The purpose of psychology is to give us a completely different idea of the things we know best. ~ Paul Valéry, Tel Quel, 1943
Psychology has a long past, but only a short history. ~ Hermann Ebbinghaus

Crenellating the Ego: Psychology and Castle Studies

by Philip Davis[1] (First published 9 November 2007)

Minerva, goddess of the defensive arts of warfare and, also philosophy.

Perhaps the most important block to a fuller understanding of 'the castle' is the psychological power the institution itself, and warfare more generally, have had on the people studying it. This psychological force has affected the judgment of people writing about castles, both today and in the medieval world. Basic human needs for emotional security and outlets for the expression of frustration must have remained unchanged for millennia although the expression of these varies from individual to individual, across cultures and through time. This essay will explore some aspects of this as these relate to castle studies.

This is not a 'definitive' paper but a deliberately provocative piece intended to inspire thought and to challenge some presumptions. It is the hope, but not the expectation, of the author that further detailed study of this area, with full research, will take place in the future.

It is beyond the scope of this small article to even outline the fundamental concepts of psychoanalytical theory and other psychological theories and models. However, one concept which should to be explained is that of ego defences. Although normally discussed in the context of clinical psychology, ego defences are an essential part of the human psyche and all people have them, expressed in a wide variety of ways. Ego defences are the mental mechanisms used to maintain the individuality of a person, which prevent the person from being overwhelmed emotionally by the needs, desires and distress of other people and from allowing their own needs desires and distress to overwhelm, and repel, others. As people are social beings these defences also need to allow emotional contact between individuals. The balance between emotional security and social interaction can be tricky and most individuals have a complex of many ego defences used differently at different times and situations.

The Castle in Psychology

Sigmund Freud, and others, have written widely on the origins of aggressive warfare

(summarised in Keegan, 1993, pp. 81-94) but little psychological attention has been given to defensive warfare.

The castle is occasionally mentioned but little written about in psycho-analytical writing. The term 'castle' does not occur in the indices of Freud's complete works and the main reference by Carl Jung, the arch symbolist, is a mention where he dreams of a hilltop castle with a tall tower the top of which is a balcony where a woman stands. The woman he identifies as a patient with whom he was having difficulty forming a therapeutic relationship. The woman is cut off from him and is described as looking down on him.

Other writers in the psychoanalytic tradition have mainly seen the castle as a symbol of psychic protection, but also, sometimes, as symbol of the isolation necessary as part of the process of individuation or as a symbol of the difficulty of achieving self-realization where a struggle between the id (loosely the instinctual drives) and the super-ego (roughly the conscience) can be symbolised as siege warfare. Occasional the castle is used as a symbol for the female body, usually in the context of male penetration of female defences (often specifically the hymen, although this is itself symbolic of psychological defences). All such writers take as a given axiom that the castle is a defensive structure and where the castle is described it is usually as a plain, unadorned, hilltop structure.

There is, probably, little to gain about a direct understanding of the medieval castle from psychoanalytic writing since this writing uses a germanic model of the castle that is divorced from the historical and archaeological evidence of the medieval western castle. But this model of the grim military structure does remain widely held in the psyche of individuals and has affected castle studies. The more general insights into the human condition offered by psycho-analysis and psychology in general have, and continue to, influence our understanding of

Peveil Castle, Derbyshire
A castle isolated on a hilltop but sited over the Peak's Arse cavern which had considerable symbolic significance.

the past and the more general *zeitgeist* in which we all live.

