortifications, Gerald's focus on them at least reflects the political orientation of the Welsh marches. This effect is only reinforced by the order in which Gerald chooses to describe Wales, starting from a political viewpoint and only gradually progressing to a discussion of the land itself. This specific order emphasizes the greater significance of the political structures of the marches, which in turn was denoted and anchored by the presence of castles. Indeed, the section immediately prior to Gerald's description of the significant rivers and topographical feature of the landscape is actually a brief examination of the palaces, cathedrals, and cantreds of Wales.[52] Even in this inherently political section, Gerald makes reference to a few castles to provide a sense of location to the places he describes, thereby firmly linking the intangible administrative districts to the physical landscape. In this manner, the castles in the marches served as a visible point of connection between the political and geographic landscapes, serving to mark and identify territory both literally and metaphorically.

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[51] Giraldus, *The Itinerary through Wales, and the Description of Wales*, trans. by W. Llewelyn Williams (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1908), 160-63.
[52] Giraldus, *Itinerary,* 158-59. A cantred is a unit for subdividing territory equivalent to the English hundreds, which served as a political and judicial district for the purpose of administrating lands and denoting noble ownership of territory.

These castles lay at the heart of the marcher lords' authority and claim to the

lands they possessed. Indeed, a marcher lord's claims to a territory hinged on his

ability to defend it. For this reason, one of the first steps taken by a marcher lord who

had either been granted new lands or had taken them for his own was to assess the

existing castles and see to their improvement. This was the course employed by Robert

Fitzhamon after he claimed the kingdom of Glamorgan.[53] In the same way, when

Gilbert, son of Rickert, was granted the county of Ceredigion in 1107, he immediately

refortified the region.[54] The rapid fortification of the counties of Cheshire, Shropshire,

and Herefordshire show a similar trend. Immediately upon receiving the provinces in

the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, the first marcher lords sought to firmly

establish and secure their positions through the construction of castles. The same can

be said for the founding of the marcher lordship of Pembroke, which was accompanied

by the construction of several formidible castles, including Pembroke Castle, the

stronghold that anchored the entire lordship through even the most trying of times. In

each of these cases, the marcher lords found it necessary to physically establish their

power and authority on the countryside by building and refortifying castles as one of

their first actions. As R. R. Davies so eloquently puts it, "Victory was converted into

conquest and domination by the construction of castles. The building of castles was to

contemporaries the visible expression and guarantee of conquest."[55] In other words, a

marcher lord could not credibly claim ownership of a territory until he had seen to its

fortification.

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[53] Taliesin Williams, *Iolo Manuscripts*, 380.
[54] John Williams, *Brut,* 105.
[55] R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change*, 89.

This led to the tendency for regions themselves to be closely associated with the castles defending them. As a result, lands in the marches were often granted not in their own right, but rather as a consequence of the custody of their castles changing hands. For example, when William Marshal's holdings in Wales were bolstered by King John, the transaction hinged on the transfer of a few specific castles to which the lands were attached.[56] The same principle holds true in the case of land confiscations, also, which were a surprisingly common occurrence in the marches as kings sought to curtail overly ambitious marcher lords. Among those unfortunate enough to face such a punishment were the son of William fitz Osbern, the Montgomery family, and William Marshal himself.[57] In each of these cases, the confiscations targeted their castles and manors as a means denying the offending lord's ability to control and profit from their lands. The seizure of a marcher lord's castles almost certainly spelled their doom, as he could no longer exert influence over the land, regardless of whether or not the land itself was officially confiscated, too. Just as Gerald oriented the natural landscape around the castles he encountered, the marcher lords oriented the political landscape around their castles and fortifications. Gerald's perception of the lands he describes hinge on the castles occupying them in very much the same way that the marcher lords established and defined their dominions.

The incredible political and military significance of castles during the Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales is clearly evident in the various chronicles and nonfiction accounts of the period, but the events in the marches also heavily influenced

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[56] Painter, *William Marshal,* 176-77.

