



This is the third of a series of heritage-related articles, published by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht in conjunction with the Irish Examiner and Limerick Education Centre. The focus turns to how we have defended ourselves and our communities through the ages and what relevance these defences have for us today.

# How Ireland defended itself and its native communities

**T**ODAY, dedicated gamers will be familiar with the trials of Ezio as he negotiates life in the 12th century to protect himself against the assassins of the Borgia. How many have asked, however, what it was really like to live in medieval times? How would you have protected yourself, your family and your home?

In Ireland people have protected themselves since prehistoric times by building defences.

In the Bronze Age, palisaded settlements are known to have existed; in the Iron Age promontory forts were strategically located along our coastline, and in early Christian times we find defensive ring forts. However, most prominent of all are the medieval stone castles and tower houses which can be found throughout the country.

This article outlines the different ways people defended themselves in

Since ancient times Ireland has had to defend itself from invaders.



Ireland during the medieval period, focussing on the chronological development of castles with their enclosing walls (bawn), battlements, and defensive features like murder-holes and arrow loops.

Our castle legacy derives from the Normans, originally from northwest France, who, in 1066, invaded and conquered England (Battle of Hastings) and eventually arrived in Ireland in 1169. The Normans were highly skilled swordsmen and accomplished horsemen. In addition, many were highly trained bowmen, often being on target at a distance of 100m.

They were also leaders in defensive strategies bringing with them a new defensive architecture that has become one of the most iconic field monuments in our landscape today.

During the early stages of the Norman campaign the defences that



## BATTLE-HARDENED

See [www.middle-ages.org.uk](http://www.middle-ages.org.uk) and [www.bayeaux-tapestry.org.uk](http://www.bayeaux-tapestry.org.uk) to find out more about the Bayeux Tapestry. It depicts a motte and bailey castle being constructed at Hastings in 1066 in preparation for the battle.

were built were quickly constructed earthwork and timber castles known today as mottes and baileys, and ringworks.

The mottes that are visible on our landscape today are large, tall mounds which, in medieval times,

## STEALTH DEFENCE

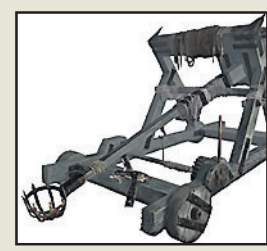
At the Iron Age promontory fort Dun Aonghusa on the Aran Islands, the most accessible approach to the fort is strewn with oblong, irregular limestone blocks pointing in all directions and packed closely together. This made a stealth attack from this side impossible on horseback or on foot.

would have had a fortified wooden tower (bretache) on the top.

Attached to the base of the motte was a bailey — an earthen enclosure with a large bank defended by a large wooden fence or palisade. The bailey was mainly used for storage, stables and billets while the motte housed the Lord, his chief advisers and his family.

Ringworks are another form of castle — similar to a bailey.

Once control had been established, the Normans concentrated on building more permanent structures and by the 1180s large



## Under attack

Mangonel and trebuchet were types of catapult used to throw projectiles at a castle's walls, and are familiar from films such as 'Lord of the Rings'.

stone castles or keeps began to emerge. These keeps formed an easily defended base from which control could be maintained over conquered lands. A good example of this is Trim Castle in Co Meath, which was the administrative centre of the Lordship of Meath.

However, as the Normans were newly settled in the country the first stone castles had a strong military function; most had a central keep with a timber hall, surrounded by a large curtain wall defended by mural towers and fortified gateways with a portcullis.

Outside was a large water-filled moat crossed by a drawbridge to a heavily defended gate at the other side, called a barbican. The curtain walls were strong and thick and sloped towards the base to make them less vulnerable to undermining by an aggressive and determined enemy.

However, while the enemy may have been trying to destabilise the walls of your keep, an expert army would have been dropping heavy objects on the attackers through a projecting defence at the top of the walls, which had an opening at its base, termed a machicolation.

Further defence would have

come from the longbows and crossbows of the archers firing from the battlements or arrow loops (openings) in the mural towers and curtain walls. These loops were cleverly designed to give maximum defensive cover while giving good views of the target. Even if the enemy managed to breach the curtain wall and get to the keep the entrance-way itself had a murder hole in the vault overhead which was used to bombard the enemy with very unpleasant ammunition.

Taking any stone castle by force in the 13th century meant the use of grappling irons. Sometimes a scaling tower was used because it gave the attackers protection while attempting to approach, climb and breach a high curtain wall. A number of machines were used to damage the walls — some of which are familiar from films such as 'Lord of the Rings' — for example, battering rams and large catapults called mangonels and trebuchets. Some of the larger catapults could fire large objects up to a distance of 200m, while higher trajectory catapults could fire over walls and were often armed with fireballs and even dead animals — thrown inside to spread disease.

If all else failed some attacking armies put castles under siege; starving the defenders into surrender was often the most effective policy and is a well-documented tactic in historical accounts of sieges in Ireland.

