The myth of the motte and bailey castle in Scotland

An assessment of medieval earthwork fortifications in Scotland and their relationship to traditional Anglo-Norman motte and bailey castles, and earlier Scottish sites

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What is a motte and bailey castle?

In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, an unknown Count in north-western France developed an ingenious new design for an earthwork fortification that could be erected by unskilled labourers in a very short time. This fortification could serve the dual purposes of protecting a military force in hostile land, and providing that military force with an effective bridgehead from which to operate. The identity of the earliest such fortification is unknown, but a case has been made for Vinchy (Les Rues-des-Vignes near Cambrai) as early as AD 979.

The context of this innovation was the creation and establishment of semi-autonomous feudal states under the varying influence of the Kings of France after the collapse of the Carolingian Empire. Borders fell to be established, and land controlled. The warfare between the territories of Normandy, Brittany, Anjou, Maine, Poitou and others resulted in large numbers of these fortifications being built, with the design being extensively copied. In 1066, the successful conquest of the far greater and wealthier Kingdom of England by Duke William II of Normandy was the culmination of this process.

These fortifications were built in earth and timber, and consisted of five key components.

1) The erection of a tall, truncated cone of earth, the motte.
2) The creation of a raised courtyard area adjacent to, but separated from, the mound. This was called the bailey.
3) A deep ditch around the two raised features, and from which the motte was built. These earthworks are the principal remains which survive today.
4) A tall timber tower on the top of the motte, commonly surrounded by a palisade.
5) A timber palisade around the perimeter of the bailey.

Access to the bailey was commonly defended by a timber gatehouse, itself reached via a timber bridge across the ditch. A second gatehouse defended access to a second flying bridge which crossed from the bailey to the motte summit, and a third gatehouse protected the entrance to the summit area. Within the bailey were barracks, stables, kitchens and so on – a typical military camp. The tower was principally used as a lookout point, but also provided a last point of retreat for defending forces.

A motte and bailey castle was usually quick to build, cheap to maintain, and was a weapon of offence as much as defence. In the absence of a military campaign of occupation, and an opposing force, they had no unique function, and were not needed. In England, ruled and exploited by a military aristocracy for centuries, no earthwork castles existed before the arrival of Normans in the mid eleventh century at the court of Edward the Confessor.

Part of the process of the Norman Conquest was the systematic exploitation of the country to a greater extent than ever before. This involved the domination of large urban populations by a small military elite, and to achieve this, a castle was erected in each town, normally involving the destruction of a large part of the settlement. In some cases, such as Lincoln and Norwich, well over a hundred houses and their associated grounds were demolished, and used – without compensation.

These enormous castles enabled the domination of trade and communication, since the towns were the location of markets and mints, and sat astride main routes across the country. Yet they were still purely required to allow the small alien Norman population to dominate the larger native population. In the absence of the military occupation of the country, the fiscal, administrative and seigneurial functions of the new castles had been fulfilled within more modest structures.
The Scottish context

England, then, had been conquered by an alien military aristocracy, who were subsequently to extend their hold into a substantial part of both Wales and Ireland, ruled by a patchwork of small independent princes. In Wales the stronger native dynasties in Gwynedd, Powys and Deheubarth resisted the advance, and started to build their own castles, coming to individual arrangements with rival Norman lords and the Kings of England. In Ireland, the Anglo-Norman lords invaded in the second half of the twelfth century, and dominated the island by the close of the thirteenth.

Scotland, however, was a different matter. When Duke William landed in England in 1066, although it was not the single kingdom of later centuries, there was a powerful King of Scots on the throne in the person of Malcolm III. Offering refuge to Edgar, who claimed the throne of England in defiance of William I, and marrying Edgar’s sister Margaret, Malcolm was in a position to oppose the Norman King, and prevent the conquest of Scotland as well.

The Norman and Angevin Kings of England were able to wrestle reluctant admissions of dominance from the weaker Scottish Kings on occasion, but they were not able to conquer the Kingdom, and did not attempt to do so. King David I even managed to annex most of Northern England into his realm during the Civil War between Stephen and Matilda in the twelfth century. It was not until 1296, and the death of the last direct descendant of the male line of the royal house, that a King of England was able to occupy all of Scotland, and then it was by invitation, and intended to be temporary.

When King Edward I occupied Scotland in 1296, he installed English constables in many Scottish castles. Although fulfilling the same functions of the royal castles in England, his officers would have found the castles of Scotland unusual, and different.
These Scottish castles had been built against different traditions of fortification coming from a number of ethnic groupings, each of whom had their own take on fortified dwellings. The people known as the Picts, occupying a stretch of land from the Forth northwards to the Ross area, the Gaels of Irish origin who occupied Argyll and the west coast, the Norse, who occupied Caithness, Sutherland and the far north-west, the mixture of Irish and British who occupied the area south and west of the Clyde, and the Angles of Lothian.

