CASTLES: MEDIEVAL STRONGHOLDS

Why were castles built?
During the Middle Ages, castles were built to control the monarch's or lord's land. Castle walls were designed to make it difficult for an enemy to attack a country. The enemy army had to waste time—and men's lives—when it laid siege to castles in a country it was attacking. Often people from the surrounding villages sought protection in the castle. Some towns and cities even built castle walls to protect their people. Castles also provided a safe place for fighters to return quickly after they had gone out on raids against enemies.

How and where were castles built?
The first castles were called motte and bailey castles. At first they were built of timber. Their main features were:
- a high mound (motte) that was surrounded by a ditch
- on top of the motte was a tower called a keep or donjon, which was protected by a palisade (stake fence)
- a defensive wall (bailey) and moat (water-filled ditch) surrounding the motte.

The Barbican, which is at the entrance to the old part of Warsaw, in Poland. A barbican is a walled gatehouse, and looks like a small castle. Like other medieval cities, Warsaw was once surrounded by a wall. The houses outside the walls did not exist in medieval times. Instead there were fields and villages.

The ruins on the hill in the background belong to Corfe Castle, in Dorset, England. The square tower is the keep and was built after the Norman Conquest. The destruction is a result of cannon fire during the English Civil Wars in the mid-seventeenth century.

The drawbridge to Marienburg Castle linked two walls of the castle. During a siege, the bridge could be lifted by chains. Below the drawbridge is a moat, which in medieval times was filled with water. The gatehouse and flanking tower also helped to protect the gate from attack.
By the end of the eleventh century, castle walls (and sometimes other parts of the castle) began to be built of stone or brick. Timber could burn easily and was less durable than stone or brick.

Some castles were built in places that enemies would find it hard to attack. Favourite positions included steep hills, narrow strips of land jutting out into the sea, and high river banks. Remember, however, that castles were meant to control the land surrounding them. Therefore, the most important position was one where the land around the castle could be watched over. Many castles were built on the islands and banks of the Rhine River in Germany, but not for defence (although the sites were convenient in that way). These positions were chosen so that their lords, who were nicknamed 'robber barons', could force the passing barges to pay tolls.

The lord of the manor

Although a castle looked like a fortress, it was also a home. It was privately owned. It may have had troops inside it, like any other fortress, but they, and all the other occupants of the castle, were answerable to the owner. They listened not to government orders, but to the lord of the manor.

Castles suited medieval times for they allowed the lords to show their strength. When feudalism (the system which helped to make the lords powerful) began to fade, so did the need for castles. The cannon also contributed to castles going out of fashion. Once weaponry was improved, castle walls could not stand up to the more effective cannon fire.

The battlements at Marienburg (or Malbork) Castle, in Poland. Fighters in the battlements defended the castle from attackers. Marienburg is ringed by four walls. If attackers broke through one wall, they had to face the next. Marienburg Castle belonged to the Teutonic Knights: a German religious order of crusaders.

1. Describe each of the following features of a castle:
   a. motte
   b. bailey
   c. moat
   d. keep
   e. battlements
   f. drawbridge.

2. If you were a medieval lord, why might you need to build a castle?

3. Look at the sources. List those features that show how medieval architects tried to make castles as strong as possible.

4. Form groups and use the information in this book and the library for ideas on making a model of a castle. When the model castle is completed, each group should provide a report that explains the castle's defensive features.

5. Write a speech of about 50 words given by the lord of the manor to the team of workers who have just finished building his castle. The lord is very pleased with the construction, so the speech must show this.

6. Do you know of any castles, forts or drawbridges in Australia? Use the library or Internet to investigate whether any exist now or if we have our own versions of castles.

KEY TERMS
- motte and bailey
- palisade
- keep
- barbican
- drawbridge
- moat
8.4

THEN AND NOW:
WARS AND WEAPONRY

In many ways the wars fought in the Middle Ages were very
different from present-day wars. Today modern technology can
make many nations, and millions of people, suffer the horrors
of war. In the Middle Ages it was not uncommon for invading
armies to massacre whole towns. They could kill several
thousand people, but they could not wipe out a large city, such
as happened in Hiroshima when an atomic bomb was
dropped. Even our non-nuclear arms are more destructive than
any medieval weapon. A castle siege in the Middle Ages could
last for months. Today a single terrorist with a bomb could
destroy an army camp in moments. This happened to the
Americans in 1983 during the Lebanese civil war. Until this
century, wars were fought on land and sea. Now firepower adds
to the overall destruction.

