# About

Castles, through the centuries, have held a significant and enduring place in history, symbolizing not only power, royalty, and the medieval era but also embodying the architectural prowess and engineering marvels of their time. These grand edifices have captivated the imagination of people across the globe, evoking visions of knights, kings, and epic battles.

## What are castles?

Through centuries castles have become symbols of power, royalty, and medieval times. Castles have long captured the imagination of people around the world. Built with strategic precision and architectural brilliance, castles were not mere fortresses instead they were the center of power, governance, and military strongholds.

A castle is a fortified structure built during the medieval times. Its function was to serve as a defensive and protective fortification for its residents. Unlike forts castle was not only used for military purposes, but mainly as a residence for powerful people like rulers and nobles. Castles included various features to make them resilient against sieges, including walls, towers, moats, and keeps.

## Purpose

Castles served as administrative centers, where rulers could administer justice, collect taxes, manage resources, and govern their territories effectively. They included courtrooms, administrative offices, storage facilities but also living areas, kitchens, dining areas and as well grand hall and chapel.

Another purpose was to serve as a defense for people inside. In an era of constant threats of invasion, castles provided safety during conflicts. The presence of a fortified stronghold acted as a deterrent to potential attackers, as capturing a castle was a tough and costly campaign. Building a castle was also tough and costly and required years and years. They were owned by lords who often spent around 50% of their wealth to build one.

## Ideal position of a castle

# The ideal position of a castle was on top of a hill, cliff, or along the river. These were important because they provided natural barriers for enemies who had to overcome them and provided expansive views over the local areas. This enabled people to oversee the surrounding areas and notice enemy armies in time. Because castles were usually surrounded by ditches called *moats*, a river would be a good option. It provided protection typically from 2 or 3 sides and was also a good source of water and fish. Castles were built by serfs who worked on lands owned by their lords. Transporting all of the material needed on harsh terrain was the main problem builders had to overcome.

# History

Originating in the early medieval period, castles emerged as more than just fortresses; they evolved into multifunctional structures that played crucial roles in shaping the socio-political landscape of their respective regions. Acting as centers of power and governance, these castles served as the heart of local communities, offering protection, justice, and administration.

## First Forts in History

As we already said, castles are a type of fortifications and first forts existed even in the ancient times where various civilizations built protections to defend themselves from enemies. Early forts provided enough protection for settlements. These first forts usually consisted of walls that typically surrounded a city or a village.

Now many differences between forts and castles were built later. Forts and castles have the same defensive purpose, but they have differences in structure, design, and their roles. Forts are often pretty smaller, and used for military purposes, while castles were mainly used as the seat for nobility, a center of governance, and a refuge for people in surrounding areas. Forts also didn’t have advanced defensive elements like those in castles.

## Castles in medieval times

During the Middle Ages castles became popular, this had to do with a lot of different factors including politics and military operations. In this period castles evolved to adapt to changes in military tactics and advancements in technology. Knowing that we can divide the history of castles into a three different parts:

1. Early Middle Ages:

During the Early Middle Ages (5th to 10th centuries) the centralized authority declined. This was the time of barbaric invasions so people needed protection in case of attack. Early castles were often built on existing Roman fortifications and were made of wood. They served as the residence of local lords and provided a means of defense against external threats. The first castle was Doue-la-Fontaine, located in Normandy, northern France.

1. High Middle Ages:

During the High Middle Ages (11th to 13th centuries) castles became more popular. The power of the nobility increased while the power of centralized authority declined. This was also the time when conquerors like Hungarians, Vikings, and others were constantly invading and pillaging lands in Europe. Because of that noblemans needed protection from them. So they started building castles all around Europe in the 10th and 11th centuries. In the begging wood was the main building material but was later replaced by stone, because it’s stronger and isn’t flammable.

The first castles were known as motte and bailey castles and they included motte, an elevated land surrounded by a canal, commonly a natural hill, bailey which was the space within walls and keep. Keep quickly became the most iconic part where everything important was located (like administrative rooms, dining rooms, bedrooms…). Castles quickly became common in the whole of Europe and a symbol of power and status.

During this time two different types of castles appeared, Romanesque (1066-1200) and Edwardian (1200-1300).

