



Utilitarian, having scarcely any outside windows, this LEGO example may seem plain on the outside, but it ticks many boxes of historical accuracy. *Oton Ribić*

# CASTLES

## Reality vs Fiction

By Oton Ribić

If you're a LEGO fan and reading this then you are likely well aware of the huge range in medieval-style castles, especially those following European design, in the world of our favorite plastic brick. Real or imaginary, ruined or intact, large or small, they have been around almost since the dawn of LEGO, and show no signs of disappearing anytime soon.

Having said that, probably the most fun one can have with castles is building them! Of course, everyone is free to pick any style and technique to their liking (that's the fundamental point of LEGO, isn't it?), but what if you are a builder who strives to make their castles resemble real ones as closely as possible? Since their features are in reality often quite different to Hollywood depictions, we

will explore several concepts to help you make your castles more realistic.

Firstly, some terminology. Strictly speaking, a castle has to satisfy two criteria: it has to be a proper home to its owner, and it has to be fortified and protected against attacks from the outside. If only one of these two criteria is met, it is better described as either a palace or a fortress respectively.

The overall form of a castle depends on the period of its construction. The earliest castles, from approximately the 10th century in continental Europe and from the 11th century in England, were of motte-and-bailey type. These consist of a hill, artificial or natural, atop which a keep is constructed. The entire area is surrounded

by a wall, i.e. a palisade and optionally a ditch. The first motte-and-baileys were made of wood, but by the early 12th century, stone was used for the keep and the surrounding wall, and by the 14th century the majority of castles were made of stone. The main advantage of a motte-and-bailey design (especially if using wood) is the fast construction time combined with low average skill required for building them.

By the 13th century, new designs appeared, reinforcing gatehouses as the key weakness in most castles' defense, as well as introducing stronger and higher outer walls. Eventually construction morphed into the other familiar design, using the keep's outer walls as the main defensive feature, doing away with the separate





A famous example of a keep having multiple walls, which was not uncommon for the very rich owners to order. *MathKnight, Wikimedia.*

baileys, and using the castle's inner courtyard for outdoor activity.

The next important influence in castle architecture was the invention of gunpowder, which allowed cannons to largely replace trebuchets by the mid-15th century. As a countermeasure, angled bastions were invented in the early 16th century, which employed sharply angled star shapes to deflect cannonballs rather than absorb them. But that was already the beginning of the end, as by the 17th century castles had largely lost their defensive value, and except for in England during the civil war, they were being converted into decorative palaces, with larger and more numerous windows.

Regardless of the time and shape, the location of a castle was always carefully chosen. It was preferable to have it on the top of a hill to slow down the invasion, and on largely rocky terrain where possible, to prevent or at least deter attackers from digging underneath the castle. However, building on soil allowed for another important defensive feature if the owner could afford it: a moat.

A further excellent, if rarely available, advantage was to build a castle right next to a river, sea, or a lake. This would allow castle dwellers under siege to at least keep some connection to the outside world by being restocked by ship—or perhaps escaping in one.

The contours of the stone walls, whether used for the keep or the outer walls (of which elaborate castles could have many), largely depended on available resources. Rounded walls are more stable, more resistant to direct attack, and allow more internal space for their length, but also take longer to build and require greater masonry skill. Contrary to common romantic notions, building a castle was an extremely expensive undertaking at the time, even for kings, and skilled labor has always been rare and expensive.