[57] R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 71. William Marshal subsequently had his castles returned to him after convincing King John of his loyalty.

contemporary culture and literature as well. These stories and tales also provides some

interesting insight into the political and cultural significance of castles to both the

Welsh and Anglo-Normans alike, supplying a viewpoint often absent from the

chronicles and histories. By their very nature, these historical accounts were

inaccessible to all but an elite few, both geographically and linguistically, with most

being written in Latin by monks, and rarely leaving the monastic archives.

Contemporary literature, however, usually embraced the vernacular languages of the

common people and sought to appeal directly to the interests and experiences of its

audience, providing a more personal perspective on the events recorded in the

histories. This, in turn, offers a glimpse into the way castles themselves were perceived

by the people who lived in and around them.

One of the more common literary traditions of the period, the legends of King

Arthur were popular from at least the twelfth century onwards in Wales as well as in

Norman England, with vast numbers of Arthurian stories being composed and adapted.

Though the legend of King Arthur predated the Norman Conquest, it was in this period

that the majority of the surviving Arthurian romances were composed and the legend

came into its own. As is the case with all literature, however, the Arthurian romances

were heavily influenced by the events and perceptions of the time and place they were

written. This phenomenon is made particularly visible by the tendency for stories to be

adapted and retold differently in Wales and in England. Stories such as *Geraint Son of*

Erbin and *Peredur son of Efrawg* have more or less analogous tales told by the French

and Anglo-Norman poets, though critics have long debated as to which version derived

from the other.[58] Other stories, however, clearly belong to one culture or the other,

such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, or the Welsh poem

Culhwch and Olwen. Each of these pieces of literature, as well as the countless others

dating from the period, contain valuable insight into the stark cultural and political

divide created by the Anglo-Norman invasion of Wales and the castles that formed an

essential part of that conquest.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* is an ideal starting point

for an examination of the Arthurian legend, as scholars have credited him with

producing the first complete written account of Arthur's story.   Although Geoffrey's

decision to claim Monmouth as part of his name suggests a Welsh connection, perhaps

even his birthplace, Geoffrey himself was very much a part of Anglo-Norman culture

and society, and his writing reflects that tradition.[59] In any case, Geoffrey must have

been influenced considerably by the Welsh marches, considering that he chose to

identify himself with them despite spending most of his life in England.[60] Geoffrey

wrote the *History of the Kings of Britain* in Latin around 1136, in which he sets out to

recount the history of the British Isles dating back to a mythical first king named

Brutus, though the focal point of his history is King Arthur, who appears near the end of

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[58] Rachel Bromwich, Alfred Owen Hughes Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts, *The Arthur of the Welsh: the Arthurian legend in medieval Welsh literature*, Vol. 1. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 147, 172. The corresponding romances are Chrétien de Troyes's *Eric et Enide* and *Perceval, le Conte du Graal,* respectively.

[59] In addition to being a clergyman, Geoffrey of Monmouth was seems to have been a teacher at Oxford University, where he lived for much of his life. Though he was appointed bishop of St. Asaph in Wales, there is little evidence to suggest he ever visited his diocese.

[60] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Folio Society, 1969), 13.

the book.[61]   The work went unquestioned as a true historical account for several

centuries, only being regarded as a largely fictional story much later. As a result, the

History of the Kings of Britain falls somewhere in between the Latin chronicles and the

rest of the Arthurian literature in terms of structure and stylistic approach, drawing

heavily from both literary traditions. As such, even though Geoffrey's *History* is steeped

in the cultural and political ideals of the Anglo-Normans, it still was almost certainly

influenced by the events occurring in the marches.