I. Romanesque was the first type. They consisted of a single simple wall, which means that the defense was very weak. Rooms were very cold and dark, windows were small, and very little light could go inside. This type of castle was uncomfortable for people inside.

II. Edwardian type had more and stronger walls which led to the creation of Concentric Castles and which were harder for the enemy to capture. They featured more defensive mechanisms whose purpose was to withstand a long siege. Life was also more comfortable within the castle, rooms were a lot warmer and brighter.

1. Late Middle Ages:

In the Late Middle Ages (14th and 15th centuries), castles underwent further transformations. The invention of gunpowder and the evolution of siege warfare meant that the castle needed modifications in design. Thick walls and towers were built to withstand cannons, and other elements like arrow slits and gun loops were established to help defenders. Life also became better and more luxurious, with larger living quarters, grand halls, and decorations.

The history of castles showcases the evolution of fortifications from simple ancient forts to grand medieval structures. Castles not only fulfilled defensive functions but also served as symbols of authority and centers of governance. As the Middle Ages progressed, castles became more sophisticated and resilient, adapting to the changing military landscape. The legacy of castles endures, captivating us with their architectural beauty and offering glimpses into the past, reminding us of a time when these mighty structures stood as testaments to power, prestige, and resilience.

# Structure

One of the most striking features of castles is their strategic precision, ingeniously designed to withstand sieges and repel invaders. The imposing walls, watchtowers, and moats were ingeniously crafted to provide formidable defenses, making them virtually impenetrable. The architectural ingenuity displayed in the construction of these fortresses continues to inspire awe and admiration.

Their structure is very complex. To defend against enemy armies, castles had to upgrade their defense and adapt to new technologies and military tactics, so many features of a castle were added later and were not present in early versions.

## The typical features of a medieval castle were:

1. **Curtain Walls & Towers** - the perimeter defensive wall
2. **Barbican** - a fortification to protect a gate
3. **Moat** - a perimeter ditch with or without water
4. **Fortified Gatehouse** - the main castle entrance
5. **Bailey or Inner Ward (courtyard)** - the area within a curtain wall.
6. **Keep (aka Donjon or Great Tower)** - the largest tower and best stronghold of the castle

1. **Curtain Walls & Towers:** Curtain walls surrounded the entire castle grounds. They stood as the first line of defense against invaders, protecting the castle's inhabitants. They were usually around 2-3 meters thick and some even included small passageways. The curtain wall featured many additional defensive features such as:

1. Arrow slits which allowed archers to shoot arrows at attackers without exposing themselves. It was a vertical hole in the wall, but later a horizontal hole was made making it look like a cross.
2. Battlements are one of the most iconic parts of the castle and they were raised parts of the wall which enabled defenders to hide behind them.
3. Towers were used so defenders could resist from higher ground. In the beginning, they were square-shaped. The problem with them was their weak corners which is why they evolved to a circle shape later. Also, towers offered more space for living quarters and storage rooms.
4. During a siege, hoardings might be built out on walls. They were made of wood and were used to throw boiling liquids, primarily water, on attackers. First introduced by Crusaders, they became rapidly popular in Europe.

Later another layer of walls was added and a castle in a castle was born. Attackers now had to capture both walls to enter inside. Two walls were typically connected by underground tunnels.

2. **Fortified Gatehouse:** The main gate of a castle was on the first line of defense and for this reason needed to be strong to protect the castle. They were surrounded by two towers on both sides. There were usually two gates that could be closed by portcullises (metal grid which could be lowered to block passage). If enemies were stuck between two gates, they would’ve been killed through murder holes, holes in walls made so that defenders can shoot arrows through them. They were connected to land by a drawbridge, which could be raised to additionally protect the main gate.

3. **Barbican:** The Barbican is a structure similar to the main gate and was usually used to protect the drawbridge. Features existing in the gatehouse were also present here.

4. **Moat:** A canal that was dug to surround the castle and could be filled with water. The moat was a huge problem for the enemy, it was around 1 meter deep, enough to disable cavalry from crossing, also usually slippy and, could provide fish and water sources for people inside the castle

5. **The Bailey:** Space within the curtain wall, the Bailey was like a functioning city during sieges. It contained many buildings like living quarters, stables, stores, workshops, kitchens and halls.

