

Attacking and defending a castle

Attack

Essentially there are three main ways of attacking a castle and, of course, the defenders knew this and so developed counter-measures to each. These were getting over the wall into the castle, going under the wall and battering a way through the wall to get inside.

1. Getting over the wall.

In order to get over the wall an attacking force could use ladders and grapnel irons with ropes to climb over or they could build large siege towers or belfries.



The advantage of a siege tower was that it provided a firing platform from which archers could clear the defenders from the ramparts before the attacking soldiers rushed over the bridge onto the battlements. Siege towers were large things to build and required a lot of labour,

material and time whereas ladders were very cheap and quick to make although they did have the disadvantage that only one man at a time could get on to the battlements. In order to prevent siege towers being set on fire they were often covered with fresh hides.

2. Going under the wall.

In order to get under the wall it was necessary for the attackers to mine. The entrance to the mine would be concealed by a cat (which was like a small house) or a mantlet (like a large shield). A mine would be dug to just beneath the walls, which would then be propped up by timber. These props would then be burned so the wall would collapse. They would try to make the fire burn more fiercely by adding pig fat, hay and any flammable materials they could lay their hands on. Once the wall had collapsed the attackers could then charge through the breach. Occasionally the miners could try to tunnel their way right beneath the walls to emerge in a quiet part of the castle.



3. Getting through the wall.

There were many ways in which the attackers could try to get through the wall as this by far the most common way of assaulting a castle. Obviously the weakest point within the wall

was the gateway and the method of attacking included battering rams, missile throwing machines and early cannon. The idea was to smash a hole in the defences large enough for the attackers to force a way through. The battering ram was usually a tree trunk with a strengthened head. It could be a simple affair which was carried by a large number of men and used the momentum of a charge to hit the defences or it could be housed in a portable building protected from fire by a roof covered with fresh hides. In this second case gangs of men who were protected by the roof set up the rhythmical swing.

There were a number of different sized missile throwing machine some used weights to power the throwing arm and others used torsion – twisted ropes to cause the arm to swing.

Trebuchet

This consisted of a long arm pivoted between a pair of uprights. Weights were attached to one end of the beam and a sling to the other. The arm was released and the weights went down the arm stopped as the weights hit the ground this propelled the missile forward.

Mangonel

This was a stone throwing engine that had a short arm and was pulled back by a length of rope and this rope was released to fire. As it was released the arm would be thrown forward and stopped with a trunk of a tree across the frame. As it stopped the missile would be thrown forward.

And towards the end of the medieval period cannon with their greater range were introduced. They would fire their missile at the wall and each shot would gradually smash its way through the defences.

Defence

The castle garrison was aware of these different ways of attacking the castle and so different ways of dealing with them were developed so as to try to defeat them.

1 preventing the enemy coming over the wall.

In order to prevent an enemy getting over the wall the castle builders selected their site with great care so that the terrain would be difficult for a belfry to cross. They then made it more difficult by digging a ditch or moat around the curtain walls in order to prevent the towers getting close to the battlements. The easiest way to prevent an attack on the walls succeeding with the use of ladders was by using forked sticks to push them away as the attackers were climbing them. An enemy attacking the castle in this way was very obvious and so the defenders had a long time to prepare their response.



2 stopping the enemy coming under the wall.

An attack on the walls from below was difficult to organise because any attempt at undermining the walls had to be detected. This could be done by listening to the ground to hear any unusual noises coming through the earth or it could be done by placing dishes of water around the base of the curtain walls – these would detect the vibrations caused by the excavations which cause rings or ripples to appear in the dish. Once detected the defenders could then sink a counter mine beneath the attacker's mine. Occasionally, this resulted in a hand to hand battle beneath the ground.

3. Preventing the enemy coming through the wall

The castle designers introduced various features to stop the attackers getting a clear run up at the gateways with their battering rams. These features were ditches crossed by drawbridges and gateways protected by towers and barbicans. If the ram got through, then the blows were muffled by hanging a large mattress in front of it and then a hook called a corvus or a grappling iron was swung in front of it in the hope that it would catch and then the ram could be toppled over. The garrison also placed their own missile throwing machines on top of the towers and because they had the advantage of height they were able to throw their missiles further and so they were able to batter the enemy machines before they reached the walls. The castle builders also took the landscape into account when they were building the castle. They knew where an enemy would set up their catapults and so they built the walls at an angle to it so that any incoming missile would be deflected.

Of course, there was a fourth way to capture a castle and that was by laying siege to it and by trying to starve the defenders. Nothing was allowed in and not one was allowed out. It was also combined with the other three methods but it was the long-term strategy that worked in the end.



NVL Rybots 1943 image of Bertrand du Guesclin laying siege to Mont Orgueil Castle, 1373