These peoples had not all been absorbed into the Scotland of Malcolm III. His descendants had, in fact, carried out campaigns of conquest during the consolidation of these peoples into one nation. Lothian and Strathclyde, Moray and Ross, Galloway and Argyll were all subdued and absorbed into the Kingdom of Scotland by force.

This process was only completed in the reign of Alexander II (1214-1249), when his nobles extended his dominion into Caithness and Sutherland. Strongholds were erected by both sides during these campaigns, and a small number of these can be identified. We might expect them to follow the classic and well-tested motte and bailey design, but this does not appear to be the case.

During the reign of Macbeth (1032-1057) a small number of Norman knights fled to exile in Scotland, including the builder of one of the earliest motte and bailey castles in England, Sir Osborn “Pentecost”. Osborn and a number of his fellow Normans were killed fighting for MacBeth two years later in 1054 at the Battle of Dunsinane, which ultimately led to the coronation of Malcolm III. There is no record that Osborn built a new motte and bailey castle during his brief time in Scotland.

The death of Malcolm III was followed by another period of civil war, which ended when his son Edgar (1097-1107), who required English support, was crowned. In 1095, when claiming his throne, a charter was issued which describes Edgar as being granted the kingship of Scotland “by gift of King William my lord”; presumably part of the price for William’s support for his claim. This status was shown publicly in 1099, when King Edgar carried the sword of state for William Rufus in Westminster. The Norman King William II would certainly have seen this in feudal terms, and in 1114 when Edgar had been succeeded by Alexander I, Alexander brought men to serve in the armies of King Henry I in Wales, which would also have been seen in feudal terms by King Henry. The view of the Scottish Kings is unknown, but there may well have been an element of Realpolitik involved. There were certainly advantages to both parties in keeping the relationship between the two kingdoms vague.

Equally vague at this time is the extent to which the influences of the Anglo-Norman court extended into Scottish politics. Ecclesiastical reform had been under way since the reign of Malcolm III, when it is traditionally said to have begun at the instigation of Queen Margaret, and certainly was under way during the reigns of Edgar and Alexander. It is possible that Malcolm III had spent some time at the court of Edward the Confessor, and more likely that both Edgar and Alexander had spent time at that of William II, but there is little evidence to draw conclusions about the effect of any Anglo-Norman influence had upon the nature of their respective kingships.

The marriage of Henry I to Edgar’s sister Edith in 1100 had bound the royal houses closely together, and it was at this time that Edgar’s 16 year old brother David, already based in England, joined the household of Henry I. In 1112, Henry I gave David the recently widowed Matilda, Countess of Huntingdon, who inherited lands in Flanders as well as wide estates in England, as his wife. When he became King in 1124, it is likely that a number of Flemish knights accompanied him northwards, possibly as part of the new Queen’s household.
The reigns of MacBeth, Malcolm III, Donald III, Duncan II, Edmund, Edgar, and Alexander I (1040-1124) are reigns in which it is normally asserted that we should see evidence of social change in Scotland. In the reign of David I this process is often said to have reached its peak, resulting in a change in the nature of the Scottish monarchy to a modern, feudal state comparable with that of England. If there were no lordly dwellings to correspond with the castles of England by this date, we should expect to find new structures dating from the eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

It is certainly under David, brought up in the court of Henry I, that evidence of extensive changes in the way the monarchy was able to exploit its resources first starts to be seen in the form of charters, some of which were to “incomers” to Scotland, and several of whom seem to have been of Flemish origin. It used to be portrayed that David was solely responsible for the modernisation of the Scottish state, but this may be at least partly due to the lack of documentary evidence from the reigns of his predecessors.

His grants of land to nobles that survive also seem to have been limited in scale, usually of individual estates. It may also be the case that it is only these grants that were made under new terms, and that existing landholders and their descendants did not have the terms of their tenure altered. There is little evidence to support the claims that there was a wholesale importing of a new nobility, or that David replaced wide sections of the existing native nobility. With the nobility remaining broadly stable, there was no occupying alien population, allowing the architectural structure of lordship to remain as it was, with no requirement to build castles of the motte and bailey design.

It is also certainly the case that the reigns of David and his brothers saw a reorganisation of the church which corresponded more closely with continental and English practice, and that it was resisted by the “Columban” church. In terms of new landholding practice and church organisation, Scotland was coming more into line with its southern neighbour. These changes coincided with an extended period of internecine conflict in Scotland, which may have been the result or the cause of the changes.

King David and his successors experienced a number of challenges to their respective rules, which ultimately resulted in military campaigns of conquest, suppression and occupation. These campaigns resulted on each occasion with confiscations of estates from rebel lords, or arranged marriages to their heiresses so that a change of landowner followed. This redistribution resulted in an increase in the number of charters issued, and a consistent movement towards a more modern “feudal” state.

