

Anna Marciniak-Kajzer

Archaeology on Medieval Knights' Manor Houses in Poland



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Anna Marciniak-Kajzer – University of Łódź, Faculty of Philosophy and History
Institute of Archaeology, Chair of Historical Archaeology and Weaponry
91-137 Łódź, 3 Uniwersytecka 3 St.

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I. AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The Middle Ages is a period that has been inspiring our imagination for a long time. Even contemporary *fantasy* literature, especially in its film versions, draws most frequently from the medieval climate, with the buildings, everyday objects and clothing styled after the fashion of the Medieval period. The greatest of emotions and interest are aroused by knights and castles. Some of the medieval strongholds have survived in their entirety to this day and have been changed to a smaller or lesser extent by the following generations, others enrapture with their picturesque ruins. However, not many people ask themselves the question where did the medieval knights actually live when they were not accompanying their master in war, or were not staying in their lord's impressive castles. Where did they spend their time with their families whilst bringing up the next generation of knights? Most certainly the majority of them, at least in Poland, did not reside in such mighty castles.

So where did the medieval knights actually live? The answer to this question may vary taking into consideration the extensive territories of Europe. Even the issue of the duration of the Middle Ages causes many difficulties and differs for the various regions of our continent. In this book, however, I would like to concentrate on the fortified manor houses of knights that functioned in medieval Poland, that is within Central Europe. Our country was, at the time, overgrown with widespread forests cut with marshy river valleys and with mountain ranges in the south. Such a landscape had a considerable influence on the form and specificity of settlements and homesteads.

In the major part of Europe the motte and bailey residence, with its tower buildings on top of an artificial mound, was the initial form of settlement dwelt in by the knight. However, it is not my intention to study the origins of this type of fortified manor house. This is a huge issue and it is extremely popular among scholars, not only archaeologists.

Above all, I would like to make an attempt at the reconstruction of the appearance of such a manor house, including the objects that could be found inside. In this work the reader will not come across any attempts at creation of a typology, which is so popular among archaeologists. I would like to give a glimpse into what we may refer to as 'everyday life' in the Middle Ages, and

in particular focus on how the fortified manor house functioned. The manor houses of knights, and later those of the nobility, found within the territories of Poland are indeed a real phenomenon. The geographical location of Poland, situated between East and West, resulted in a melting pot of cultural impacts and given the unsettled times a safe fortified settlement was a necessity. Subject to only slight changes, the shape of such settlements survived well into the 17th century, with some remaining even into the 18th century. It would not cause us any great astonishment if we were talking here of palaces of brick or stone, however, in this case we are talking of small wooden manor houses, frequently hidden among wet meadows. As such the fortified manor houses within the territories of Poland need be considered as a unique phenomenon that really finds no parallel in other regions of Europe.

II. FOREWORD

1. Introduction

For the majority of historical researchers, the manor houses of knights belong to the past and are something that has been and gone forever. For an archaeologist, however, they still exist, albeit in a heavily modified form. Therefore, the basic question is what is the state of the manor house today, or in reality, what are its remains, and how to identify, verify and investigate them? The most common response of the archaeologist to this question is that the designation of a manor house is a fortified residence, that is an archaeological site with distinct land features. In Poland most frequently it is the so-called motte-type residence, in the form of a mound often surrounded with a moat. Another form, typical of more mountainous regions, is the cutting off the end of a headland by a ditch, often referred to as a dry moat. The strict typological classification into upland, headland and lowland etc. fortifications was not successful. In principle we are still using the old nomenclature and saying it is a ring-shaped fortified town if it is surrounded with embankments, or a motte and bailey residence if the courtyard is situated on a raised earthwork. Misunderstandings are sometimes caused by the fact that these terms intuitively have chronological associations, that is ring-shaped fortifications are of early medieval construction whereas the motte and bailey residences have late medieval origins.

