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Forgotten Castle Landscapes: Connecting Monuments and Landscapes through Heritage and Research

Aleks Pluskowski ^a, Rowena Banerjea ^a and Guillermo García-Contreras ^b

^aDepartment of Archaeology, University of Reading, Reading, UK; ^bDepartamento de Historia Medieval y Ciencias y Técnicas Historiográficas, Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the theme of a special issue exploring the connections between castles (broadly defined as medieval fortified sites) and their landscapes, from archaeological and heritage perspectives. It includes a brief case study of how some of the castles in Occitanie, southern France, have been connected with their landscapes in the construction of *Le Pays Cathare* within the context of promoting regional tourism.

KEYWORDS

Castles; castle landscapes; medieval; heritage; Europe



This special issue of *Landscapes* draws on a conference session called ‘Forgotten Castle Landscapes’ at the 25th annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) in Bern in September 2019. It is also connected with two research programmes focusing on castles, their landscapes and heritage: the ‘Landscapes of (Re)Conquest’ and ‘All along the watchtowers!’. The aim of the session, and this special issue, is to contribute

a new perspective on the relationship between castles and their landscapes, one that includes heritage as a crucial third component. In his reflection of the history of castle studies, Robert Higham (2010, 6–7) drew attention to the long and complex development of the theme of castles in their landscape and settlement context, part of a continually growing trend in holistic medieval studies (exemplified by Creighton 2002). The principal themes encompassed by the landscape approach are the castle as a centre of governance, settlement networks and economic organisation (including resource exploitation), and as a symbol of authority reinforced by military resources and the exercise of judicial powers. They also now regularly feature as part of a further analytical category of space, that of ‘elite landscapes’. Higham concluded that regional studies were ‘the most effective means of demonstrating the landscape context of the castle-building period’.

Higham, and others, have also noted that castles were ‘prime resources’ in the heritage industry and for tourism, at the heart of which is a discussion on how they should be conserved and presented to the public. The intention of this special issue of *Landscapes on ‘Forgotten Castle Landscapes’* is to focus on the lack of connection between castles, landscapes and heritage, and to explore how the presentation and understanding of castles as heritage can be usefully more comprehensively linked with their landscape contexts. The term ‘castle’ is used here in a very broad sense and our aim is to encompass all fortified residences associated with the long Middle Ages, some of which remain intact, others of which are striking ruins, and many of which have only survived as earthworks or have vanished below the surface completely.

Due to their captivating appearance as well as their enduring role in Western imaginings of historical and fictional pasts, the best-preserved castles of Europe will remain fundamental interfaces between academic and public understandings of the past. The European heritage sector has promoted these monuments as tourist attractions in varying ways, and they remain at the centre of discussions regarding authenticity and commodification. Many function as public museums, others have passed into private ownership with obligations of retaining some public access; in both instances combining recreational enjoyment with educational value. Others still have become hotels or residences with a clearly redefined commercial role and varying levels of protection for the monument’s above ground remains and its associated buried archaeology. The creation of *paradors* in Spain (or *pousadas* in Portugal) remains one of the most effective government strategies for twinning conservation with hospitality to promote local economic growth (Yáñez Juez 1991). The *parador*, which became established as a concept in international tourism by the 1960s, connected the draw of historical architecture with local gastronomy in providing a unique, localised experience for visitors, drawing them away from major tourist hotspots and connecting the historical biography of a building with its geographical context. Castles, unsurprisingly, represent ideal venues for *paradors*. In Poland, by contrast, the private ownership and commercial redefinition of castles has resulted in more uneven approaches to their conservation, although the ‘parador model’ has also been adopted (see Banerjea *et al.* 2019).

