

The Norman Imposition: castle construction and the urban environment in England, AD 1050–1150

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This PhD project is exploring the phenomenon of urban castle construction in England in the later 11th and early 12th centuries following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 in the context of the Wallingford Project. Urban castles are those that were constructed within the fabric of a pre-existing town or city (Drage 1987; Creighton 2002 chs.3 and 7), of which Wallingford Castle (Oxon.) is a classic example, being situated in the north-eastern corner of the earlier town and forming a key case study within the research project. Fieldwork and desk-based research have already been able to discern much about the form of the original motte and bailey castle at Wallingford which has been heavily disguised behind the later development and expansion of the castle complex. It has also been possible to re-assess the alignment of the pre-Conquest town *burh* defences which are largely lost beneath the later castle development which has important implications for understanding the form of the Later Anglo-Saxon town.

At a broader level, the critical analysis of the concept of the urban castle will be at the core of this project. Principally, urban castles were held by the crown and are generally portrayed as an oppressive element in the Norman Conquest of Anglo-Saxon England. But there is clear evidence that these ideas rely heavily on a simplistic model of the Norman invasion with its crude ethnic connotations. As part of this model the introduction of the castle into the urban space in England has also been frequently understood as a movement of emphasis from public defences in the form of the Anglo-Saxon *burh* to the private defence of the Norman castle, with little reference being made to the complexity and diversity of the archaeological evidence.

The phenomenon of urban castles will be analysed at a range of scales to allow their efficacy and relevance within their settlement contexts to be judged effectively. In addition to studies of individual towns such as Wallingford and Huntingdon (Cambs.), research will take in wider regions including the county of Sussex and the River Severn zone. Regional studies will allow comparative analysis not only of urban castles in different towns, but also with urban settlements in which no castle was constructed. The idea sustaining this approach is that these comparative investigations will

inform on why particular settlements were selected for the erection of a castle; this in turn will bring research closer to the reasoning behind the construction of the castles themselves.

Methodologically the two key forms of evidence to be utilised will be the results of urban excavations and original earthwork survey. Importantly, investigation will not simply be on the urban castles themselves but also their wider urban contexts, informing on how the condition of towns developed through the 11th and 12th centuries and how castle building sat within that form. The use of earthwork survey may at first seem an unusual choice in a project investigating urban landscapes, but utilised carefully alongside the assessment of excavated material and the topographical form of the surviving town fabric, it can produce major dividends. Wallingford provides a particularly potent example since the extensive earthworks of the castle and pre-Conquest *burh* survive in a relatively complete form, but the effectiveness of earthwork survey has also been demonstrated in Huntingdon where investigation of the open area of Mill Common adjacent to the castle is going some way towards elucidating the form of the 11th-century settlement.

Research to date has made important steps in the reassessment of both the castles themselves and their urban form. Important original archaeological identifications so far realised include the north-eastern defensive perimeter at Winchcombe (Glos.) and the original route of the north-south road through Wallingford, both of which add important dimensions to the understanding of the pre-Conquest urban landscape. At a broader level it is becoming clear that archaeological understanding of towns across this period is in need of significant revision before any attempt to understand the imposition of castles within their fabric can be confidently undertaken. Fortunately there exists a potential of evidence which, set within a reflective theoretical study, will enable such an ambitious research project to proceed.

References

- Creighton, O.H. 2002. *Castles and Landscapes*. London: Continuum.
Drage, C. 1987. 'Urban Castles', in J. Schofield and R. Leech (eds), *Urban Archaeology in Britain*. London: CBA Research Report No.61, 117–132.

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