Over the course of the *History of the Kings of Britain*, castles and fortifications

appear fairly often, though they tend to be used in the traditional defensive manner to

stave off invading armies and stall for reinforcements. Interestingly, however, control

of these castles and fortifications fluidly shifts between the Saxons and Britons, much as

they did in the Welsh marches. Take, for example, the passage describing Arthur's first

campaign against the Saxons. Arthur first marches on the Saxons at York, where he

defeats a detachment and besieges the rest, until threat of reinforcements forces him to

withdraw to London to await the arrival of an ally of his own. Arthur's advisors

convinced him to withdraw, "for if so large an enemy force were to come upon them

they would all be committed to a most dangerous engagement."[62] Once Arthur's ally,

King Hoel, arrives, the two of them march together to relieve the town of Kaerluideoit,

which the Saxons had besieged in their efforts to pillage the kingdom.[63] Indeed, the fate

that Arthur had escaped was inflicted upon the Saxons, "for on one day six thousand of

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[61] Interestingly, Geoffrey draws from the *Aeneid* for the character of Brutus. According to Geoffrey, Brutus was a direct descendant of Aeneas who was banished from Italy and was guided by the gods to the Isle of Britain, which was then named for him.
[62] Ibid., 191.
[63] Ibid., 190-92.

the Saxons were killed, some being drowned in the rivers and the others being hit by weapons."[64] In just this brief passage, both the Britons and the Saxons had defended and assailed fortifications as the tides of battle shifted, though the central focus of the passage is the relieving armies seeking to drive off the besiegers. Both sides use the fortifications in this section passively to await favorable conditions to meet on an open battlefield, where the outcome of the campaign is ultimately decided.

This depiction of the usage of fortifications is highly traditional in the Anglo-Norman style of warfare seen outside of the Welsh marches. Indeed, the castles in this passage perfectly align with the defense-in-depth strategy the Anglo-Normans adapted from the Romans. Ultimately, they succeed in fulfilling their role in the defense-in-depth strategy employed by the Anglo-Normans, as well. Arthur comes upon the Saxons besieging Kaerluideoit, where he catches them off guard and crushes them.[65] In short, these castles are more or less used as straightforward tools for the defense of the kingdom against raiders—except for one thing. Geoffrey has the Saxon raiders occupy and defend a fortified town, much like the Britons do. Such an act seems rather odd for an army focused on pillaging rather than conquering, though it likely is related to the fluid dynamic of the Welsh marches that Geoffrey was born in. Indeed, at the time Geoffrey was composing this work around 1136, the Welsh marches were in a state of turmoil as the marcher lords and the Welsh princes waged war back and forth across the border regions. In this conflict, both the marcher lords and the princes seized and reduced castles in much the same way as the Saxons and the Britons do in Geoffrey's story.

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[64] Ibid., 191-192.
[65] Ibid., 191-92

Perhaps even more telling than this is Geoffrey's treatment of Tintagel Castle, and Uther's war with Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall.[66] In Geoffrey's book, when Uther began ravaging the Duchy of Cornwall, "[Gorlois] did not dare to meet the King in battle. He preferred instead to garrison his castles and to bide his time until he could receive help from Ireland."[67] Gorlois attempts to use his castles in much the same way that Arthur and the Saxons do later in Geoffrey's book. The unusual circumstances surrounding this particular conflict allow a new and different dynamic to make an appearance, however. This war was fought not over land, but over Gorlois' wife Ygerna, so the Duke of Cornwall sought to protect her by sending her off to Tintagel Castle, a nigh-impregnable fortress on the coast. Gorlois himself occupied a fortified camp elsewhere in the province to draw Uther's army away from Ygerna. Interestingly, Tintagel Castle seems to not be associated with the surrounding lands like other castles, being actually divorced from the land itself. As one of Uther's men describes it, "The castle is built high above the sea, which surrounds it on all sides, and there is no other way in except that offered by a narrow isthmus of rock."[68] Tintagel's detachment seems to preclude it from claiming and protecting the land outside, with the castle fulfilling instead a different role. Rather than controlling territory, the castle is designed to protect that which is inside it. As a result, Tintagel is a refuge facing inwards instead of a locus for projecting power outwards, but only because it has been so effectively cut off from the land it occupies. Interestingly, the inward focus that proves its greatest strength is also the castle's downfall. Though Uther's men warn him, "Three armed soldiers could hold

