

The Motte and Bailey Castle:

Instrument of a Revolution

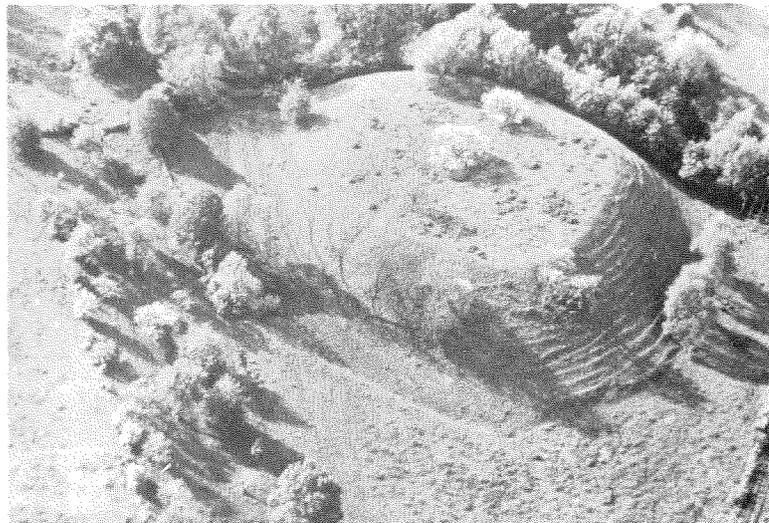
by Michel Bur

SCATTERED across the European countryside are a number of what appear to be insignificant mounds of dirt. As a medievalist and archaeologist trying to reconstruct the European landscape of the 10th to 15th centuries, I have become interested in these little artificial hills, because for several generations in the 10th and 11th centuries they constituted a weapon for the widespread seizure of power and were at the root of the most important social and political revolution of the medieval world — the beginning of feudalism.

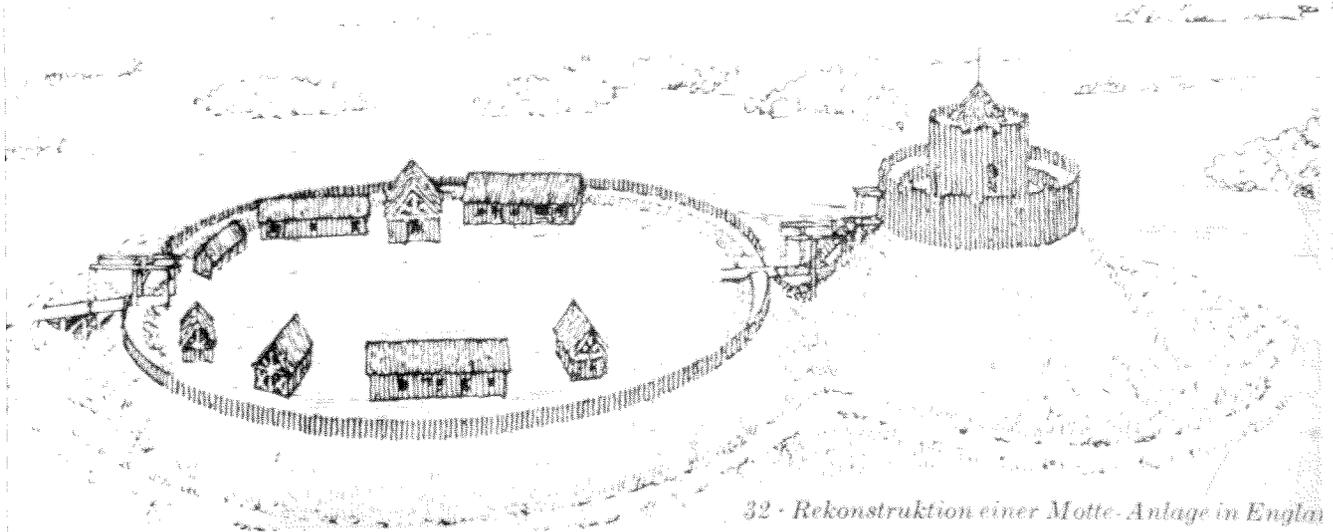
So far no one knows exactly how many of these mounds there are or their geographical distribution. It is hard to say whether they formed a pattern or were independent units. It is certain that they are neither tombs in the style of the Egyptian pyramids or Celtic tumuli, nor temples similar to the ones the Aztecs built on this side of the Atlantic. They are mottes — the first fortified castles.

