

The Old in the New: Urban Castle Imposition in Anglo-
Norman England, AD1050-1150

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Norman Conquest of the kingdom of England in the late eleventh century a series of castle structures were imposed on the fabric of a large number of Late Saxon towns. In the late 1980s this specific group of castles were archaeologically termed 'urban castles', being perceived as distinct from other forms of such structures encountered in the UK. The interpretation of these castles, whose design is widely accepted as being imported in this period from northern France, is closely entwined with culturally and nationalistically-loaded historical narrative of the Norman Conquest. This interpretive position has had a dominant role in how the urban castle is studied in historical and archaeological discourse, which in turn reinforces the validity and legitimacy of this approach.

The present study will seek to question the rationale and evidence behind the present interpretive framework. This will include a historiographical analysis of the development of the study of Late Saxon and Norman England over the last century and how the conditions of research in this period has influenced and often proved divisive in how the urban castle is understood and encapsulated within perceptions of radical change in English history. In turn it will offer an alternative, interdisciplinary approach to the encounter and interpretation of the urban castle. Detailed examinations of the urban castles and settlements of Wallingford (Oxon.) and Huntingdon (Cambs.) will be followed by broader, regional studies of Sussex and the Severn Vale. The castles in these examples will be studied in the wider context of urban development across the period c.AD900-1150 which will allow them to be considered as one element amongst a heterogeneous, fluid process of settlement evolution. This original methodology will be utilised to demonstrate how these sites can be used as a subject for understanding the wider phenomenon of Saxo-Norman urbanism, and that the castle is an integral, if physically distinct, element in this process.

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