The presumption that the seat of the dominant social class, or knights, should stand out against the background of peasant households, is certainly well-grounded. In general it is emphasized that these seats were most frequently fortified. In the case of motte and bailey settlements or residences located on headlands, defence was ensured by the elevated location. In other cases, surrounding embankments or moats formed part of the defence system. It is obvious that sites with distinctive land features are easier to be discovered. Excavations of such sites provide artefacts typical of manor houses that differ from findings discovered within rural settlements in terms of quality, diversity and the high standard of workmanship. This fact supports the classification of such sites as relics of settlements occupied by representatives of the privileged social classes - knights or nobility. However, reliance only on the presence

of a distinct land feature, deprives us of the possibility of learning about the full range of the types of seats affiliated to this social group. Sometimes, archaeological field surveys reveal 'courtly material' which is not reflected by any land feature that we could expect according to the accepted norms. Of course, there is always the possibility that such a structure had existed, and that it was completely destroyed leaving only the artefacts to remain¹. Unfortunately, we are really not able to answer these doubts at the moment.

After many years of research, much can be said about the location of manor houses and their form of construction. It seems that no strict rules or trends existed that determined the choice of the location for construction of a safe residence. Our ancestors simply made use of the most suitable land features available within the boundaries of their landed estate. As can be observed, manor houses built on artificial mottes situated in river valleys prevail over constructions located on hills surrounded by ditches or embankments. Most likely it results from the fact that in the greater part of our country it was easier to find a marshy river valley than an isolated hill that could be lined with a defensive system without any difficulties.

Another issue that must be addressed at the beginning of this work is the question of ownership of these objects. The title of this work mentions 'the knight's manor' implying private ownership. In principle then, in this work properties owned by the church or rulers will be excluded, as long as they have been identified properly. Is this procedure justified? We can presume that both part of the clergy and the knighthood – nobility, as well as a duke or king to a lesser extent, used similar objects, such as utensils, weapon, tools and ornaments and so on. Royal locations or private residences of wealthy clergymen spread around the country most likely did not differ in form or furnishing from the manor house of the knight. The existing studies done allow us to make such a conjecture². However, in order to turn the speculations into an assertion, it would be necessary to conduct a comparative analysis. I hope that this work on the knight's manor house will be the first element that renders such deliberations possible in the

¹ The examples of such sites are Żerniki near Kórnik and Pomorzany.

² T. J. Horbacz, *Nowożytny dwór w Brodni Dolnej koło Łasku*. In: *Między północą a południem. Sieradzkie i Wieluńskie w późnym średniowieczu i czasach nowożytnych*, (ed.) T. J. Horbacz, L. Kajzer, Sieradz 1993, pp. 303–307.

future. Unfortunately it will not be an easy task to perform. Above all, due to the lack of historical studies in the case of many sites it is impossible to determine the ownership. Still, the possibility of incorrect classification of particular facilities does not seem to be of such a crucial importance. According to estimates by L. Kajzer in relation to Central Poland, private estates accounted for more than 90% of all fortified manor houses built prior to the year 1500³.

In the seventies and eighties of the 20th century studies of the fortified residences of knights reached their peak. Inventories were taken and verifications of late medieval defensive residences were carried out in many regions of the country. As a result, a significant database was developed providing information on the number, location and state of preservation of such sites. However, since no compilation has ever been published it can only be estimated that approximately five hundred such structures are affiliated with the Late Middle period on the territories of contemporary Poland. Different scale excavations were carried out on approximately 200 sites, including stationary excavations for a few seasons on some, to surveys which were limited to one trench and a few test boreholes.

A significant difficulty is the assignment of specific objects to subsequent owners as a result of problems with the precise dating of archaeological sites. Hence, the determination of the founder or even the successive users is not easy. The case becomes even more complicated when we have to deal with estates that used to be owned by the king or a duke and subsequently were transferred to private owners. An excellent example is the stronghold in Rozprza, undoubtedly it was initially a state-owned residence, the title to which was later assigned to a knight. In the case of the manor house in Zduny, nominally it remained the property of bishops from Wrocław, however it was leased to a knight during the entire period in question⁴. In such cases, especially when the objects under study resulted in extremely interesting data, I have tried to take them into account even as analogies.