The rebellions were led by disaffected members of the extended royal family. In 1114, Alexander I had been attacked at Dundee, and pursued his attackers as far as Ross, but there are no mentions of the protagonists. In 1130 Angus of Moray led an army in conjunction with Malcolm, possibly the illegitimate son of Alexander I, to defeat at Stracathro. Angus was perhaps claiming the throne of Scotland, as he was the grandson of Lulach, killed by Malcolm III in 1057. Malcolm was to war with David for the next 4 years before his capture. Once Malcolm was imprisoned, David had domestic peace for the rest of his realm, and we might expect to see evidence of the process of granting out Angus’ and Malcolm’s lands to his own supporters afterwards.

But grants made by David in the north were largely to the church. Any other lands he gained appear to have remained under royal ownership, possibly governed by a powerful ally or subordinate, and assisted by an alliance with the Norse Earl of Orkney. This policy was not one of conquest, but of dominance through intermediaries, and would not have required the building of new castles as there was no occupying army. The one exception that we know of is the grant of lands in Moray to Freskin, almost certainly a Fleming associated with the Queen’s household.
The castles David was personally responsible for were built within his own territory, and were large fortresses, not motte and bailey types. They were intended to demonstrate his status and power to his peers and nobles, not as weapons to subdue his own people. Roxburgh, known to have been built by David, was built on a ridge, with a central square courtyard at the highest point, and lower courtyards to either side. Around the perimeter at a lower level was a curtain wall, and the whole was surrounded by a deep ditch and bank. The design is that of a Scottish multi-platform fort, not a motte and bailey castle. Stirling, Edinburgh, Dumbarton, the other big royal castles in the south (which were almost certainly already fortified) are also of this nature.

Further rebellions and military campaigns took place during the reigns of David’s grandsons, Malcolm IV (1153-65) and William (1165-1214), and William’s son Alexander II (1214-1249). These were led by the descendants of William fitzDuncan, (the son of the disinherited Duncan II) who had a good claim to the throne. During these campaigns are mentions of castles, and under Malcolm and William we see a much wider expansion of the lands granted out to the new nobility.

The castles which are known to have been founded by the crown in the northern campaigns, such as “Dunscath” on the Cromarty Firth, “Etherdover” on the Beauly Firth, and possibly Ormond Castle at Avoch, still do not follow the motte and bailey design, however. Dunskeath consists of banks and ditches only with no motte, and Ormond is a fortified hilltop similar in concept to Roxburgh; Etherdover has disappeared beneath the later mansion of Redcastle, but was on a river cliff and was probably similar to Dunskeath. The royal castles of Inverness, Nairn, Auldearn, Forres, Elgin, Cullen and Banff are all commonly assumed to have been founded at this time with the consolidation of royal power, and where these survive there is no evidence of motte and bailey design either, with the majority occupying natural
high points and defended with one or more perimeter ditches around a central courtyard area, harking back to terraced hilltop forts. It is quite possible that most of these were in continual use from a much earlier date.

Auldearn is, however, assumed to have been founded by William circa 1165. It consists of a large motte surrounded by a ditch - with no evidence of a bailey area. This has a rampart around the perimeter, suggesting it may have been a ringwork, although it may be of later date associated with the Battle of Auldearn in the 17th century, or the erection of the Boath House doocot on the top.

By the late 1220s, and the final defeat of the MacWilliam kindred, Moray and Ross were part of the Kingdom of Scotland, and this was followed in 1236 by the breaking-up and absorption of Galloway. This left just the far north and west as nominally (and partially) independent of the Crown. The following three quarters of a century saw the conversion of many larger earthwork castles into castles defended in stone, and the erection of courtyard castles on the sites of some of them.

The reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III were largely peaceful, allowing castles to serve almost entirely as symbols of lordship, and which developed associated buildings and settlements that served the needs of the castles inhabitants. They had not been tested in war, and were mainly small in scale, more fortified manors than castles, with a small nuclear defended hall for the lord, commonly on top of a mound with a ditch. Defences were mainly of timber, since they did not need to be more substantial.

So at the end of the 13th century, when the royal line died out, and Edward I was asked to determine the closest heir, earthwork castles were still very much in use in Scotland, although they were largely obsolete in England. It is to be noted that when Edward I finally invaded Scotland, there are records which suggest he commissioned earthwork castles to be built, such as at Lochmaben in 1299. They were still clearly a useful weapon in times of war.

Since Robert Bruce ordered the destruction of all castles so they could not be held against him by the English, it is likely that the refortification of earthwork castles with timber defences was commonplace during the English occupation of Scotland, and that the timber palisades were overcome repeatedly by both sides. The few sites that have been excavated and dated show signs of destruction at this date, such as the Castlehill of Strachan on Deeside.

Even after his victory at Slioch over the Comyns in 1307, and that over the English at Bannockburn in 1314, Bruce was forced to continue fighting his domestic opponents and their supporters the English for most of his reign. The same pattern followed in the reign of his son David II, and it is likely that by mid-century most of these small castles had been abandoned altogether for some time. The armies of the Scottish and English were simply too large for them to be held against, and even the huge castles at Stirling, Edinburgh, Dumbarton, Dunbar, Berwick and Roxburgh had been taken and retaken time and again.