Certain elements are emphasised to promote sustainable tourism, such as a connection with a historical or literary figure, or a well-known historical event, and these can also play a role in the construction and maintenance of local communal identities. In towns, they are often the physically dominant historical monument, although they can be overshadowed by well-preserved urban fortifications (see Runge 2019; Borderie *et al.* 2019),

whilst in the countryside they can be situated in striking landscapes, which may themselves be designated spaces with recognised biocultural value such as national parks and UNESCO geoparks. They also regularly feature as the venue for festivals and historical re-enactments. It remains to be seen whether castles and their related landscapes contribute to the same sense of mental well-being in terms of existential relatedness as has been demonstrated for major prehistoric monuments (Nolan 2019), but certainly from the mid-eighteenth century the use or emulation of castle ruins as follies within a carefully designed landscape setting was connected with a sense of aesthetic pleasure, one that extended to ‘authentic’ ruins within their landscape setting as captured in the ‘ruin paintings’ of European Romantic art. However, whilst such paintings, today recast as drone-captured aerial photographs, highlight the visual effectiveness of setting a castle within its landscape context, it is questionable whether castles—as heritage—are presented and experienced in this way.

The papers in this special issue—and the wider discussion during the original EAA ‘Forgotten Castle Landscapes’ session—demonstrate a broad spectrum of understanding of the term ‘landscape’, particularly from the heritage perspective. This ranges from the very pragmatic considerations of the immediate surroundings of a castle, which may or may not be protected by conservation laws, through to a historical perspective of the castle’s political, economic and symbolic territories at any given point in time. Moreover, not all European archaeological traditions have approached or understood ‘landscape’ or ‘landscape archaeology’ in the same way, either in terms of the scale of study or methodology. For some it is the immediate context of the archaeological site itself that defines the criteria for analysis, while for others it consists of the entire natural space or territory that could be visually monitored from the fortification, the landscape of viewsheds.

In the last two decades, landscape archaeology has increasingly reshaped our understanding of medieval communities, stressing the connection between places and their associated territories. The use of Lidar and GIS has increasingly facilitated the synthesis of micro- and macro-spatial perspectives of fortified sites (e.g., Rouco Collazo *et al.* 2019). Castles, as centres of governance and socio-economic organisation, symbols of authority and security, have become important foci of these studies. But whilst both castles and landscapes, whether urban or rural, perennially attract visitors, they often remain disconnected from each other in terms of how they are presented. In other words, there is often a conceptual gap between this progressive aspect of castle studies, where landscape is an established theme, and the ‘heritage use’ of castles. This is largely due to a lack of engagement with a theoretical understanding of ‘landscape’ and an inability—whether economic or administrative—to transform these monuments into centres of management for their historical and natural environments, as they were in the past. There are exceptional cases, where the landscape context is an inescapable part of the castle’s story. Where these landscapes functioned at a crucial point in the process of state formation as frontiers, castles were frequently constructed to secure and manage them. At the same time, they existed at the fringes of centralised authority, potentially diluting its power and resulting in varying encounters between incoming and resident communities within their territories.

This is the narrative that has been created for all the major castles in the eastern French Pyrenees which defined the frontier created after the Albigensian Crusade by the Treaty of

Corbeil (1258). The architectural forms of the castles themselves, as they are visible today, are products of royal French investment after the annexation of the region. For the modern visitor, however, the castles are presented as fully embedded within the narrative of the preceding religious and political struggles of the Albigensian Crusade. This has a landscape dimension: an entire cultural region branded as *Le Pays Cathare* or Cathar Country.

The Cathar branding was planned in the 1980s and implemented in the 1990s as part of the General Council of the Aude and affiliated partners' programme of rural regeneration for the region, with the aim of using cultural heritage to promote tourism and sustainable development (Bobot 2012, 166–167). One of its products was the creation of a popular hiking trail and road route which included several castles, some of which are in difficult to reach locations, perched on mountain ridges. Moving through and actively engaging with this visually striking landscape is an integral part of accessing and experiencing these castles (Figures 1–4), where their function in the medieval French-Aragonese frontier competes with their earlier role as the dramatic settings of the Cathar tragedy, of which comparatively little survives in terms of above ground architectural remains. There is also a detachment between the experience of these castles and the broader landscape. Visitor surveys have indicated that many hikers following the trail prioritised natural heritage, which they envisaged as timelessness, whilst for others who saw an integral connection between the castles and the natural landscape, the historical context was of limited interest (Menzel 2017).