A very few writers have attempted to get a direct understanding of the inner psychological world of the medieval person. Harald Kleinschmidt exploring perceptional psychology notes a change in perceptual standards in the 12th century from 'group-centred' to 'space-centred', that is moving from seeing and portraying the world in terms of relationships of social groups into seeing and portraying the world as 'the aggregate sum of hierarchically arrayed places with which different qualities were associated' (Kleinschmidt, 2005, p. 23). In a space-centred perception higher places are better and Kleinschmidt suggests that hilltop and motte castles were built because of this perception of height equating with social status. (A similar point has been made by others, including R. A. Brown, although with less psychological expertise.) The complex of castle forms and locations suggests that this change was not a sudden or clean one and that space-centred perception may have origins before the 12th century and the continuing use of older high status sites suggests group-centred perception continued to have some currency in later periods and it may well be that space-centred perception was an addition to, rather than a replacement of, group-centred perception.

Disciplines with a strong psychological component, such as anthropology and cognitive archaeology, have not been applied to castle studies although I suspect that, just as landscape archaeology has had major affects on the understanding of the castle, applying the techniques of anthropology and cognitive archaeology would greatly increase understanding and change perceptions of the castle.

The greatest psychological influence on the study of castles has been the introduction of the concept of symbolism, although this has mainly been confined to understanding later masonry castle, most notably in the extensive discussions about Bodiam Castle, Sussex. Even here this concept has been used in a relatively limited way and mainly confined to considerations of the peer to peer social and political messages contained in castle architectural forms, although others have started to explore the symbolic meaning of castle landscapes and features. (Notably Marten-Holden (2001) where Christian symbolism is attributed to the associated deer park, fish pond and dove cot. - as showing God given dominion over the beasts of the land, sea and air) There appear to be still a number of writers who fail to understand symbolism as an idea and consider it to refer only to 'sham' defences. The

The badge of Jane Seymour. Difficult to see this as anything other than a symbolic womb holding the future Tudor king.

symbolic transmitting of conscious and, particularly, unconscious psychological messages remains unexplored in castle studies writing.

Psychology in the Castle

Whilst the castle may not be much of a feature of psycho-analytic writing some features of the castle have resonance with psycho-analytic themes. The tall tower, such as the bergfried of the germanic castle, has phallic symbolism to which tower top machicolations, such as at Warwick, add somewhat more graphic *corona glandis* detail. The twin drum towered gatehouse has a *labia majora* form and the portcullis gives this a 'toothed vagina' quality. The castle is sometimes given a female identification with the interior court having a womb-like quality[2].

Such unconscious ideas of repressed sexuality were not the prime reason for building castles but the specific form of some castle features may well be influenced by such drives although separating such psychogenic factors from the other economic, social and military factors may well prove impossible. However, explaining complex castle forms purely in military terms, as has been done for decades, is as naïve as calling a tower a phallus.

Examination of the 'defensive' gatehouse shows the numerous forms that have been

used (The plans of Sidney Toy remain very useful for this). The twin drum tower form is not the most military form of gatehouse; indeed, hidden gateways, such as the East Gate of Troy or recessed gates such as Porte des Gaules at Fréjus make better military sense since they allow more concentrated 'firepower'. However, the twin drum tower gatehouse is the form of gateway for the 13th and 14th centuries. This probably has to do with following fashion based on allusions to Roman Imperial forms; but this still begs the question as to the reason for such a form to be as fashionable. Here, it is suggested that the *labile majora* quality had an unconscious resonance for castle builders, not in a salacious pornographic way, but as a retreat to the maternal womb. A drive mirrored more widely shown in the cult of the Virgin Mary as mother figure.

Genesis by Jacob Epstein
Whitworth Gallery Manchester.

The phallic symbolism of the tower is fairly clear and the overt message of dominance and (military) power is little different from the covert psychological message of male generative power. The 'zoological/ anthropological' view of Desmond Morris would also fit with the tower being a symbol of the male penis with an overt message very little different from the covert message of group supremacy. The medieval towers of Bologna, Italy, are a particularly fine example of a symbolic display of penises. Indeed this symbolisms is so obvious it is difficult to believe that it was not also fairly obvious for the medieval builders but the power of individuals and groups to suppress 'obvious' knowledge can, at times, be astonishing.