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[66] Although a Tintagel Castle exists today, it was actually built in the thirteenth century, after Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote about it.
[67] Ibid., 182.
[68] Ibid., 182

it against you, even if you stood there with the whole kingdom of Britain at your side,"

the fortress is infiltrated and Ygerna is claimed through the use of Merlin's magic, which

allows Uther to bypass its defenses in disguise.[69]

If Geoffrey of Monmouth's work reflects the Anglo-Norman literary tradition of

the period, the tale of *Culhwch and Olwen* illustrates the Welsh writings of the Anglo-

Norman conquest. Unlike the *History of the Kings of Britain,* which was written as a

history of England, *Culhwch and Olwen* is a hyperbolic tale of adventure. As a result, the

stories are remarkably different in both style and form, adding to the differences in

language and culture. Notably, while the *History of the Kings of Britain* was composed in

Latin, *Culhwch and Olwen* was originally written in Welsh. Although the surviving

written versions of the story date to the fourteenth century, the oral tradition dates

back much farther, likely reaching its final form sometime around the year 1100, in the

early phases of the conquest, and more or less contemporaneous with Geoffrey of

Monmouth.[70] As such, both the written and oral versions of *Culhwch and Olwen* are

heavily steeped in the tumultuous political and cultural experience of the Anglo-

Norman conquest. Evidence of this contemporary influence manifests itself clearly

throughout the text, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the story's presentation

of castles, which appear at various points during the adventure.

One of the most important castles to appear in *Culhwch and Olwen* is that of the

giant Ysbaddaden Bencawr, and the unusual interactions centered on this stronghold

provide insight into the Welsh perception of the castles increasingly dominating the

countryside over the course of the Anglo-Normans Conquest. Although Culhwch and

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[69] Ibid., 183.

[70] Bromwich, *Arthur of the Welsh*, 73.

his companions visit the castle with the intention of asking for the hand of

Ysbaddaden's daughter Olwen in marriage, they approach the castle as they would an

enemy fortress. After conversing with Olwen as to how best to approach her father,

"they all got up to go after her to the fort, and killed the nine gatekeepers who were at

the nine gates without a single man crying out, and nine mastiffs without a single one

squealing."[71] Oddly enough, not only does Culhwch slaughter his way through the

castle to reach Ysbaddaden, he also does so silently, more like an assassin than a suitor.

Indeed, even though Culhwch had been warned to expect danger upon reaching the fort,

the clandestine approach seems out of place, especially considering his bold

conversation with the giant upon breaching the last layer of defense, in which he

directly asks for Olwen's hand. In the context of the Anglo-Norman conquest, however,

this episode begins to make more sense. A nearby shepherd reveals that Ysbaddaden,

his brother, is a terrible tyrant responsible for killing all but one of his twenty-three

sons. Ysbaddaden's castle is not a place of refuge or defense for the people living

nearby; rather, the castle is used to subjugate and oppress the local populace. As such,

the fortress has an adversarial relationship with the people it should be protecting,

much like an Anglo-Norman castle built to claim territory and subjugate the Welsh

peasants. In this context, the Culhwch's raid on the castle seems justified as a means

both of obtaining what he wants, but also of liberating the entire area from a tyrant.

      Ysbaddaden's castle is not the only stronghold to be portrayed in this light

throughout the text, either. After Culhwch receives a list of demands from the giant,

which must be completed before he can wed Olwen, one of the first tasks his

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[71] Sioned Davies, "Culhwch and Olwen" in *The Mabinogio*n (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 193.

companions set out to complete involves infiltration of a similar fortress. Though the

gatekeeper initially refused them entrance to the castle, Cai convinces him to allow first

him, and then Bedwyr, to enter the castle under false pretenses.[72] Much like

Ysbaddaden himself, the giant ruling this castle meets with much grief as a result of this

mistake. A number of the people milling around outside snuck in along with the two

knights and, "crossed the three baileys, as though it were nothing to them, until they

were inside the fort…they dispersed to their lodgings so that they could kill those who

lodged them without the giant knowing."[73] Much like Culhwch's earlier infiltration,

these men engage in a stealthy and bloody assault on a seemingly tyrannical castle.[74]

This sudden attack is reinforced, rather than condemned, by the actions of Cai and

Bedwyr in the giant's audience hall. Cai convinces the giant to hand him his sword,

which he then immediately uses to kill his host, and "they destroy the fort and take

away what treasure they want."[75] Interestingly, the text seems to praise the knights for

this underhanded sacking of the fort, glorifying the successful infiltration and

plundering. This episode presents a startling portrait of the role of castles in Wales.