³ L. Kajzer, *Archeologiczny rodowód dworu. Przemiany siedzib obronno-rezydencjonalnych Polski centralnej w późnym średniowieczu i czasach nowożytnych*, Łódź 1988, p. 19.

⁴ T. Jurek, *Właściciele rezydencji*. In: R. Grygiel, T. Jurek, Zduny. Późnośredniowieczne i nowożytne rezydencje właścicieli miasta, Łódź 1999, p. 243 et seq.

There is one more debatable issue concerning the term 'the knight's manor', namely who actually belongs to the circle of 'knights'⁵. In this context, the question seems of particular importance for archaeologists, the majority of whom were brought up on the views of Janina Kamińska, published until this day, that associate the so-called motte and bailey constructions with the average knight.⁶ L. Kajzer made an attempt at solving this issue on the basis of considerably more extensive materials obtained both from exploration and archive sources⁷. He demonstrated that fortified keeps situated on a raised earthwork were initially constructed by the social elites. However, gradually they were becoming more and more popular and available even for minor knights, especially from the end of the 14th century, when the nobility started to build private brick castles. Hence, the owners of the buildings in question were representatives of all strata of the privileged class, yet different at different times. Here the most important problem is the fact that the earliest manor houses most likely belonged to magnates and were not owned by knights. Unfortunately, chronology determined with little accuracy and very few dates obtained by means of physico-chemical dating methods or dendrochronology, do not allow for such distinction.

⁵ The term 'knight' usually refers to a person who served as a mounted warrior and was a landholder. However, the variety of this definition is reflected e.g. in monographs that have been published in the past years; cf. R. Barber, *Rycerze i rycerskość*, Warsaw 2000; J. Flori, *Rycerze i rycerstwo w średniowieczu*, Poznań 2003; cf. Polish publications: K. Buczek, *Prawo rycerskie i powstanie stanu szlacheckiego w Polsce*, "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. 69, 1978, no. 1, pp. 23–46; A. Bogucki, 'Strennus' jako tytuł rycerzy pasowanych (XIII–XV w.), "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. 77, 1986, no. 4, 1987, pp. 625–647; J. Bieniak, *Tytuł rycerski jako kryterium identyfikacji osób w średniowieczu*. In: *Personae–colligationes–facta*, Toruń 1991, pp. 66–73; A. Bogucki, *Rycerz i panosza w źródłach polskich XIV i XV wieku*. In: *Spółczesność Polski średniowiecznej*, S. K. Kuczyński (ed.), vol. 7, Warsaw, 1996, pp. 165–200; H. Samsonowicz, *Struktura społeczna późnego średniowiecza Polski w badaniach historycznych*, *ibid.*, pp. 267–282.

⁶ J. Kamińska, *Grodziska stożkowate śladem posiadłości rycerskich XIII–XIV w.*, "Prace i Materiały Muzeum Archeologicznego i Etnograficznego w Łodzi", Seria Archeologiczna, no. 13, 1966, pp. 43–78.

⁷ L. Kajzer, *Czy tzw. gródki stożkowate były fundacjami „średniego rycerstwa”?*. In: *Średniowieczne siedziby rycerskie w na tle badań podobnych obiektów na ziemiach polskich*, A. Kola (ed.), Toruń 1987, pp. 105–126.

With a broad definition of knighthood and treating the term ‘manor house’ more as a cultural concept than a material phenomenon, it would be also necessary to discuss the residences of magnates, when they abandoned the small household situated on raised mounds and moved inside brick-walled castles. However such a procedure does not seem to be well-founded. This phenomenon is commonly observed in Poland in the 15th century. At that time however, the stratification of the knighthood, especially the widening differences in wealth, resulted in a considerable diversification of furniture and objects found in the residences occupied by the richest and the poorest knights. This should also become a subject for future research. Therefore, in this study private castles will not be considered, although ideologically they were ‘knights’ manor houses’, formally they were significantly different from them. Clearly we have come to another problematic issue, namely how to distinguish between a manor house and a castle in the material sense. Fortunately, this questions has been answered by the authors of *Leksykon zamków w Polsce [Lexicon of Castles in Poland]*⁸. So the objects or constructions which are listed in the *Lexicon* will not be discussed in this study.