The tooth like form of crenellations may also have some base attraction. Baring the teeth is an aggressive display in primates and is culturally unacceptable in Japan[3] and elsewhere, although in other cultures the toothy smile is common. The unsmiling display of teeth, in the snarl, remains an aggressive display.

The other aspect of the castle with fairly intense psychological meaning, although less stated in more recent years, is the dungeon. Although the word dungeon is a corrupted form of donjon (the great tower of the castle) the image in the popular mind is that of the underground hidden, dark and unpleasant place where people are locked away and tortured. This has a deep resonance with the way that many people deal with the negative, unliked, socially unacceptable aspects of their personal inner world; which

Armley Gaol, Leeds. Built 1847.

is to 'box' these away. That this is a 'hidden' aspect of the castle means that it is not expressed in architectural forms but the symbolism remains in popular folklore, etymology, in the practical use of some castles and castle sites as prisons and in the castellated architectural forms used in many prisons. More subtle is the use of the castle itself as a symbol of the hidden dungeon itself the symbol of hidden 'bad' feelings. Thus the castle might symbolically defend the whole ego and/or represent that part of the ego which needs to be contained.

Psychology in Castle Studies

Internal anger, of whatever psychogenic origin, is often expressed by an interest in violent activities and warfare. The needs for social and individual security means the direct express of such violence is strictly controlled and often highly stylised; but the feelings are readily and, generally, safely projected onto a variety of displacement objects (psychologically safe objects or people on which to project negative emotions), most simply in voyeuristic viewing of acceptable violence. There is a link between the Roman gladiatorial arena, the medieval tournee and the modern playing field, all are stylised and socially controlled expressions of tribal warfare.[4] Academic studies of medieval warfare may seem distant from such things but are, in fact, still fundamentally an imaginative voyeuristic viewing of violence. This is not to say such activity is morally reprehensible, since there is a need to express psychogenic aggression there can be little social criticism of doing this by stretching the mind in serious study.

The need to express this psychogenic violence, even as safely as via academic study, can result in serious bias. The fascination with warfare is clear from the numerous popular TV documentaries, textbooks and military re-enactors. This fascination seriously distorts perceptions of the past. The *Oxford History of England* volume for the 14th century, for instance, has two whole chapters on the Hundred Years War, one chapter on War and Chivalry and significant sections on other wars yet spares just two pages for the Black Death.

Partly this is due to the fact that this fascination with warfare is not new and that medieval writers recorded in fine detail every nuance of war whilst barely bothering to write a thing about food production. Medieval education of the sons of the elite deliberately exaggerated warfare as noble and the practice of the elite of removing sons from their mothers at a relatively young age is likely to have increased psychogenic anger, which would have somewhat increased actual violence and war but also marked increased the interest in warfare and description of many civil activities as military. Thus historians, almost entirely dependent on written sources, can, at best, reflect this fascination, although many add to its distorting bias.

It is highly probably that many of the medieval elite had concrete personalities, because of the particularly traumatic form of childhood, and would not have been able to articulate the symbolic meaning of their own buildings beyond fairly obvious, and generally militaristic, levels.

The castle, in reality rarely and often never involved in war, has since its origin, almost always, been described as a military building with its other domestic and administrative roles relegated to after thoughts. The strength of the view of the castle as a primary military structure, despite the evidence to the contrary, requires some psychological explanation.[5]

Some attempts have been made to explore the factors that influence and distort the views and perceptions of historians and

archaeologists. Mostly this has been done in sociological and political terms. Charles Coulson looked, in some detail, at the political influences affecting the interpretation of licences to crenellate and Christopher Gerrard has done a fine analysis of how archaeological techniques and theory (politically influenced) have affected medieval archaeological practice and interpretation.