The allocation of rooms in a castle also tended to deviate from our modern expectations. While it is nice to dream about castles with endless dance halls, lavish dining rooms, billiards salons

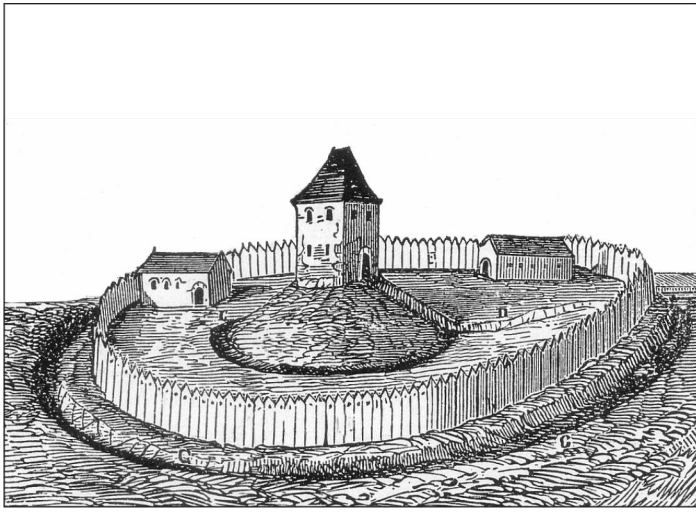
and elaborately decorated chapels, the reality was much more practical. Any proper castle had to devote an even higher share of space to various “boring” utility areas than a regular house does. This is because even in usual circumstances (and more so during political difficulties) a castle would house a significant garrison of military personnel.

Of course, a soldier's living space was not particularly luxurious, with the main hall often being used in place of rarely used barracks. Yet the need for dozens, or hundreds of soldiers to be fed daily meant that a typical castle's stores, stables and kitchens would seem enormously oversized and over-designed by today's standards. The

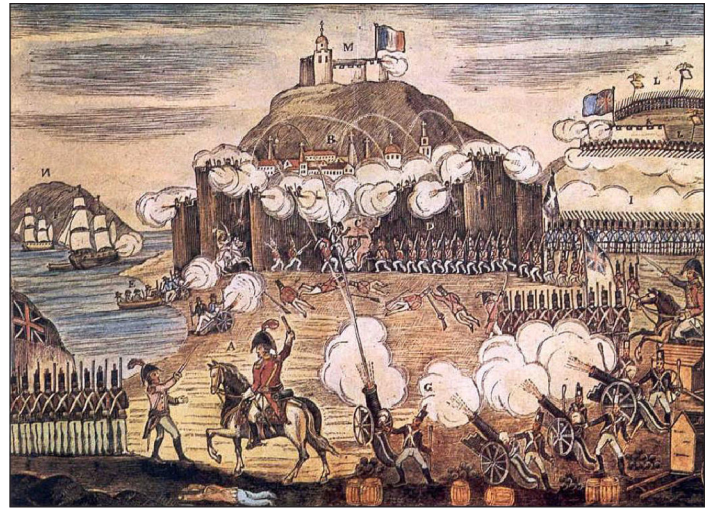


Castle decoration was not just for the owner's comfort: expensive tapestries and banners were often displayed as a symbol of wealth and influence. *Tangopaso, Wikimedia.*





Motte-and-bailey, the oldest castle design, built from wood in the early days. Later, stone became the preferred building material.  
*Arcisse de Caumont, Wikimedia.*



Gunpowder spawned a new, angled castle design, but in the longer run signaled the beginning of the decline of the castle era.  
*Denis Dighton, Wikimedia.*

owner could afford the luxury of a main hall and a personal, private section of the castle, but without a significant military presence a castle would make little sense. To give an analogy, during troubled times medieval castles were like a static version of a modern aircraft carrier, i.e. a well-defended base from which attacks could be launched against surrounding areas when needed.

A further reason for huge stores was the possibility of a siege, where even the tiniest piece of food could help in enduring the siege for longer than the surrounding enemies could patiently wait. The majority of sieges were not won or lost through trebuchets or direct fighting, as movies often portray, but rather on the castle defenders' ability to avoid starvation.

At this point one might wonder how and why, if castles were designed on strictly utilitarian principles for warfare and efficacy, they ever came to be so decorative. This is an important question as it opens another topic on which cinema and general pop culture rarely touch.