The arrangement of artefacts in particular parts of this book was an essential decision to be made, which had a significant impact on the presentation of the study results. According to archaeological practice, raw material is the main criterion for the organization of artefacts obtained within excavations. Archaeologists describe objects as pottery, metal, bone and ‘other’. Most likely such a practice derives unconsciously from the historical division into Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age based on the criterion of raw material. Classification suggested by S. South, who was one of the first theoreticians of historical archaeology, was not adopted in Poland. The criteria for division are not really uniform here and the legitimacy of classification into certain groups is disputable⁹. The classification proposed by V. Brych¹⁰ seems to be

⁸ L. Kajzer, S. Kołodziejski, J. Salm, *Leksykon zamków w Polsce*, Warsaw 2001.

⁹ It should be emphasized that the deliberations of this author refer mainly to historical times in North America; S. South, *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology*, New York 1977, tab. 3 and 4, cf. remarks of K.M. Kowalski. In: *Artefakty jako źródło poznania*, Gdańsk 1996, pp. 29–34.

¹⁰ V. Brych, *Hmotná kultura středověké tvrze v Čechách*. In: *Encyklopedie českých tvrzí*, vol. 1, Praha 1998, pp. 47–83.

more suitable in our realities, although this method is unlikely to be instilled in Polish archaeology in the light of different research traditions.

Methodological reflection in Polish archaeology has been developing mainly based on studies of prehistory. Apart from artefacts, historical archaeology deals with text and it lacks separate proposals for methodological reflection. I have also observed an even more peculiar fact. When presenting their views, methodologists more and more frequently speak of prehistory instead of archaeology. It is encouraging that they distinguish the specific character of the archaeology of historical times¹¹.

It seems in practice that a particular research approach usually depends on the changeable fate of the discussion between Polish methodologists trying to answer the question whether archaeology is the study of artefacts or past societies¹². It should be noted at this point that although the majority of archaeologists are aware of the fact that any manifestation of human activity may be a potential archaeological source, still the spectrum of typical forms of activity described, ergo identified by archaeologists, is relatively small. This is not a consequence of the lack of appropriate source facts, but our limited ability of observation. It seems that when exploring a site, we are searching for the traces of human activity that we expect. Moreover, it often happens that some of the observations made during excavations, especially not standard ones and difficult to interpret, are written only in the field diary. For fear of criticism of our explanations, we do not present our remarks to the readers and at the same time we narrow the discussion and limit the possibilities of broadening our potential expectations. Hence, this book includes only those manifestations of human activity that were described by researchers.

For archaeologists, certain objects (or most frequently their relicts discovered during excavations) are integral elements of knights' manor houses. Such objects are usually referred to as 'artefacts or material culture'. The latter term is obviously used here with a narrow meaning.

¹¹ On disintegration of relations between researchers within one branch of knowledge and the actual division into practitioners and theoreticians cf. A. Zalewska, *Teoria źródła archeologicznego i historycznego we współczesnej refleksji metodologicznej*, Lublin 2005, especially part I/1 *Refleksje nad źródłem-polem spotkania teorii i praktyki*, pp. 13–18.

¹² Cf. remarks: H. Mamzer, J. Ostojka-Zagórski, *Orientacje badawcze w polskiej archeologii*, "Nauka", no. 1, 2007, pp. 131–148.

In Poland, the issues related to comprehension, definition and finally the study of material culture (with a broad meaning) were the subject of extensive discussion over fifteen years ago in *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* [*Quarterly History of Material Culture*]¹³. The discussion concerning both theoretical background and particular research was very broad and we shall not refer to it in this work. We will focus in particular on material culture meaning “the structures of everyday life”, as defined by F. Braudel¹⁴ and limited only to the functioning of knights’ manor houses. As this work is an archaeological study, it is obvious that particular emphasis is placed on artefacts discovered during excavations. As archaeologists have access only to a small number of objects used in manor houses, it is necessary to support with written sources or iconography to get the full picture of material culture created on the basis of excavated artefacts.