In 1357 the only castles left in English hands were right on the border - Berwick, Roxburgh, Jedburgh and Lochmaben, and the Scottish nobility were able to build new castles in stone. The lesser nobles did not return to living in timber halls, but instead erected small stone hall houses, or square towers reminiscent of keeps, but on a smaller scale. The old earthwork mounds were very rarely reused, although other types of site were easily reoccupied.
Scottish castle building styles

By the time of MacBeth, there were three broad traditions of Scottish fortification that were current, and long-established. These can be categorised as dun-type, broch-type, and fort-type.

1) The dun-type consists of a simple enclosure an extended family could retreat inside at times of need. Duns themselves predominate across the western side of the country, particularly Argyll and the Isles, and can also be found across the west coast of Ireland. When built in stone, the walls were thick, and enabled defenders to throw missiles at attackers. Some were thick enough to contain mural chambers, and it is possible that they contained lean-to buildings inside. Duns were normally built on naturally strong sites such as crags or knolls.

When on low ground, the stone used to build duns was not as commonly available, and the design was adapted to build in timber and earth. The enclosure was surrounded by a timber palisade, sometimes two, and beyond that a ditch to provide the additional height. These palisaded sites survive only as crop marks known as ring-ditches, and very occasionally with traces of the earthworks. It is quite possible that the dun-type developed out of earlier roundhouses, and that smaller dun-type sites were roofed. There is certainly scope for this crossover. Palisaded sites are not found in Argyll or the Isles, or north of the Great Glen.

2) The broch-type was a round tower of dry stone construction. The broch had hollow walls with mural staircases and chambers, and was several storeys high. Sometimes a broch had an associated group of buildings around it, forming a larger ring of walls reminiscent of a wheel house in some ways. Brochs date to between the first century BC to the fourth century AD, although they were reoccupied and reused in later periods, probably as places of retreat from raiders. Brochs are found mainly to the north and west of the Great Glen, and the greatest concentration is in the far north. Some have been identified in Angus, Fife, and further south, but they are entirely absent from the north-east.

3) The fort-type is the largest and most varied. These structures tend to use existing natural strong points, such as hilltops, promontories, cliff edges and so on, and are defended by varying numbers of ditches and banks. Commonly an entire settlement could fit inside the enclosed space, but in some cases it is hard to see how they could have been occupied full-time because of their altitude and lack of water.

Many of these forts were built on different levels, as with Dunadd, or Dundurn, with a central “nucleus” which occupied the highest point, and is assumed to have been the residence of the highest status individual living at the site. Those which remained in use longest had their defences augmented by stone ramparts with wall walks, some of drystone construction, and some interlaced with timber. These presented the appearance of walls, but they were often retaining walls, or revetted banks.

By the eleventh century the brochs were almost certainly abandoned, and only the dun-type and fort-type sites were still occupied, although the concept of a multi-storey building was perhaps one that remained useful, if only as a watch-tower. There was overlap between large duns and small forts, particularly with the use of terracing on both. A dun-type structure on the summit of a hillock that had terraced sides starts to look like a fort, and a small peninsular fort with a single terrace protecting the slope up to the nuclear building starts to look like a dun.

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The Pictish fort of Dundurn, Strathfillan. fortified c AD600, destroyed in AD 683 (probably by Dalriadan Scots) and occupied until at least AD 889.

The overwhelming majority of medieval earthwork fortifications in Scotland consist of a single raised platform, often (but not always) surrounded by a ditch. This platform varies in section and plan, and the summit area is normally sufficient for a modest hall and not much more. It is usually the case that the site chosen has some natural defences, being adjacent to a river, or on top of an existing knoll or hillock.

The summits of these fortifications were defended with a wooden palisade or stone wall, and access to the enclosed area was probably by a simple gateway. Where a ditch was present, this would have been crossed by a bridge. Upon the summit was sufficient room to accommodate only a single household, that of the lord, his family and retainers. This group may not have been resident at all times, and in their absence the accommodation would have been used by a deputy. It is likely that here was the seat of justice, as well as storage for resources paid in tribute, or taxes collected. The defences were sufficient to deter raiders, but not to defeat a determined assault.

Below the summit may have been a small settlement from which the lord drew tribute, and which gained the benefit of being close to the seat of local power. In some instances, this settlement was itself defended, but this was not commonplace, and only occurred as part of linear defences, such as on a promontory-type site. The nature of these settlements is such that there is rarely any surviving evidence of their existence today.

These simply defended sites are in concept dun-type sites. Small in scale, defending a small household only, and protecting resources, they represent a desire for security amongst the minor
nobility. When put to the test, they were unable to resist the attack of a determined foe, and were destroyed, usually by fire.

**Examples of earthwork castles**

Such a simple site is the Castlehill of Strachan, in Aberdeenshire (NO657921), and excavated in 1980-81 by Peter Yeoman. The Castlehill is a round and predominantly natural mound, partially destroyed by quarrying, that is on a rise of ground on the north side of the River Feugh. It is about 5.5 metres high, and when entire the summit was about 20 metres wide. Excavations revealed that it was surrounded by a V-shaped ditch, now completely silted up, which was about 3.5 metres wide and up to 1.9 metres deep. At the time of occupation it was surrounded by marshy ground and minor streams, and formed an island.