The specific demands of the gatekeeper and his assertion that "no guest has ever left

here alive" suggests that this particular castle was seen as extorting all the skilled labor

and resources from the surrounding lands.[76] Indeed, the giant ruling the castle seems

to care very little for the people outside his gates except for his interest in what services

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[72] Ibid., 201-02.

[73] Ibid., 202. The omitted portion of the passage describes the laudatory etymology of the name of the leader of these men.

[74] The text suggests that only select craftsmen are permitted entry into the fort, and all others are either turned away or killed, and no guests are permitted to leave alive.

[75] Ibid., 202.

[76] Ibid., 201.

they can provide him. Ultimately, the very people the castle had oppressed end up

sacking it, and its master is killed with his own sword, no doubt an ending the tale's

Welsh audience found particularly satisfying. As at Ysbaddaden's stronghold, the

cunning and courage of a small band of warriors overthrew a tyrannical lord in the

heart of his oppressive castle.

Though *Culhwch and Olwen* clearly represents the Welsh perspective and the

History of the Kings of Britain provides a glimpse of the Anglo-Norman point of view,

other stories seem to bridge the gap between the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh, with

versions being composed by both sides. One such story is *Geraint Son of Erbin*, to use its

Welsh title, or *Eric and Enide*, for the French version. The earliest surviving version of

the Welsh *Geraint* dates to sometime around 1250, though, as with *Culhwch and Olwen,*

the romance is likely the product of an oral tradition of the tale dating back possibly as

early as 1100. However, the striking similarities to its French counterpart have led

some to suspect that the story instead derives from Chretien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide*,

which was written in France around 1170, but proved quite popular among the French-

speaking nobles in England.   Both versions of the tale are medieval romances, fantastic

and often-magical episodic adventures focused on heroic and knightly deeds. Though

these two variants are plainly similar, they diverge just as clearly in a number of key

ways, as befitting the products of two different cultures. At the core of their disparities,

however, lie the different perspectives of the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh towards

the establishment and the expansion of the marcher lordships.

One of the more illustrative episodes of this phenomenon concerns Geraint's

meeting with Earl Ynywl, the father of Enid, whose hand Geraint wins by defeating the

Knight of the Sparrowhawk. Geraint first meets the old earl when seeking hospitality in

a town where he was a complete stranger, pursuing a knight who had dishonored both

him and Gwenhwyfar. Earl Ynywl, along with his daughter, lodges and provides for

Geraint with his meager stores and explains his current poverty, as he is earl in name

only. Though he tells Geraint that he once owned the entire town and the castle

defending it, he also confesses that he "lost a large earldom too."[77] The earl also

explains the circumstances surrounding his misfortune: when he refused to relinquish

control of a neighboring kingdom that he had maintained for his young nephew upon

his coming of age, "what he did was to wage war on me and take everything that was

under my control."[78] This was a story all too familiar to the Welsh during the Anglo-

Norman conquest, when extensive infighting amongst the Welsh Princes was

compounded by the incursions of the marcher lords. The earl saw his lands and castles

stripped away in war, and his family was reduced to destitution and poverty. Familial

dispute or not, the earl found himself deposed by an outside invader, who then took up

residence in his home castle and claimed Ynywl's entire kingdom. From then on, the

castle no longer was a place of hospitality or shelter for the young Geraint; instead, it

housed his enemies. However, the victorious Geraint negotiates a settlement between

Ynywl and the new earl, and rectifies this injustice by returning the earldom to its

original owner.

Chretien's telling of this episode contains a number of key differences from the

Welsh version, which clearly illustrates the different cultural perspectives behind each.