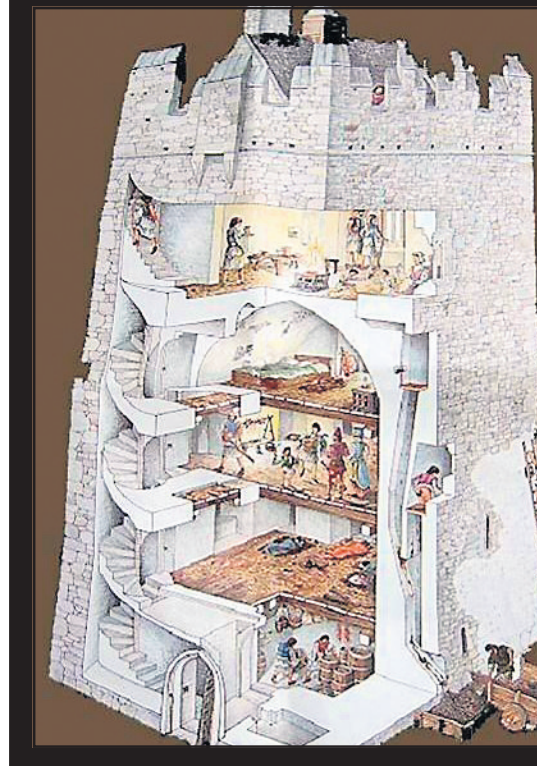
Even today, many centuries after they were built, you can still appreciate what imposing symbols of power and status castles were in their heyday. The more defensive, elaborate and grand the castle, the higher the status of the owner and those who worked for him.

While these keeps served a very important military function, they were much more than that.

The structures were an integral part of Norman feudal life, and their meticulous layout and



Roscommon Castle: Our castle legacy derives from the Norman who arrived in Ireland in 1169.



Clockwise from top: A scene from a siege at a castle; Grianan of Aileach, Donegal; and everyday life in a tower house. In the Bronze Age palisaded settlements are known to have existed; in the Iron Age promontory forts were strategically located along our coastline, and in early Christian times we find defensive ring forts. However, most prominent of all in our landscape are the medieval stone castles and tower houses which can be found throughout the country.

Pictures: National Monuments Service/Uto Hozergell



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architectural detail are a reflection of how structured and orderly Norman society was. Each castle also served as a residence and was an important venue for celebratory feasts and tournaments.

The great halls within the

## TOUS DE LOUP DANGER

In medieval England, *Tous de loup* were pits dug along the approach to a castle — then disguised by earth, branches and leaves — embedded at the base was a sharpened stick sometimes covered in poison!

curtain walls hosted banquets for those showing allegiance to the Lord, and, in accordance with the strict rules of Norman society, people sat in order of rank on side tables in front of the Lord and Lady.

The castles also functioned as important administrative and legal

centres; very often the Lord was also a High Sheriff assigned to collecting taxes, overseeing trade and market rules and holding court. Some keeps also had 'prisons' for holding the enemy

hostage while awaiting payment of ransom.

The 14th century saw a general decline in all aspects of medieval society.

This is the period of the Black Death (1349), a plague which took a heavy toll on mainly urban populations in Ireland. This was also a period of political upheaval and as the power of the English monarch eventually diminished, Gaelic clans began to push into Norman territories.

By the early decades of the 1400s, a new type of castle, the tower house, was being built in Ireland, which strongly resembled the Norman keeps of the 12th century. However, their defensive features were tailored to more local situations where small-scale warfare was the nature of the day. For example, tower houses had specially protected doorways where an iron grill allowed the

wooden door to be opened permitting negotiations with the enemy but preventing them gaining entry.

Most of the ruined castles in the Irish countryside are the remnants of 15th/16th century tower houses built by both Gaelic and Old English (Norman origin) families.

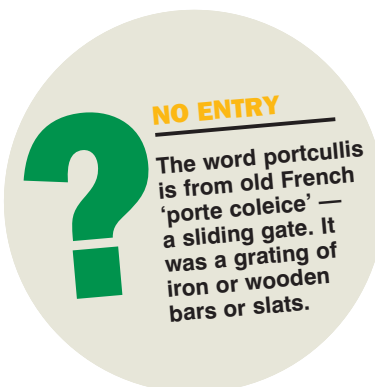
They are easily recognisable as tall 3, 4 or 5 storey towers with narrow windows and stepped battlements, and some still retain their defensive bawn walls and fortified gate-houses.

By the late 16th century, some tower houses were keeping up with a new military trend, incorporating gun loops into their defences. However, use of gunpowder and cannon sounded the death knell of castle building across Europe — they proved too easily breached by cannon fire. To counteract this threat star-shaped forts, such as James Fort in Kinsale, Co Cork, were developed.

These had sloping external earthworks to absorb cannonballs, and bastions to provide flanking fire.

Effectively, this led to the end of the 'age of the castle' and heralded a new era of defensive strategies.

● [www.itsabouttime.ie](http://www.itsabouttime.ie)



This article is the third in a series of articles published by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht in conjunction with The Irish Examiner and Limerick Education Centre aiming to supplement the recently revised second edition of 'Archaeology in Classroom, Time in Transition'. The resource offers a comprehensive range of engaging lessons across a series of three themes: **Worship and Commemoration**; **Lifestyle and Living**; **Archaeology at Work**. All the lessons are targeted (but not exclusively) at students who are undertaking the Transition Year Option. In this article the focus is on the concept of commemoration; the archaeological and historical evidence of its development and its relevance today. For a more complete picture, this article should be read in conjunction with Theme 2, Unit 2, Lessons 1 and 2 of Time in Transition available on [www.itsabouttime.ie](http://www.itsabouttime.ie).