Before occupation, the summit of the mound consisted of two terraces, the central and higher area being some 50cm higher than the lower terrace. The slopes of the mound were regularised and the summit levelled, probably with upfill created by the digging of the ditch. A timber palisade was erected around the outside of the lower terrace, with the entrance probably facing the river to the south. On the upper area, a timber hall measuring 14 metres by 12 took up most of the summit. This building was probably two storeys in height. Later on in its life, a second palisade was added to the site, outside the original one.

*Castlehill of Strachan, a 13th century terraced mound with a surrounding ditch at the base, once surrounded by marshes and tributary streams of the River Feugh.*

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Strachan was a barony that was granted to William Giffard between 1189 and 1195 by King William, and the archaeological evidence points towards the mound being fortified c1250. It was destroyed by fire in the early 1300s, most likely at the instigation of Robert Bruce, who captured Aboyne Castle (a mere 11 miles away) from the English in 1308. During the early part of Bruce’s reign, the barony was granted to the Frasers, suggesting that the Giffards had either died out or been opposed to Bruce.

The Giffards were major landholders, and although William Giffard was a younger son, he had many other estates, and was important enough to be sent as an ambassador to King John. As such the Castlehill was unlikely to have been occupied by William very often, and was therefore erected for local reasons. William appeared in councils appointed by Alan Durward during the minority of Alexander III, and not in those dominated by the Comyns. Given the hostility in the middle of the century between the Comyn and Durward factions, it is likely that the Castlehill was fortified initially as a precautionary measure against the Comyns. After the fall of the Durward faction, the strengthening of the castle with a second palisade may have been in expectation of retaliation by the Comyns.

There is no evidence of a settlement at the Castlehill. The land around is too marshy to allow it, and in fact the quarrying away of the mound was probably to build up the track that is now used to access the castle area. Between the mound and the river to the south is a higher tongue of land which has been called a causeway, and to the north the land is also above the marsh level. However these areas are not large enough to be occupied, and they cannot be called bailey areas. As such, the Castlehill is a strategically placed watchtower within the barony of Strachan, most likely erected to guard a nearby ford. It is likely that the barony had a hunting lodge and manor nearby as the principal residence, but this has not been located.

An example of such a principal residence, and also excavated by Yeoman in 1988, is Wardhouse (NJ593289). In plan, the site consists of a central platform, roughly oval in shape and about 3 metres high. This platform is a natural rise, but has been scarped to strengthen the defences. In addition, a substantial V-shaped ditch has been excavated around the platform, originally 7 metres wide and 2.4 metres deep. Outside this was a bank, and beyond that a second, smaller ditch. The central platform and bank do not, however, rise significantly above the natural contours of the rise, suggesting that the upfill was used to level the central platform. A further ditch may have existed further out, but this only survives as a cropmark, and may represent something else entirely. To the east, there is no ditch, and the slope falls into boggy, waterlogged ground.

No evidence was identified to give a clear idea how the site was defended beyond the earthworks, but possible post holes suggest a timber palisade. It is likely that the central platform was defended by a wall of some description, possibly crossed to the north through a sunken passageway. The site has been extensively ploughed, and only a small section of cobbles indicating a courtyard survived when it was excavated. The site is still cultivated and will probably be destroyed in that process.

Wardhouse was occupied in two phases. The first was when the earthworks were created, possibly during the thirteenth century when it was part of the Earldom of the Garioch, held by the younger brother of Kings Malcolm IV and William, David of Huntingdon, who died in 1219, and with its main seat at Inverurie. The earliest reference to it is in a deed of Bartholomew the Fleming between 1228 and 1239, when Bartholomew had a chapel at Weredors for his household. It is likely that Bartholomew or his family were responsible for the earthwork castle, but nothing further is known of them.
The site of Wardhouse Castle, main enclosed area beyond the bank and ditch, with the boggy area to left beyond the woodpile.

As with the Castlehill of Strachan, the earthwork castle of Wardhouse was destroyed, probably after a single assault. The presence of pottery sherds dating to the 14th or 15th century suggest a rough timescale for this event, but nothing further is known. By 1465, Wardhouse was in the possession of the Leslie family of Balquhain; but this is not necessarily a different family to Bartholomew, who shared his name with the traditional founder of the Leslie family. The site today is unrecognisable, although its natural strength is apparent, with the defences much spread by centuries of cultivation.

Both the Castlehill of Strachan and Wardhouse represent defensive structures erected by the gentry, those who owed their allegiance to the great nobles. They are typical of what we find all over Scotland in scale, and also in the use of multiple layers of earthworks, be they linear or concentric. Next we can turn to the atypical earthwork castles, those of the nobility, such as the Earl of Garioch, Alan Durward, or the semi-independent Lords of Galloway.