A fundamental paradigm shift is not new to castle studies. In his paper 'Cultural Realities' Coulson discusses the shift from the 19th century cultural historic view of the castle, expounded by figures such as J .H. Parker, James MacKenzie and MacGibbon & Ross, into the 20th century militaristic view of Hamilton Thompson, J. H. Round and, in Brown's view most importantly, Ella Armitage. How much this reflects both sociological and psychological changes in mind sets from the relatively peaceful (for Britain) 19th century with the 'Total War' characteristic of the first half on the 20th century may be questionable but the power of greater sociopolitical events to influence personal psychological can be little doubted. Both Hamilton Thompson and Ella Armitage wrote their major works in 1912, before the Great War but after the Boer War, which, in many ways did prelude the traumas of the Trenches and the, later, Holocaust[6]. How much the ideas of Freud effected the mind set of these Edwardian authors is also an interesting area for consideration. Did Freud's ideas, freeing the unconscious, allow a subconscious reconsideration of the castle from a dungeon containing the inner beast to a fortress defending against external enemies. (Something made more of an emotional concern by the widespread misrepresentation of Darwin's natural selection as a fight between species.)

Understandably, given the potential for misunderstand and taking of offence, no one has studied the psychological factors which may affect the views and writings of serious castle studies writers. The following comments are, therefore, generally speculative.

It is probable that many of those attracted to castle studies will have ego defences of a form of which castles can be a ready symbol. That is the person already has formed a personality for which the image of the castle has an unconscious resonance. Many children feel vulnerable and develop ego defences which are apparently strong and are fixed and concrete. A disproportionate number of serious students of castle studies can be expected to have ego defences of this form. This form of professional determinism, where the personal psychological traits of the individual have a determining role on the individual's career choice is recognised both professionally and more widely, although the typical example would be of rigid authoritarian person being attracted to work in the police service.

Concrete ego defenses would be expressed with some elements of combativeness, certitude, inflexibility, pedantry, less openness to new ideas and, in general, reduced levels of empathy and empathetic behaviour. These mechanism would generally put defence from perceived psychological harm ahead of the need to socialise, although it should be made clear that having this form of ego defences is neither unusual or 'abnormal' and that 'concreteness' of such defences is a trend rather than an absolute. Although the constraints of academic writing usually do not allow such behaviours to be readily identified there are occasional examples, notable the vitriolic piece 'Castles of the Conquest' by J. H. Round. A detailed study of personal correspondence of the noted castle studies writers might give greater insight into the personality traits of these writers and allow for some analysis to see if there are common features.

My limited viewing of some of the personal correspondence of David James Cathcart King showed him to use arguments to defend his position which were more combative than I

have seen in similar situations elsewhere and to use stronger language than appeared needed. I also felt his critical writing lacked empathy and an understanding of the potential for causing distress. David King was awarded the Military Cross and was a heroic figure who was a self taught expert who showed considerable resolve in not letting the loss of a leg affect him in the monumental task of surveying numerous castles. He was admired, although he rather fell between the tribal camps of historians and archaeologists, and was a likable man, possible because, like some other figures in castle studies, he maintained a youthful exuberance. This youthful exuberance was, itself, an ego defence mechanism.

Arguably the most important figure in castle studies in the latter half of the 20th century would be the historian R. Allen Brown. His lectures, using his cavalry officer issue saber as a pointer, described, in his obituary by Christopher Harper-Bill, as mesmerising, are still fondly recalled by many. The desertion by his father in his youth may well have affected his dislike of argument and his tendency to be dogmatic. Without a detailed examination of the whole body of his work, including private papers, it is difficult to make certain assertions but there is a distinct possibility that castles, as strong 'unambiguous' military buildings, resonated with a boy deserted by his father who must have had some impotent rage and need to feel protected and secure. What is undeniable is that the body of his work, academic (notably his contribution to *The History of the King's Works*) but particularly the popular volumes (such as *Castles from the Air*), have been a great influence on castle studies in the second half of the 20th century and that he wrote, according to Harper-Bill, with a spirit of evangelism.