The impact of improved artillery
The main difference between wars fought in medieval times
and those fought today is artillery. Gunpowder and gun
technology have changed the ways that wars are fought. In
Europe, guns and cannons began to be developed by the early
fourteenth century. Gunpowder itself is a Chinese invention.
Medieval guns were not efficient, however, because they were
slow and inaccurate. Archers with longbows or crossbows

SOURCE A

The Battle of Grunwald, 1410, which was fought between the Teutonic
Knights and the Poles and their Lithuanian allies. This is a nineteenth-
century painting by Polish artist Jan Matejko. The Teutonic Knights were
distinguished by their symbol: a black cross on a white background. They lost
this battle but kept their stronghold, Marienburg Castle. This painting gives
us a quite accurate estimate of how many fighters took part in medieval
battles. Grunwald is believed to have been the biggest battle of medieval
times: a total of about 30,000 fighters fought in this battle.

SOURCE B

The two hosts [English and Scottish armies] came together,
and the great steeds of the [English] knights dashed into the
Scottish pikes as into a thick wood; there arose a great and
horrible crash from rending [splitting] lances and dying horses,
and they stood locked together ...

From a chronicle describing the Battle of
Bannockburn in 1314, when the Scottish rebel
leader Robert the Bruce, defeated the
English, who were trying to take control
of Scotland. Robert became King Robert I
of Scotland.

SOURCE C

The two bristling lines of pikes
crossed [clashed against each
other], and the leading files were
thrust upon each other's weapons
by the irresistible pressure from
behind. Often the whole front
rank of each phalanx [tight
formation of soldiers] went down
in the first onset, but their
comrades stepped forward over
their bodies to continue the fight.
When the masses had been for
some time 'pushing against each
other', their order became
confused and their pikes
interlocked.

From History of the Art of War in the Middle
Ages by C. Oman, which was published in
1924. The battle described here is between
Swiss and German infantry.
were more effective. Worse still, medieval guns could blow up in the user's face.

Once gun technology had improved by the end of the fifteenth century, the way that a battle was fought began to change. In the Middle Ages it was more common to meet your enemy face to face. Today every soldier can carry a gun, so battles rely less on hand-to-hand conflict. An enemy can be killed from a great distance. In the 1980s, when Russia tried to invade Afghanistan, Afghan fighters could knock planes out of the sky by firing Stinger missiles from their shoulders. During the Middle Ages, if your enemy was firing arrows at you, a shield had to be used to get close enough to him to strike him with your sword or axe. Some present-day armies include children as young as ten years of age! That is because modern-day light assault rifles are easy to handle; unlike the arms and armour of the Middle Ages, which were so heavy that only fit men and youths could use them.

The bloody medieval battlefield

What was a battle like during the Middle Ages? If we were to watch such a battle from a hill, we would notice the quietness of it. We would hear the screams of excited or dying men, and the clatter of swords and shields. This would not even be as loud as afternoon traffic, and certainly not as loud as modern artillery fire.

We would also be aware of how close the fighters are to one another. Medieval hand-to-hand combat meant that armies had to clash in tightly grouped formations, especially if they were infantry. Each side tended to push against the enemy, as foot soldiers jabbed and hacked each other, using all sorts of weapons: swords, axes, long spears (called pikes), maces and even farming tools. Every so often, knights, as mounted cavalry, would charge the ranks of an opposing side to try to break its formation.

Wounds were horrible. Heads and arms were gashed or chopped off, and brains and entrails were spilt over the ground. Fighters had to stumble over their dead and dying comrades. By the time a battle was over, the battlefield was soaked in blood and piled with the wounded and the dead.

It was not uncommon for the dead to be thrown into a pit after the battle, but not before the victors had stripped the dead of any worthwhile arms and armour. If a soldier's wounds made him disabled, he spent the rest of his days as a beggar.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. How accurately do you think Source A shows a medieval battle? What evidence might the artist have used to paint this picture?

2. What evidence is there in this unit's sources that the medieval battlefield was a messy and bloody place where fighters fought shoulder-to-shoulder in tight formations?

3. List three differences between a medieval battle and a modern battle.

4. Imagine that you are one of the fighters in Source C. What would be your feelings as you experienced the battle described in this source?

5. How can we find out the social rank of any person (whether someone is a knight or a peasant) on the battlefield by looking at his equipment?

6. List the reasons why medieval guns worked badly.

7. Use your school or local library or the Internet to find out more about the battle of Grunwald or another medieval battle. Write a newspaper report on the battle.

8. Design a set of posters, website or PowerPoint demonstration explaining the most important weapons used in the Middle Ages.

KEY TERMS
- artillery
- crossbows
- longbows