At the Bass of Inverurie (NJ780206), the Peel of Lumphanan (NJ576037), the Mote of Urr (NX815646), and the Doune of Invernochty (NJ351129), we can see larger examples of earthwork castles erected by the great nobles.

David, Earl of Garioch, was the brother of two Kings, and heir to the throne for much of the reign of King William. He held several Earldoms in England as well as Scotland, and was without doubt the second man in the realm. At least in his sixties by the time William died, he was succeeded by his son John, who was also Earl of the far wealthier Earldom of Chester in England. At Inverurie are the twin mounds of the earthwork castle that was the seat of their Earldom of Garioch.
The Bass of Inverurie and Little Bass, which were not originally separated by the path that now runs between them. The Bass was probably crowned with a palisade and a two storey timber hall.

The mounds of the Bass and Little Bass are utterly featureless today, and their appearance is deceptive. Originally there may have been no ditch between the two, as is shown in the old photograph at the front of John Davidson's *Inverurie and the Earldom of the Garioch* (1878). At the very least the ditch was far shallower, certainly not separating the two mounds entirely as they are today. Around the base of the earthworks there was also a bank, which has been completely lost during the landscaping works prior to the creation of the graveyard, and a ditch measuring about 3 metres wide and 2.5 metres deep.

The castle at Inverurie was built on what is assumed to have been a natural mound, and upon which has been found evidence of burials in the prehistoric period. The upfill from the ditch around the base was probably used to create the surrounding bank, and when the sides were scarped and any ditch separating the Bass from the Little Bass was created, the upfill was used to level the summits of the two areas. The summit of the Bass is about 20 metres across, and would have been protected by a palisade, with a substantial hall on the top. There is no evidence of any stone structure on the summit. It stands about 12 metres high today; the Little Bass is about 5 metres high and measures 30 metres by 23, containing two raised rectangular platforms which may be the remains of long halls.

Alan Durward was descended from the comital families of Atholl and Mar, and was prominent in the reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III. He claimed the Earldom of Atholl and challenged the right of
the Earl of Mar to his title. He was one of the main political rivals of the Comyn family, and ruled the Kingdom for a short while during the minority of Alexander III.

The Peel of Lumphanan, showing the central mound, outer bank and wet moat between the two.

On the strategically important route to upland Moray from Donside, in lands held by Durward, is the Peel of Lumphanan. This is a large oval mound, 10 metres high, and measuring 40 metres by 30 on the top. Around the outside is a wet moat, about 18 metres wide, crossed by a cobbled causeway which leads up the side of the mound. Around this moat is an earth bank over 3 metres high and 2.5 metres wide at the top. A further shallow ditch surrounds the whole structure. The central mound is natural, and has been levelled and built up around the edges with turf, probably excavated from the ditch along with the outer bank.

Lumphanan clearly has a different function to the Bass. The scale of the defences is far greater, and the summit area is large enough to contain a considerable number of buildings. On 10th August 1057, a battle was fought in the vicinity of Lumphanan between the rival forces of MacBeth and Malcolm III. The battle ended in defeat for MacBeth, who was killed. It is by no means certain that the Peel of Lumphanan was in existence in 1057, but there was an early church of St Finan which traditionally dates to the 12th century, so it is possible.

It is likely that the predecessors of Alan Durward were actually responsible for building the Peel, although they may have incorporated elements of earlier defences dating back to MacBeth’s time or earlier. It was not their chief seat, however, which was at Coull (NJ512022), about four miles west of Lumphanan. The close proximity of the main castle, a modern courtyard castle built in stone, suggests that Lumphanan was of earlier date, and perhaps not to Alan Durward’s liking. In 1296, Sir
John de Maleville submitted to Edward I at “Lunfanan”, and in 1299, it belonged to Joan de Clare, Countess of Fife. Presumably after Alan Durward died, Lumphanan passed to his daughter Alice, who married Colban, Earl of Fife; their son was Duncan, who died in 1288, leaving Joan as his widow and a young son Duncan as his heir.

In 1299 the lands of Coull and Lumphanan were transferred by Edward I to Sir John Hastings of Abergavenny, and it is probable that the site was abandoned shortly afterwards as there were few artifacts of the 14th or 15th century found in excavations. It is only with the building of the hall house of c1497 that the Peel was reoccupied.

It would be expected that the summit was defended by a palisade or wall around the perimeter of the mound, and that it contained a number of high status buildings. However the stone foundations have not been adequately recorded or dated, so it is not possible to get a real understanding of these, and no definitive evidence for a palisade or wall was identified in the 1975-79 excavations. It may actually be the case that the defence was entirely of earth, as there were suggestions of a turf rampart around the edge of the mound.