[77] Sioned Davies, "Geraint Son of Erbin" in *The Mabinogio*n (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 145.
[78] Ibid., 145.

Chretien's account begins in much the same way that *Geraint* does: the hero, Erec,

pursues the Knight of the Sparrowhawk to a nearby town, where he meets an elderly

nobleman, who, though fallen on hard times, offers him hospitality. In this version, too,

Erec meets and falls in love with the old lord's daughter, Enide, while lodging with him

for the night. However, despite (or perhaps because of) the similarities between the two

characters, the key differences between them prove particularly illuminating. In *Erec*

and Enide, the former lord explains his misfortune by saying, "A lifetime I have been at

war; / bereft of all my land and store, / I've pawned it, sold it; it is gone."[79] Unlike the

Welsh Earl Ynywl, this former nobleman did not lose his lands to invasion. Rather, it

was his own poor financial management that saw the ruin of his estates. Indeed, the

threat of foreign invasion that so heavily characterized the Welsh version is noticeably

absent from Chretien's telling; according to the poverty-stricken nobleman, not even

the lord of the nearby castle bears him or his daughter any ill will, offering instead to

provide fine garments for Enide.[80] The episode concludes differently in *Erec and Enide*,

as well. Unlike in *Geraint*, where the hero negotiates the return of the earl's lands, Erec

offers instead to grant his host lands in his own kingdom, not coincidentally through the

gift of two castles.[81] This particular disparity is particularly telling; while the Welsh

version celebrates the restoration of the rightful lordship, the French version simply

supplies the aging nobleman new lands in another kingdom, a story no doubt

nauseatingly familiar to the Welsh populace of the marches.

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[79] Chretien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, trans. by Dorothy Gilbert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 56, lines 519-21.
[80] In fact, the lord of the castle is Enide's uncle, and therefore the brother-in-law of Erec's host. Erec's host declines his offer in the hopes that he may find a better one from a prospective suitor, which, of course, turns out to be Erec.
[81] Ibid., 81, lines 1315-34.

The motif of foreign threats is not limited to this one episode in *Geraint Son of Erbin*, notably featuring in Geraint's return home, and providing another point of contrast with *Erec and Enide*. In the Welsh romance, Geraint, several years after marrying Enid, receives a message from his aging father, saying that "he is drawing near to old age, and that the men whose lands border on his, knowing that, are encroaching on his boundaries and coveting his lands and territory."[82] This message is accompanied by a request for Geraint to return home to defend his kingdom against these would-be conquerors. Though Geraint is set to receive sovereign control of the kingdom from his father, the romance repeatedly emphasizes that Geraint only leaves Arthur's court so that he could defend his boundaries, with Geraint going so far as to tell his father, "if it were my choice, you would not be placing control of your kingdom into my hands at this moment, nor would you have taken me from Arthur's court just yet."[83] This particular detail almost certainly was influenced by the opportunistic and expansionistic nature of the marcher lords, who often preyed upon aging and otherwise weakened Welsh princes. Indeed, though Geraint's kingdom may not be a true frontier, it still bears great similarities to the marches, with plenty of neighbors eager to lay claim to various portions of it, in much the same way that the Welsh kingdoms gradually fell before the Anglo-Norman advance.[84] Here, as with Earl Ynwyl, *Geraint* suggests a kingdom under siege, always under the threat of foreign invasion, an attitude doubtlessly informed by the political and military turmoil of the Welsh marches.

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[82] Davies, "Geraint," in *The Mabinogion*, 154.

[83] Ibid., 156.

[84] Based on his lineage, Geraint's kingdom appears to be Dumnonia, which is in Cornwall, not Wales.