6. **The Keep (Donjon):** It was usually the tallest building and certainly the most important. The Keep housed great halls, bedrooms, storage rooms, offices, and other important rooms. It was born in Normandy, northern France, where local lords ignored the popular motte and bailey castles built in England. They were normally 2-4 floors high and squared-shaped. Entranced was on higher ground connected with stairs to the ground which could be removed in case of attack. Inside there was normally a great hall, used for meals and amusement, a chapel, used mainly for prayers, private apartments, and storage rooms.

7. **The Dungeons:** Lurking beneath the castle, the dungeons were dark and foreboding chambers designed to imprison captives or enemies. Often damp and inhospitable, these grim spaces were a stark reminder of the castle's authority and the consequences of defying its might.

# Gunpodwer Era

As the Renaissance appeared in Europe, feudalism declined and centralized authority gained power. Castles found themselves in a very uneasy situation, they lost their main purpose as they could no longer withstand the power of mighty artillery. As time passed, castles underwent various transformations, adapting to the changing demands of warfare and societal dynamics. Some were expanded and fortified, while others were converted into palatial residences or museums, preserving their historical significance for future generations to appreciate.

This is what happened to most of them:

1. **Renovation and Transformation:** Various castles were renovated and transformed to serve new functions. As they lost their purpose they were modified into stately homes or palaces by noble families. They underwent many renovations to adapt to the changing social and architectural tastes of the time. Elements of Renaissance, Baroque, or Neo-Classical were integrated into the existing medieval structures.
2. **Abandonment:** With the decline of feudalism, some castles were abandoned by their owners, and their fate was left to nature. As they slowly decayed, they also became an inspiration for many artists.
3. **Demolition:** Many castles were dismantled or demolished. Sometimes authorities ordered their destruction to use construction materials, mainly stone, or to prevent these structures from becoming centers for rebellion.
4. **Tourist Attractions:** A few medieval castles managed to escape their unfortunate fate and were converted into museums, heritage sites, or tourist attractions. Governments and private organizations took the responsibility of preserving them and ensuring that these remarkable structures do not decay.
5. **Inspiration:**Medieval castles became an inspiration for many artists in the past. Knights, princesses, and legendary quests became iconic symbols of these magnificent structures.
6. **Modern Residences and Hotels:** A select few medieval castles were converted into modern-day residences or luxury hotels, offering guests a unique opportunity to experience history while indulging in modern comforts.

## ****Archaeological Sites:**** For many abandoned castles only ruins remained. Some of these ruins became archaeological sites, offering insights into medieval life.

# Examples

Today, these magnificent structures serve as living museums, drawing tourists and history enthusiasts alike to explore their rich heritage. Tourists can step back in time and immerse themselves in the stories of chivalry, courtly love, and medieval life that these castles hold within their walls.

Here are some of the most eminent:

**Malbork Castle**

*Location: Malbork, Poland*

*Constructed: 13th Century*

It is considered the largest castle in the world by area. It was built by Teutonic knights in northern Poland.

**Château de Doué-la-Fontaine**

*Location: Doué-la-Fontaine, France*

*Constructed: 9th Century*

It is the oldest known castle in the world located in Normandy, northern France. It is a typical motte and bailey castle built by Normans (Vikings). It suffered many destructions in the past but the majority managed to survive.

**Neuschwanstein Castle**

*Location: Schwangau, Germany*

*Constructed: 19th Century*

It’s located in Bavaria, southern Germany, and is one of the most iconic castles in the world and a famous tourist attraction. It was built by King Ludwig in the 19th

**Mont Saint Michel Castle**

*Location: Normandy, France*

*Constructed: 8thCentury*

It is famous because it’s located on an island, during the day water retreats making it connected with the land, and then water returns making it an island again

**Edinburgh Castle**

*Location: Edinburgh, Scotland*

*Constructed: 12th Century*

It was used as a residence for the royal family and as a military base. After the union with Great Britain, it was still a military base and today is a popular tourist attraction.