A motte was made partially or completely by human hands, surrounded by a ditch, and topped by a wooden tower. A trenched annex was attached to the foot of this mound, forming the lower yard or bailey where the service buildings were assembled. The remains of mottes and baileys are still found today all over the European countryside, and their preservation over the intervening centuries has probably been due to the fear or respect that surrounds a leader's dwelling.

The mottes began to appear toward the end of the 10th century, first in low and swampy areas but then also on hills and rocky spurs, during a period of the disintegration of central power — the cracking of the unity of the Carolingian



Above, the present-day remains of a motte built in a valley (Le Vieil-Dampierre: Marne, Sainte-Menehould, Givry-en-Argonne). Left, a motte 21 meters high made of chalk (Rehel: Ardennes).



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Reconstruction of a motte and bailey castle. Reprinted from *Burgen des Abendlandes, A Tuulse, Verlag Anton Schroll & Co., Munich, 1958.*

empire. Consequently this was the period of the rise of feudalism and the formation of local power. For warriors seeking to subvert the king's authority, to appropriate hereditary rights of command and justice, and to expand their power over a territory, a motte constituted a powerful weapon. It enabled its possessor to hold out against attacks on territory he already controlled and to spread out in all directions. The mottes were the physical expression of a challenge to the incompetence of the central power. As the force behind the law over the neighboring population, they established the supremacy of the strong over the weak, of the dominant over the dependent. The motte was the symbol of a new feudal society.

Historians have wondered for a long time where lords acquired their powers of justice and command. Some have argued that these powers were inherent in landowning and that the owner of a large domain was naturally inclined to give orders and to police the population within the limits of his estate. But this theory of the landowning origin of lordship has now been abandoned. The social and political transformations that occurred in the 10th and 11th centuries could not be explained by such a simple hypothesis. Undoubtedly, important landowners benefited from these changes, but they could not have created them.

Others have seen the origin of seignorial power in the *droit de ban* — the right to command, coerce, and punish originally delegated by the king to his officers and then increasingly appropriated by them. Such power was fairly widely distributed, but to exercise it during civil wars, a lord had to have control not only of human resources but also of some kind of material means. Current research leads us to think that

without the instrument represented by the motte and bailey castle, the final appropriation of the *droit de ban* by the king's officers or the usurpation of this power by the wealthiest landowners would never have taken place. The motte accelerated the tipping of the balance of power toward the seignory. The crucial power we must consider is not that of lordship based on ownership of land (even though this type of power had always existed at a very modest level), nor the lordship of command (as this alone does not account for the means used by the possessors of power of command to establish their position and hold out against attack). The most important factor was the lordship inherent in possession of a castle; the motte and bailey castle crystallized power and in some cases even created it.

Who, then, built the mottes? The most obvious are the legal holders of power — the founders of principalities (dukes and counts) who, after having power delegated to them on a revocable basis, then claimed it for themselves by hereditary right. Because the right to a fortress was one of the rights held by kings and therefore subject to their delegation, these individuals were in the best position to actually erect them. Formal laws existed for building castles, and the counts were eager to preserve this monopoly of fortification. But, as the power of the delegating central authority crumbled, it was not always possible to maintain this monopoly. In some areas, anarchy spread very fast and very far down the social scale. Motte and bailey castles multiplied all the more easily because the materials needed for their construction — dirt and wood — were readily available, very inexpensive, and did not require specialized tools or skilled workers.