Once again, Chretien's version of the story bears a number of key differences that completely alter the scene. Unlike his Welsh counterpart, Erec returns to his kingdom almost immediately after his marriage, though nowhere is there an indication that his homeland may be anything but secure. Rather, Erec is so confident in the safety of his kingdom that he provides a fief for his new father-in-law, as promised at the ending of the previously mentioned episode. This fiefdom is impressive; according to the text, "Two castles were included in this bequest: / they were the realm's two loveliest / and best; their strength superior, / they had least cause to fear a war."[85] The confidence and generosity of this gesture are firmly rooted in the knowledge that the kingdom is not under threat. Even a poor and inexperienced administrator would know not to cede control of two of his most important castles if he had any reason to fear for the security of his lands.[86] Indeed, Erec receives no desperate letter from his father; instead, his return is born from a desire to bring his wife home to his kingdom.[87] This action starkly contrasts with the circumstances of Geraint's homecoming. While the Welsh hero returns to shore up his kingdom's failing defenses and defend it against invaders, Erec arguably weakens his kingdom's security by bequeathing two of the strongest castles in his domain to an elderly nobleman and his wife. Though the two characters have much in common, the key differences separating the two reveal the dramatically different perspectives held by the Welsh and French towards not only the tumultuous situation in the marches, but also the castles that dominated the landscape.

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[85] Chretien, *Erec*, 96-97, lines 1831-34.
[86] Erec indeed proves to be a poor administrator at first. Upon arriving at home, his infatuation with Enide leads him to neglect his duties as a knight and a lord.
[87] Ibid., 108-09, lines 2225-27.

Throughout all of these stories, the political and cultural ramifications of the Anglo-Norman conquest are heavily featured, and the insight they provide proves a valuable complement to the larger history recorded by the chronicles. Though many of the same elements are present in both the fictional and the nonfictional writings, the contrasting perspectives serve to reinforce the overall impact and significance of, among other things, the massively influential and important castles and fortifications of the Welsh marches. Looking at both historical and literary sources, it becomes increasingly clear that not only were castles a major component of the political and military strategies employed by the marcher lords, but also were major sources of cultural significance for the people who lived in and around them.

The political, military, and cultural significance of the castles used by the marcher lords is quite apparent from their history. Almost immediately after the Anglo-Normans arrived in Britain, they began searching for ways to both secure their borders and expand their holdings outwards. In the Welsh marches, this was accomplished via the creation of a special class of nobility, who came to be known as the marcher lords. These men made use of the exceptional rights and powers granted to them to construct fortifications and wage war with the Welsh princes without royal oversight. In doing so, they adapted the traditional Roman tactic of defense-in-depth in an effort to not only defend their holdings against Welsh assaults, but also to gradually push their borders further and further into the marches. This strategy relied on the construction and expansion of a multitude of castles along the border regions, and, as a result, counties such as Herefordshire and Shropshire saw a massive increase in the number of castles defending them shortly after the Anglo-Normans claimed them. This was a trend that

was continued all across the marches, with frenetic bouts of fortification shortly

following each new gain made by the marcher lords.

   The style of castle preferred by the Anglo-Normans facilitated this conquest in a

number of ways. The traditional motte and bailey design was simple enough to be

easily and swiftly produced all across the landscape, while still maintaining a

reasonable degree of strength. They were also relatively cheap when compared with

more permanent stone fortifications, though at the cost of being more susceptible to

fire and attacks. Over time, this weakness was mitigated by the creation of stone shell

keeps, and by later inclusions of stone walls and towers in particularly important

castles. Still, the motte and bailey castles of the Anglo-Normans largely proved to be

highly effective tools in the conquest of Wales, and despite often being partially or

completely sacked, these castles were rapidly rebuilt and so as to continue controlling

the landscape. From these bastions, the Anglo-Normans could either delay or

discourage enemy attacks, or even launch potentially deadly counterattacks when the

Welsh retreated. As a result, these castles became important focal points of warfare in

the marches for both the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh, and were often directly

targeted by Welsh raids, as was represented in *Culhwch and Olwen*.