Given the lack of evidence for any substantial defences beyond the earthworks, it appears that the Peel of Lumphanan may be of earlier design to the other sites under discussion, and although occupied until c1300 was not defended in the manner we might expect of a castle of this period. The detour of Edward I to take a personal oath of allegiance by a knight serving the Countess of Fife might suggest that it was perceived as a site of some importance. This may have been symbolic if it were perceived to be the site at which Malcolm Canmore finally became undisputed King. Certainly there is little evidence of the site being militarily strong in the late thirteenth century, although it may have been entirely destroyed during the subsequent wars of Robert Bruce.

The Mote of Urr dates to a time when Galloway had not yet been incorporated into the realm of Scotland, and was almost certainly built originally by one of the early Lords of Galloway, such as Fergus, who died in 1161. The scale of the defences is huge. The central domed mound rises 10 metres above the base of a ditch that surrounds it, and the roughly round summit measures about 30 metres across. The ditch is perhaps 5 metres deep, and the mound and ditch are both entirely surrounded by a roughly rectangular platform with curved ends, which rises perhaps 20 metres above the surrounding countryside. Around the edge of this platform is a second ditch, cut into the slope so that the inner face rises steeply perhaps 10 metres from its base. It is almost certainly the case that the upcast from the ditches have been used to steepen and level the edges of the platform and the mound.

Excavation in 1951 revealed that the top of the mound was occupied by a large timber building, and around the perimeter of the mound was a timber palisade. The summit was gained by means of a wooden bridge. This phase of occupation was destroyed entirely by fire, and this is assumed to have taken place in 1174/5 when Galloway rose in rebellion. Following the burning of the tower, however, the summit of the mound was repaired and levelled, raising its height by about 1.8m in the process. The reason for this is not clear, but there are some interesting hints.

When Fergus died, his lands were split between his two sons, Gillebrigte and Uhtred. Uhtred granted out lands to associates of the Scottish King, such as Walter de Berkeley, who held Urr from around 1170. Gillebrigte is said to have resented not inheriting all of Galloway, and it may be that Uhtred was seen as a collaborator with the King. It may even be that in order to have his claim for part of the lands supported by the King, he agreed to allow some of his estates to be held by royal supporters, such as de Berkeley. Regardless, the end result was that Uhtred was killed on an island fortress by Gillebrigte’s men. Around the western side of the Mote are various cropmarks showing
former courses of the River Urr – which today flows on the eastern side. If the river in the twelfth century flowed on both sides of the Mote, it would have been an island fortress.

The Mote of Urr © Matthew Emmott, 2014. Used with permission and thanks.

Gilbert died in 1185, and Roland, the son of Uhtred then took over Galloway, and is said to have built “castles and very many fortresses”. Roland had been living at the court of King William, and no doubt was supported in his campaign by Walter de Berkeley, who had become Chamberlain of Scotland. Walter was succeeded by two heiresses, one of whom married Ingram de Balliol, and from this point until 1287 Urr was a property of the Balliol family, enemies of Robert the Bruce. In that year Edward I granted the barony to Henry Percy, who presumably remained the owner until Bruce’s rebellion of 1307, and it is logical to assume that the castle was destroyed in that year along with Buittle, Caerlaverock and Dalswinton if it was still occupied.

It is by no means clear who built the Mote of Urr, or indeed when it was destroyed, but it was certainly occupied in the 13th century by the Balliols. It seems probable that the original castle was erected by Fergus, or by Roland, who died in 1200. The excavations of the castle did not provide evidence for a palisade around the lower court, which covers a flat area of about 70 metres in diameter, although it seems very probable, and it is believed that a gatehouse structure protected the entrance at the western end. Ploughing has destroyed any evidence for buildings in this area.

There was a borough of Urr in existence by 1262, but there are no references to this after the early 14th century, suggesting that it may have been destroyed during the wars of Robert Bruce along with the castle of the Balliols. The changing path of the River Urr makes it more likely that this burgh was on the slopes of the castle – or on the platform.
The mound of the Doune of Invernochty.

A further large comital earthwork castle is the Doune of Invernochty, in . This castle is also an improved natural mound, oval in shape, with steep sides and a deep ditch surrounding it. Outside the ditch is a platform of varied width which rises at least 2 metres above the surrounding land, and beyond that an area of ground which has been landscaped to divert a stream into a large pond, which flooded the ditch. This platform contains the remains of several buildings, invisible beneath the long grass.

The perimeter of the summit is surrounded by the footings of a stone wall, which encloses an area measuring perhaps 50 metres by 42, and contains a simple opening at one end. This was flanked internally by a rectangular building, and possibly was a sunken passageway. A long rectangular building, probably the old parish church, occupied almost the full width of the summit towards the northern end. Fragments of masonry found during excavation are said to be “Norman” in style, but comparisons are drawn with the late twelfth century church at Monymusk, suggesting a later date.

Again the scale of the earthworks is large, but they augment an existing feature with natural strengths. It is likely that the upfill from the ditch was used to create the outer platform, and that the sides of the mound were regularised. The Doune was in all likelihood the early seat of the Lordship of Strathdon, which was one of the provinces making up the Earldom of Mar. It was probably occupied until the reign of Alexander II, when the castle of Kildrummy was first fortified, and perhaps at this point the old castle chapel became the parish church.
The external earthworks of the Doune of Invernochty; the gap is where the burn entered the ditch.