This brief example illustrates a case where castles and their landscapes are both naturally and culturally connected, yet the connection is branded with a particular narrative that is not always attractive to visitors. It raises questions about whether this connection could be articulated differently, beyond the established tourist trails. The disconnection between academic research, heritage management and public engagement is beginning to be addressed by projects that focus on integration within the context of promoting cultural tourism. A recent example is the Connacht Project in the west of Ireland led by the National University of Ireland Galway, which focuses largely on the twelfth to seventeenth century cultural landscape of Anglo-Norman and Gaelic encounters, where castles (for

Figure 1. The landscape viewed from Peyrepertuse, Aude, France. (Photo: Aleks Pluskowski).





Figure 2. Views from the donjon of Puivert castle, Aude. (Photos: Aleks Pluskowski).



Figure 3. The landscape surrounding Puilaurens castle, Aude. (Photos: Aleks Pluskowski).



Figure 4. The landscape from Montségur castle, Ariège. (Photo: Aleks Pluskowski).

example Moygara) play a pivotal role in articulating social relations. Here, heritage officers have played a crucial intermediary role for helping communities access the research generated by the project. At the European level, landscapes and cultural heritage, including castles, have been linked in similar ways in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes programme, echoing the template that has been economically successful in the Pyrenees and which has been enthusiastically adopted by communities elsewhere.

The articles in this collection draw on case studies largely from Western Europe. They capture a range of approaches to the relationships between castles and other types of medieval fortified residences and structures (thus, not solely the elite fortified residences to which the term ‘castle’ are most commonly attached) and their landscapes, at multiple spatial scales and to the value of both as heritage. Together the papers explore whether the castle’s associated landscape, from its immediate surroundings to its one-time historical territory, has—or can have—value from a heritage perspective. This value is highlighted by the case studies presented here in different ways.

The issue’s first paper, by Mads Runge (Runge 2019), has a focus on Nonnebakken, one of Denmark’s Viking Age ring fortresses, a category of early medieval fortified monument which predates the era of castle building but which, similarly to later castles, is projected as an elite, militarised structure, here reflecting the role of centralised authority in the story of state formation. Drawing on recent archaeological work and public engagement, Runge recognises three scales of cultural landscape at Nonnebakken: local, regional and national, the latter connected with the drive to designate the fortresses of Harold Bluetooth as UNESCO World Heritage sites. In contrast to the ‘Cathar castles’ which are today associated with a constructed Occitan regional identity, Bluetooth’s fortresses are connected above all with a sense of national identity, and like the other great Danish landscape feature of this period—the Danevirke—their significance is part of the historical geographic narrative of the Danish state. Nonnebakken, however, today lies beneath houses and streets, for long forgotten, and the story of its reinvention reflects a hidden spatial biography that is being increasingly visualised through archaeological investigations and made accessible to the local community.

Two articles from north-central France provide contrasting examples of approaches to later medieval fortified buildings. Mélinna Bizri and her colleagues (Bizri *et al.* 2019) focus on Gien castle in the Loire valley, famous for its row of castles which, like those in the Pyrenees, have become embedded in tourist itineraries, but which do not include Gien. Unlike Nonnebakken, Gien never disappeared, but its original significance and purpose has been concealed below later interpretations and uses, and in addition it is seen as an outsider to the Loire chateaux brand, perceived by tourists (because it houses and is branded as a museum of hunting) as being connected nature. Here, archaeology and building analysis have resulted in a completely new understanding of the castle’s origins and history, not least during its perceived heyday at the end of the fifteenth century when it underwent a rapid programme of major, politically-driven building work. Whilst a range of data was recovered concerning the sourcing of natural products from the castle’s territory and beyond, including from the Loire itself, the public story of the site is only just beginning to be told, and it currently remains disconnected from its broader landscape.