   In other cases, the Anglo-Normans used castles as offensive tools for directly

claiming territories, a strategy that proved risky but often highly effective, both in the

chronicles and in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. In some cases,

as with William II's construction of a castle at Mona during a raid, these isolated

fortifications could be used to draw out the Welsh princes and possibly even secure the

territory by driving them back once again. Other times, however, these castles fell to

enterprising Welsh princes, who then used them for their own benefit. More often than

not, though, these castles served to accomplish the designs of the marcher lords, and

they claimed more and more of the Welsh countryside, all while providing the Anglo-

Normans with more and more outposts to launch campaigns from. The marcher lords

also used walled towns in the marches for this purpose, as suggested by the

disproportionate amount of murage grants allowed, as well as the startling lack of

apparent correlation between these hikes in defensive spending and actual Welsh

attacks on vulnerable settlements.

Aside from purely military purposes, castles in the marches enabled the Anglo-

Normans to project power directly onto the landscape to such a degree that the actual

territories came to be organized around them, as seen both in the possible example of

Tintagel castle, and more clearly in the case of Gerald of Wales' writings. In addition to

their straightforward administrative role, castles became landmarks of not only

political power, but also of geographic landscapes and cultural divides as well. The

castles also dominate the surviving literature from the period, from both sides of the

conflict, and reveal the drastically different views of the Welsh and the Anglo-Normans

towards the ongoing conquest. Ultimately, the Anglo-Normans saw the castle as a

valuable tool in their arsenal for both offensive and defensive purposes, but for the

Welsh, the castle was an inescapable symbol of the Anglo-Norman invaders sweeping

across the landscape.

This stark division, centered on the castles of the marches, cuts to the very core

of the shared military, cultural, and political history of the Welsh and the Anglo-

Normans. Ultimately, just as the military conflict between the two gravitated around

the various castles littering the countryside, so too did most other aspects of life in the

marches. For peasants of both sides, the castles were a reminder of the political

landscape controlled by the nobility, though, as the literature of the period shows, that

political authority meant different things to people on opposite sides of the conflict. For

the lords themselves, castles were perhaps the most reliable way to project power from

the political landscape to the physical landscape, occupying and controlling the land and

its resources in a way that would be otherwise impossible. Indeed, throughout the

entirety of the dynamic and complicated Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales, the castle

proved to be one of the most significant military, political, and cultural objects for both

sides. Although the castle meant very different things to different people, the power

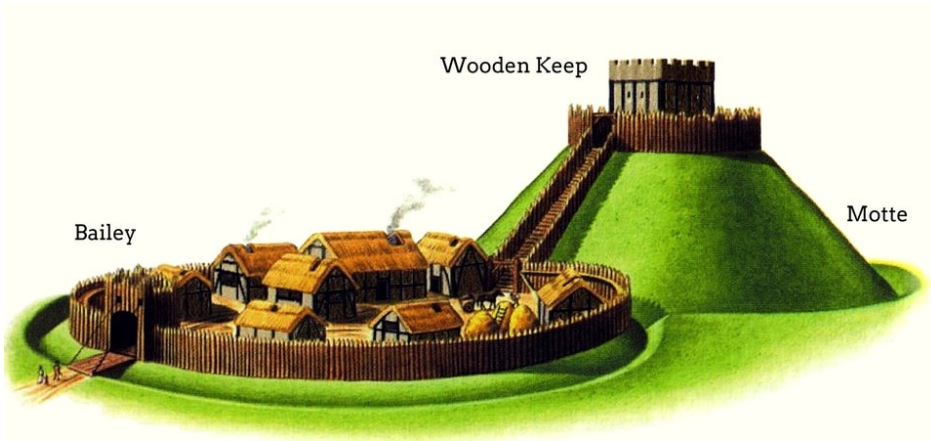that stood behind it was a message that was clear to all.

APPENDIX

Fig. 1: Ghidrai, George. "Motte and Bailey Castle." *The World of Castles.* https://www.castlesworld.com/.

Fig. 2: Wrexham County Borough Council. "Historic and Important Places in Wales 1100 - 1300." *Medieval Exhibition*.
http://www.wrexham.gov.uk/english/heritage/medieval_exhibition/wales_map.htm.

Fig. 3: Wrexham County Borough Council. "Wales after the Treaty of Montgomery in 1267." *Medieval Exhibition*.
http://www.wrexham.gov.uk/english/heritage/medieval_exhibition/wales_1267map.htm#content.

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