Finally, as a formality it should be emphasized that the archaeological sites referred to in this book are located on the territory corresponding more or less to the territorial range of Poland during the reign of the last Polish king from the Piast dynasty, i.e. Casimir III the Great (+1370). Other territories that are within the present borders of Poland, i.e. Chełmno Land, Pomerania and Silesia will be discussed here as a valuable comparative background.

In the case of our considerations, the chronological limits of the phenomena referred to in this book are much less controversial. The lower time limit is naturally determined by the emergence of private knights’ manor houses, i.e. starting from the second half of the 13th century¹⁵. The upper time limit is more difficult to define. As demonstrated by L. Kajzer in many of his publications, the model of the motte-and-bailey residence or settlement with defensive embankments was so attractive that it lasted longer than the Middle Ages,

¹³ J. Topolski, *Fernand Braudel a koncepcja historii kultury materialnej*, “Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej”, vol. 42, 1994, no. 2, pp. 159–165; W. Wrzosek, *Braudelowska idea kultury materialnej...*, *ibid.*, pp. 167–172; L. Kajzer *Archeologia a historia kultury materialnej*, *ibid.*, pp. 173–175; J. Ostojka–Zagórski, *W kwestii znaczeniowych treści kultury materialnej*, *ibid.*, pp. 177–179.

¹⁴ This is the subtitle of the first volume: F. Braudel, *Kultura materialna, gospodarka i kapitalizm XV–XVIII wiek*, vol. 1, *Struktury codzienności. Możliwe i niemożliwe*, J. Kochanowicz (ed.), Warsaw 1992.

¹⁵ A. Wędzki, *Ze studiów nad rezydencjami możnowładczymi i rycerskimi na ziemiach polskich w XI–XII wieku*, “*Slavia Antiqua*”, vol. 25, 1978, pp. 173–187.

i.e. at the conventional turn of the 15th and 16th centuries¹⁶. Therefore, the disappearance of manor houses cannot determine the upper time limit, as it occurred much later. When studying the medieval residences in Lesser Poland, S. Kołodziejski introduced a very accurate and convincingly well-grounded end date of medieval residences owned by magnates¹⁷. Relying on previous proposals as regards the periodization of the development of castles by B. Guerquin¹⁸, he considered that the year 1530 to be the end date. Kołodziejski reckoned that the most essential reason in support of such a dating is the decline of medieval defensive-residential constructions in the first quarter of the 16th century and at the same time the development of new modern residences compatible with Renaissance trends¹⁹. The work of S. Kołodziejski is based on written sources and archaeological studies to the same degree. Hence the need for the determination of a specific year on the timeline that would limit the preliminary source research. In our case such exact precision is not required, mainly due to little accuracy in the dating of archaeological sites subject to exploration. Traditional dating methods based mainly on the determination of the age of pottery, tiles or arms allow for a precision of about twenty-five years. However, especially in the case of older studies, it would be necessary to verify the chronological terms defined by researchers. Unfortunately, in order to re-define the age of some of the sites it would be necessary to undertake separate studies. In such situations the dating quoted is by the authors of studies or excavations. On a few occasions, I took the liberty to express my doubts, whether the chronology of particular structures should not be changed in the light of the up-to-date findings. To recapitulate, it should be assumed that our deliberations are related to the period ending in the widely understood early 16th century.

16 L. Kajzer, *Studia nad świeckim budownictwem obronnym województwa łęczyckiego w XIII-XVII wieku*, "Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis, Folia Archaeologica", no. 1, Łódź 1980, pp. 147-160; L. Kajzer, *Grodziska średniowieczne i nowożytnie*, "Prace i Materiały Muzeum Archeologicznego i Etnograficznego w Łodzi", Seria Archeologiczna, no. 36, 1989-90, p. 35 et. seq.

17 S. Kołodziejski, *Średniowieczne rezydencje obronne możnowładztwa na terenie województwa krakowskiego*, Kraków 1994, pp. 15-17.

18 B. Guerquin, *Zamki w Polsce*, Warsaw 1984, pp. 25-26.

19 S. Kołodziejski, *Średniowieczne rezydencje obronne...* p. 17.