A similar phenomenon of "illegal" castle building occurred in times of crisis such as suc-

cession or wardship, particularly around the middle of the 11th century in territories that were otherwise well under control. When the ruler recovered his power, he usually preferred to formalize the status quo rather than start a war with the new castle owners who had appeared during the crisis. In the long run, however, even these illegal castles usually ended up acquiring legality by agreement between parties. Those that stayed totally independent were very rare.

Since it was a weapon in the competition among the powerful and at the same time their dwelling and that of their entourage (a setting for knightly life), the castle was fixed within a set of values and institutions completely foreign to the rest of the rural world. Basically the castle and its institutions ignored the peasant. The only connection with the tillers of the soil was one of domination, exploitation, and even outright pillage. The castle was, in effect, the camp of an occupying army in a conquered country.

We must therefore erase once and for all the image of the medieval castle providing a shelter for the neighboring population in case of invasion or other danger. It is an obsolete image dating back to a much earlier era when the Frankish kings, concerned about the welfare of their warrior subjects, maintained large fortresses for collective defense. In fact, at the time of Charlemagne and his immediate successors, such fortresses were unnecessary because the empire was at peace. Later, in the late 9th and 10th centuries, kings and bishops tried to build ramparts for protection against the Scandinavian invaders, but this peril provided an opportunity for private rivalries for power to be unleashed. Because of competition for the crown, this soon led to civil war. The seditious lords, motivated by a brutal drive for power and supported by client vassals and bands of outlaws, were not interested in the common good. The advent of feudalism is to be equated with the triumph of private interests, at least temporarily, for power always seeks to legitimate itself.

Thus the castle is not linked organically with the spread of population. Since their main mission was not to protect the weak but to allow the strong to survive and dominate, castles were implanted anywhere, but primarily at strategic points and traditional locations for the exercise of power. Castles controlled the main thoroughfares; they usurped the property of the royal treasury and the wealth of the church. The castle holders' aims were to confiscate agricultural produce, income from trade, and the symbols of authority for their own advantage.

Consequently, castles were not attractive to the

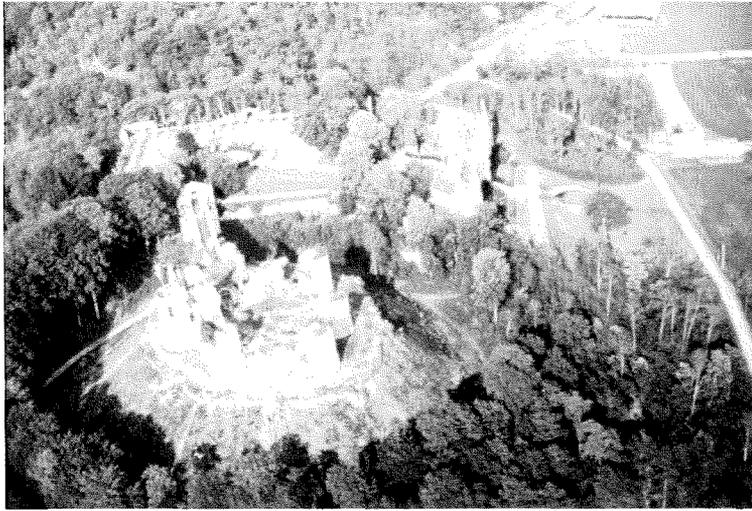
rest of the population as places to settle. A network of mottes was imposed on an already partially shaped countryside without introducing large changes in population patterns. Sometimes castles coincided with older settlements, and sometimes they stood alone. Their formidable outlines were enough to dissuade anyone from approaching, except, of course, those spoiling for a fight. The burgs, or nascent towns, that formed in their immediate vicinity were usually modest groups of craftsmen or administrators in charge of the master's supplies and the execution of his orders. Many such burgs disappeared when the fortified system did. Those that survived and grew owe it less to the privileges that they were occasionally granted by the castle than to more determining factors such as rich soil or location on well-traveled routes.