Namely, while most of the "interesting" time periods for castles revolve around conflicts, battles, sieges and political tensions, this was far from being their regular *modus operandi*, even throughout the medieval era. While castles had to be ready to defend their owners, for most of the time they were praying and hoping to retain peace. Contrary to typical belief, medieval lords were typically very reluctant to solve conflicts by force, as peace meant prosperity, and prosperity meant higher income via taxes. Castles were a home, with all the little comforts and decorations any homeowner likes to apply.

An important related aspect is the role of castles as medieval instruments of psychological warfare. They were meant to impress guests, enamor

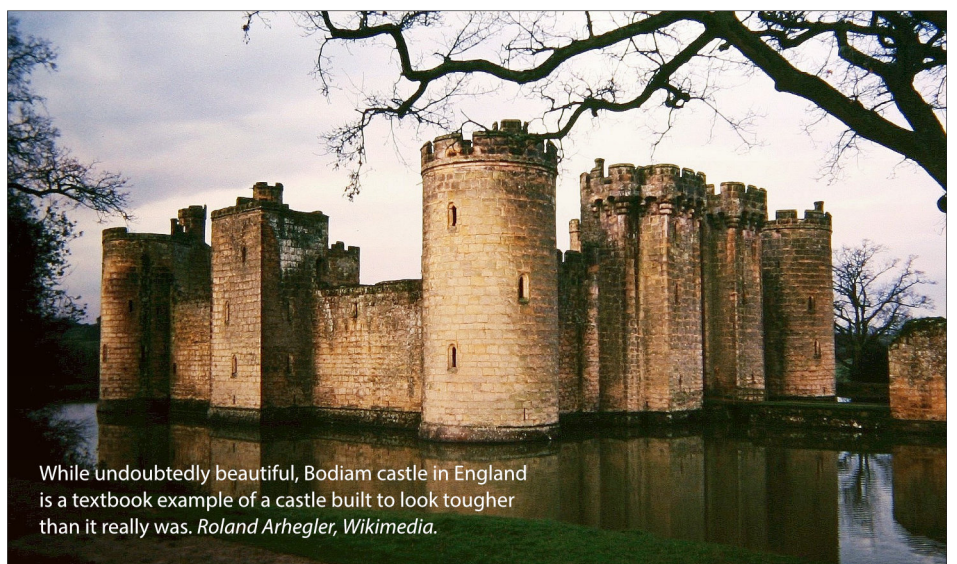
potential allies, and deter potential enemies. For that reason, many real-world castles were built to look much more formidable and unconquerable than they really were. Once pointed out, these cosmetic features often show their funny side. For example, machicolations (used for dropping rocks on invaders who manage to reach the wall below) make little sense in castles with close moats. One or two portcullises at the entrance have a practical defensive purpose, but having four or five is completely bonkers and over-the-top. They were there instead to be seen by visitors.

Decorative shields or colorful banners hanging from the windows follow the same principle. Due to the extreme cost of vivid dyes throughout most of history, an entire cascade of lively banners and tapestries served to show off the supposed wealth of the owner, giving an important psychological edge in negotiation should times become messy. (The same mentality exists today, though via other means.)

These considerations touch again on the

practical principles governing a castle's construction. Apart from the main halls and other important areas where guests would be received, most of the rooms in medieval castles were surprisingly small with low ceilings. Heating, especially during winter nights, was extremely demanding. Heating the whole castle (especially one with thick stone walls) was simply out of the question, as this would require a stupendous amount of firewood. Instead, inhabitants were either lumped closely together, or crammed into tiny areas that could be properly heated by a normal fireplace.

This is also one of the reasons why proper defensive castles rarely had windows, except for archers' slits, although windows have also often been avoided due to being obvious weak spots when under siege. The magnificent large castle windows we often imagine are the product of a more peaceful later era when castles had long lost their defensive purpose and became instead rather sturdy-looking palaces.



While undoubtedly beautiful, Bodiam castle in England is a textbook example of a castle built to look tougher than it really was.  
*Roland Arhegler, Wikimedia.*