An association with personal vulnerability, concrete ego defences and physical bravery was explored on film in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*. T E. Lawrence's graduate thesis was on Crusader castles and this illegitimate son of a Baronet had both a fascination with castles, visiting many as a child (often on his own), and with the military, including enlisting as a boy soldier. Although Lawrence was an extraordinary man, his autobiography *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and other biographies of him may have some insight for understanding other students of castles, particularly amongst his contemporaries.

That scholars with concrete ego defences are attracted to castle studies might also be suggested by the acrimonious nature of the late 19th century debate over who founded

Reginald Allen Brown
Armed, armoured and combative?

the first English castles. Thompson (1991 p. vii) wrote of this as "to an outsider like a dispute between the deaf and the blind". It should have been a considered exchange between scholars but was far from this. Bob Hamilton has done an interesting critique of Ella Armitage which outlines how by selective use of sources she was able to produce an argument with a certitude that was questionable. As a woman successful in what was then very much a man's world, Mrs Armitage surely must have had affective ego defences. Careful analysis might show how rigid and 'castle-like' these were.

Conclusion

Concrete ego defences need not necessarily be associated with a lack of imagination. However, there are some people for whom ideas like symbolism, which require imaginative thought (such as imagining a gatehouse as a vulva), are particularly difficult to understand and probably impossible to fully take on board. Imagining an archer shooting through an existing arrow loop is one thing but appreciating the subconscious and unconscious inner world of medieval people is a major step in imaginative thought. It will be argued that this sort of imagining of the inner world of medieval people is a step to far. However, this is not about some sort of empathetic understanding as used in historical fiction but about applying fairly well established psychological techniques into gaining an understanding of individuals from their actions. This is often done successfully in criminal offender profiling but applying such techniques to understand the mental world of medieval people has not been formally attempted.

Another sign of the high prevalence of concrete ego defences in castle studies is the presence of the concept of 'real' or 'true' castles. The complex, multifunctional form of the castle means that there is no such thing but the rigidity of the concrete personality requires the certainty of 'truth'. Intelligent writers faced with the reality of the complexity of the castle as an institution have, more or less successfully, dealt with the diversity, whilst still tending to give primacy to the military aspect. A number still identify something called a 'true' castle.

More generally, in my view, the large number of persons in castle studies with concrete ego defences has slowed down the acceptance of new ideas and has made the subject one that feels unrelated to people. It is no surprise that Francis Pryor, the noted archaeologist, refers to his experience of castle studies as "dull" (Pryor, 2006, p. 275). Nearly 30 years after the introduction of concept of symbolism into castle studies there continue to be published numerous 'popular' books on castles which rehash R.A. Brown's more populist work with little acknowledgment (and even less understanding) of revisionist ideas. There are a large number of people for whom a simple military defensive definition of the castle is one that they feel emotionally comfortable in imaginatively inhabiting. Such popular books have a ready market, even if the more aggressive fantasies of 'boiling oil' have been toned down. That some of these books get reasonable reviews is not a surprise but should be a concern if castle studies are to reflect the actuality of castles and the medieval world and not the psychological needs of some modern people.

It has been said that 'military determinism' (Coulson, 2003, p. 1) is in retreat (Johnson, 2002, p. 6) and the influence of the military perspective has been questioned in the drive to study castles holistically. (Creighton, 2002, pp. 6-7). There is a persistent and strong military deterministic view, of which a good recent example is Stuart Prior's *The Norman Art of War* where he argues, with considerable force, for the military role of the early castle, but without acknowledging the bias in the historic records, or, in my view, in his

limited consideration of alternative explanations[7].

Castle studies have progressed, partly because the value of some of the new ideas is undeniable, partly because of sociological changes, of which the most important by far is the contribution of feminist thought, which by changing the academic *zeitgeist*, has increased the appreciation of difference and diversity, and partly because not all writers of castle studies have concrete ego defences. Hopefully, as castles become to be seen as complex, diverse and interesting structures and institutions the appeal of castles will widen to a broader range of people and this broader range of people will write as extensively about the political, social and psychological aspects of the castle as has been written about the military aspects in the past.