There are, however, a few exceptions — cases in which the castle did support population accord-



ing to a carefully elaborated plan. This phenomenon can be observed in the Norman settlements on the borders of their duchy and in Great Britain. As foreigners trying to establish themselves among a hostile population, the Norman lords, monks, and merchants felt the need to live together and support one another. So they combined the establishments necessary for their respective activities — the castle, the priory, and the burg. More generally, in areas of colonization, a true convergence of interests induced lords and peasants to combine their efforts and to bring their dwellings together within a common defensive system that included the village and the castle. Psychologists are well aware of the effects of enclosure in reinforcing collective feelings. Earthworks still visible on the soil attest today to the original solidarity of the teams that cleared the forest.

At center left the circular outline of a motte can be seen. Directly behind it is the lower yard, or bailey, while still further behind (shaped like a grand piano) is the outline of the former village compound, or burg. The tree-lined rectangle in the foreground, below the road, is the site of a priory. (Vanault-le-Châtel: Marne, Vitry-le-François, Heiltz-le-Maurupt.)



Top, a "motte," mostly natural, bears the remains of a 13th-century stone castle (Fère-en-Tardenois: Aisne, Château-Thierry). Below, a later "maison," whose moat has since been filled in (La Cense-Bizet: Marne, Châlons, Vertus).

Variety and size of the seignories were also factors in the need for supporting population. A great prince descended from Carolingian noblemen could hold a large region without modifying its structures, riding from one place to another without really settling down. On the other hand, a minor lord, isolated among his rivals, probably felt the need to rally as many of his men around him as possible. In all likelihood the medieval countryside was shaped more by the minor lords than by the great territorial princes.

Although it was a decisive weapon in the battles for influence and the distribution of power in the 10th and 11th centuries, the motte and bailey castle, like any other weapon, grew obsolete. As siege methods improved, the stone castle proved a much more efficient fortress. But, while wood and dirt are inexpensive materials and easy for peasants to work, hewn stone is an expensive material requiring skilled workers. Therefore the new castles could be built only by the wealthiest lords while the lesser ones struggled to modernize their more and more obsolete dwellings. Selection

worked in favor of the strongest powers with the king at the top.

If the dissemination of authority during the 10th and 11th centuries was due to the multiplication of earthen castles, the relative concentration of authority in the 12th and 13th centuries can be explained to a great extent by the cost of stone fortifications. But, while the former was a truly revolutionary occurrence, the latter followed in slower, more evolutionary stages. A last step, also evolutionary, in the central concentration of power was taken at the end of the 15th century, when kings were able to destroy any castle with their superior field artillery.

After about 1250, castles of earth and wood were no longer built, and this kind of fortified dwelling was abandoned. The lords who could not afford a stone castle began building a new kind of dwelling — a "maison." Laws limited the size of these houses to modest dimensions. These early country houses were built on a foundation that was generally rectangular in shape and surrounded by a ditch. Adjoining houses and service buildings were surrounded by a hedge or palisade with a wood or stone gate. Some houses were fortified, that is, surrounded by a blind wall without projections. In response to circumstances, especially during the Hundred Years War, some fortified houses acquired crenellation, corner towers, and drawbridges. They turned into real little castles, and the foundations on which they stood were improperly called mottes. Sometimes fortified houses were replaced by a kind of small rustic donjon, a dwelling tower. Because of the minor importance of these buildings, they did not leave a clear mark on the countryside or affect the distribution of population. Though a village might contain several fortified houses, no fortified house ever gave birth to a village.

Much is being done today in France to study earthenwork fortifications before they disappear in the modernization of the countryside. It is important to inventory them to learn how many there are and their distribution and density. An investigation is currently being conducted to establish a series of classifications based on carefully measured diagrams prepared by surveyors and presented on a standardized scale. This has already begun for the province of Champagne and is being planned for eastern France, eventually to extend to all of continental France. At the same time, archival research is yielding historical information about each site — dates, names, and the titles of the inhabitants. This investigation, supported by the National Center for Scientific Research, will undoubtedly lead to a better understanding of feudal society. □