**Eltz Castle**

*Location: Wierschem, Germany*

*Constructed: 12th Century*

It was built by the Eltz family in the hills near Koblenz and is one of the most famous castles in Germany and a tourist site.

**Prague Castle**

*Location: Prague, Czechia*

*Constructed: 9thCentury*

Located in Czechia’s capital it is alongside Malbork Castle considered the largest in the world. It is also connected to the old town of Prague by Charles Bridge, another famous tourist site

**Windsor Castle**

*Location: Winsdor, England*

*Constructed: 11thCentury*

Favorite residence of the royal family of England, it is also opened to tourists since the 1920s. Built by William the Conqueror, it is the oldest still used castle.

**Hohenschwangau**

*Location: Hohenschwangau, Germany*

*Constructed: 19th Century*

Built on the 12th-century fortress by King Maximilian II it is alongside Eltz and Neuschwanstein one of the most famous castles in Germany, and in the world. Located in southern parts of Bavaria it is also popular for tourists.

**Versaille**

*Location: Versaille, France*

*Constructed: 17th Century, 1623 (early castle)*

Located near Paris it was a royal palace for the French royal family. It was the center of government and justice in France. It’s famous for its gardens and breathtaking interior. In 1789 it was no longer home to the royal family and in the 19th it became a history museum. About 15 million tourists visit the castle every year.

# Castles in modern culture

In today’s age, castles continue to hold a prominent and romanticized place in various forms of media and entertainment. They are presented in a multifaceted manner, evoking a wide range of emotions and associations. Here are some detailed ways in which castles are presented in modern culture:

1. **Literature:** Castles have been a recurring motif in literature, especially in fantasy and historical fiction genres. They often serve as central settings for epic adventures, romance, and intrigue. Novels like "The Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien and "A Song of Ice and Fire" by George R.R. Martin feature grand castles that play major roles in shaping the plot. In these stories, castles are often portrayed as imposing structures filled with secrets, hidden passages, and dramatic histories.
2. **Movies and TV Shows:** Castles are frequently featured in movies and television shows, with many productions set in medieval or fantasy worlds. Films like "Harry Potter," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Cinderella" showcase magical castles as enchanting settings integral to the story. Historical dramas like "Braveheart" and "The Tudors" use castles to recreate specific periods and highlight political intrigue and power struggles.
3. **Video Games:** Castles are prevalent in video games, providing players with immersive experiences in virtual worlds. Titles like "The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim," "Dark Souls," and "Assassin's Creed" feature intricate castle designs, allowing players to explore their vast halls, dungeons, and ramparts. These virtual castles often act as strongholds, boss arenas, or essential story locations.
4. **Tourism and Travel:** Real-world castles attract tourists from all over the world. Many medieval castles, such as the iconic Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany or the Edinburgh Castle in Scotland, have become popular tourist destinations. Visitors can tour their historical interiors, walk along ancient walls, and even participate in reenactments of medieval events.
5. **Children's Media:** Castles are common elements in children's media and cartoons, where they represent enchanted worlds and magical adventures. Animated series like "Sofia the First" and "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic" often feature magical castles as the central settings, portraying themes of friendship, bravery, and imagination.
6. **Art and Illustrations:** Castles are a favorite subject for artists and illustrators. They appear in paintings, illustrations, and digital art, often depicted in breathtaking landscapes or fantastical realms. These artworks showcase the allure and grandeur of castles, adding to their iconic imagery in modern culture.
7. **Advertisements and Brands:** Castles are occasionally used in advertising campaigns and branding to evoke a sense of heritage, luxury, and timelessness. They can be found in commercials for fairytale-themed products, luxury goods, or historical experiences.
8. **Theme Parks and Events:** Amusement parks and medieval-themed events often include castle replicas as part of their attractions. Renaissance fairs, in particular, recreate medieval settings with temporary castles, offering visitors a chance to experience aspects of medieval life, such as jousting tournaments and medieval banquets.

In modern culture, castles symbolize a blend of history, fantasy, and architectural magnificence. They evoke a sense of wonder and nostalgia, capturing the imagination of audiences across different forms of media and entertainment, making them timeless icons of the past and enduring symbols of storytelling magic.