My thanks go to Dr Charles Coulson for supplying much helpful material and for reading this paper.

Post Script

Since I wrote this essay I have read Abigail Wheatley's *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England*. (Boydell, 2004) This very fine work covers some aspects of the medieval symbolic ideas of the castle notably the representation of castles on town seals but particularly the castle as used as a symbol of Christian values. There is some slight overlap of areas of interest here between the conscious expression of some medieval clerics that the castle was a a symbol of the Virgin Mary and my contention that the choice of the twin drum tower gatehouse was an unconscious choice made by castle builders motivated by desire to retreat to the womb. Interested readers should seek out Wheatley's book.

For another perspective of the expression of sexuality (particularly female sexuality) in medieval England see The Sheela Na Gig Project. Badly eroded sexually explicit figures form part of the decoration of the Tickhill Castle gatehouse and another female figure was over the door of the stables of Haddon Hall (it is now inside.)

(Further note added 22 April 2016) - Luke Croll's MA Thesis François Villon: *Gender, Psychoanalysis and Metaphor in the Middle Ages* (2005 University of Durham) (Online copy), of which I've just become aware, also looks at some of the psycho-sexual aspects of medieval buildings.

The Sheela Na Gig, Kilpeck Church, Herefordshire. This overtly sexual image was fairly common throughout medieval western Europe (although many have been destroyed) but particularly in Ireland where it is often found on castles.

Footnotes

[1]Philip Davis is an amateur historian based in England who designs and runs the Gatehouse-Gazetteer website and collates the content of that site. He has written, and had published, several papers on castle studies related subjects.
[2]The oblique sexual imagery of the castle was also used by Gothic writers, notably Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (see Ronald, 1983)
[3]Crenellations are not a feature of Japanese castles.
[4]The riots, violence and occasional deaths that has always been associated with football shows it to be a, sometimes only loosely, stylised form of tribal warfare. George Orwell famously wrote "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence. In other words: it is war minus the shooting."
[5]Some castles clearly were built initially as military buildings, but this number is often exaggerated. These military castles make up a disproportionately large number of the relatively select group of castles which are repeated used to illustrate castle studies. For instance, of the 100 or so castles in Shropshire only about 10 have real military function but these 10 include Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth and Clun. Such opinion is partly based on a question of what 'military' is and considering administrative policing by knights as military action is open to serious questioning.
[6][This footnote added 28 Sept 2016] The rapid speed with which Armitage's argument that mottes were a post-Conquest Norman innovation was turned into a more generally argument that castles were a Norman introduction to England and its acceptance as an absolute and unquestionable truth has more to do with the political situation of the first half of the 20th century than the quality of the evidence. For the generation that survived the Great War and fought in the Second World War the idea of a Saxon (germanic) origin of the castle versus a Norman (French) origin was anathema.
[7]He argued a military role for castles because many occupy military 'pivotal points' also called 'nodal points', such places are also the natural places to put administrative centres; were some of these castles, from the start, personalised administrative centres with a martial aspect rather than military buildings? Is the collecting of taxes from a recently conquered but subservient people really military action just because the person collecting the money is a, part-time, soldier? [Note added 2-6-2010. I met Stuart in April 2010 and feel he has adapted his views since the publication of this book (based on his PhD thesis) and that he now recognises the administrative aspects of castle more and, to be fair to him, some Somerset castles, particular Castle Neroche, do fairly clearly seem to have started as military bases in the 1060's conquest of the west of England, although I would argue that the military function was short lived but the site, having gained kudos from such use, then continued as a, not very successful, administrative centre. My point about the over emphasis on military history generally and in relation to the castle specifically remains the same.]

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