In a second paper from France, Quentin Borderie and his colleagues (Borderie *et al.* 2019) shift the focus away from individual castle-type residences to much larger fortified townscape. In the *departement* of Eure-et-Loir, a dynastic frontier during the Middle Ages, a programme of careful recording of the urban fabric and fortified structures of the department’s medieval towns has drawn on a diverse range of fragmentary historical, cartographic and archaeological sources, alongside geological and environmental data, to produce conclusions that are important from both a scholarly and a heritage perspective. This highlights in particular how these fortified settlements were

connected with the reshaping of the region's hydrology, as well as the great extent to which largely overlooked remains of medieval fortifications still survive within the contemporary townscape. Whether this perspective will be adopted by local residents and heritage managers as part of the narrative of these fortified spaces remains to be seen.

Sarah Kerr's article on Ireland considers how late medieval castles, specifically the small tower houses which are almost ubiquitous in Ireland, can be better and more strongly connected with their and landscape contexts (Kerr 2019). Kerr approaches landscapes in the broadest sense, from the physical space on which castles were built, through to their associated social territory and the subsequent cultural and literary landscapes centred on these monuments. She also draws attention to the communication gap between academics and heritage managers. Her case study is the late medieval tower house at Dún an Óir, in West Cork, southern Ireland, at the very western edge of Europe. The site is at risk from the erosion of its cliffside siting, and as with the other contributions, the importance of a multi-disciplinary methodology is highlighted, in this instance including the use of toponyms and local histories—and clan associations, because while being iconic of Irish national heritage, such tower houses are also redolent of pre-national kinship group identities (in this case, the O'Driscoll clan, whose annual international Gatherings focus on visits to their three surviving medieval towers houses).

Finally in this special issue, and in part acting as a rounding-off of the whole issue, a paper by Rowena Banerjea and the other two guest editors of this issue, along with other colleagues, draw on a range of castles in two regions—Spain and the eastern Baltic—that both (as did the regions in the two French papers) functioned as medieval frontiers (Banerjea *et al.* 2019). They particularly highlight the value of geoarchaeological approaches for connecting buried archaeological deposits with castle territories. These deposits, as Bizri *et al.* also show, are invaluable reservoirs of information not just for the occupational history of castle interiors, but also for the environmental impact of castles on their territories, and for understanding how these sites were connected with their immediate and distant surroundings and how their landscapes were exploited. Awareness of the landscape and environmental dimensions of any castle raises questions, especially given the wide variation in the recognition and protection of castles in different regions of Europe, about the definition of the spatial limits of the monument. This, in turn, affects the uneven value attached to the buried archaeology of castle sites.

Amongst the wide range of definitions of landscape in the study, conservation and presentation of medieval fortified structures that are encompassed in this special issue. The most important recurring theme is how the varied approaches to castle landscapes are not always accessible to those working with heritage, local communities or the broader public through a lack of communication and connectivity between these various groups. One of the key aims of this special issue is to highlight this need.

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Notes on contributors

Aleks Pluskowski is Associate Professor of Medieval Archaeology at the Department of Archaeology at the University of Reading, UK. His research focuses on the relationship between nature and culture in medieval Europe, particularly within frontier societies associated with crusading, colonisation, cultural encounters and religious transformations. He is currently the PI of the ‘Landscapes of (Re)conquest’ project.

Rowena Y. Banerjea is a Researcher at the University of Reading (UK) in geoarchaeology, formation processes of the archaeological record, and frontier landscapes in medieval Europe. Rowena worked as Forum Coordinator to establish the National Heritage Science Forum (2011–2013) under auspices of the Centre for Sustainable Heritage, University College London (UK).

Guillermo García-Contreras Ruiz is Senior Lecturer at the Universidad de Granada (Spain) where he teaches Medieval and Postmedieval Archaeology. He is specialist in Islamic Archaeology, Landscape Archaeology and settlement patterns in relation with natural resources exploitation. Currently he is Co-PI of the international project ‘Landscapes of (Re)conquest’.

ORCID

Aleks Pluskowski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4494-7664>

Rowena Banerjea  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1786-357X>

Guillermo García-Contreras  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0655-7067>

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