The final example is often cited as the finest example of a motte and bailey castle in the north of Scotland, Duffus in Moray (NJ189672). The castle was built upon a low mound surrounded on all sides by marshland at the edge of Spynie Loch, which was until at least the ninth century an open expanse of salt water which lay between the coast and a group of islands a short distance offshore, including Burghead and Lossiemouth. By the time the lands were granted to Freskin by King David, the loch had probably silted up at the western end, towards which Duffus is situated. It is quite possible that the island was used as a defended residence before Freskin was granted it, possibly by the rebel Earl of Moray, Angus.

Duffus Castle is on top of this gently sloping mound. It has a large courtyard area surrounded by a stone wall which encloses most of the summit, which slopes upwards to the north. At the northern end, and separated from the courtyard by a ditch, is a roundish mound, upon which is a rectangular hall-keep, dating from the fifteenth century. There is no early defensive ditch around the castle, and that separating the courtyard area from the mound does not surround the mound. In fact, it is the later masonry combined with the natural contours of the land which gives Duffus the appearance of a motte and bailey castle, not the earthworks.
It is, of course, likely that the top of the mound was occupied by a timber hall originally, and it seems probable that there was a timber palisade around the summit. The ditch also, is likely to belong to this earlier phase. There is no evidence that the area enclosed by the stone wall was defended, although this may have been destroyed when the stone wall was erected. Once the masonry is removed, and the water and marsh reinstated, the overall appearance of the earthworks is that of a small fortified mound on an island.

It is very clear that the earthwork castles of Scotland vary considerable in scope and design, and that considerable use was made of natural strong points, no matter what the scale of the castle. It is also clear that in the majority of cases that these natural features were augmented by steepening slopes, diverting watercourses, and so on. They remained in use for a longer period of time than was the norm elsewhere in Britain, and timber defences were far more commonplace than we would expect. In fact, timber defences were the norm, and stone walls the exception.

**Analysis of morphology and distribution**

A statistical analysis of the RCAHMS Canmore database reveals that within Scotland, there are 331 sites containing the term “Motte”, only 40 of which contain the term “Bailey”. These terms have been applied using the logic that all mounds used for defensive purposes are to be referred to as mottes, and if a lower platform is present beneath the mound, it is to be referred to as a bailey. This is unsatisfactory, as the terminology does not permit differentiation between those mounds which are predominantly or entirely artificial, and those which are enhanced natural features. In addition,
by using this terminology, there is a predisposition that a bailey is to be expected where there is a
motte.

The use of the term “motte” in this list indicates that the majority of earthwork castles in Scotland
consist of an artificial mound of earth, most of the volume of which was made from the upfill from
excavating a surrounding ditch. However this is not the case. To begin with, there are 128 of these
“motte” sites which have a caveat of a “possible” label, indicating that it is by no means clear that
the site in question was a motte of this nature, but possibly just a natural feature that was never
occupied. Closer examination reveals that of the 291 remaining “mottes” without “baileys”:

1) 33 have been reported as mottes but not surveyed
2) 19 are implied by the tradition or presence of a castle or medieval lord
3) 13 are completely destroyed and insufficient descriptions survive to assess them properly

This leaves 223 sites which can be confirmed as having earthwork fortifications, and therefore
possible “mottes.” However, detailed examination reveals that the overwhelming majority of these
sites are built on a natural strongpoint which could easily have its defences enhanced. 50 are
actually situated at the end of a ridge, spur or promontory, which reduces the labour required for
construction. One is actually a river island! The remaining 172 are largely natural mounds which
have been sculpted to a more strongly defended form, 53 of which have no trace of defensive
ditches at all, and were basically an occupied low hilltop crowned by a palisade or wall.

So, on balance, just under a quarter of the sites classified as “mottes” are forts with linear defences,
just over a quarter are simple enclosed hilltops. About half may therefore be better classified as
earthwork castles, with terraces cut into the slopes of the knolls they are built on, ditches at the
bases with upcast banks, as well as upcast banks. Some are reminiscent of moated manor houses,
with low partially artificial platforms enclosed by banks and ditches. In all cases, these are also the
sites with larger summit areas, indicative of more powerful lords with larger households – and more
money to pay for the construction work.

Looking at the 40 “motte and bailey” sites, there are 7 where there is no evidence at all for a bailey -
the presence of the lower enclosure has been inferred by the presence of a motte. There are 2
where a natural piece of level ground nearby is assumed to have served that function, and 3 which
are completely within the bounds of older fortifications. The majority, however, are large natural
features which have become fortified, and within which a higher area has been erected or
enhanced.

In fact only two of the 40 sites identified as “motte and bailey” might conform to the perceived
standard morphology of that castle type, Nether Abington (NS932250), and Auldton (NT094058).
Both these sites are situated in the uplands along the M74 corridor, and are about 15 miles apart –
roughly a day’s march. Both are along the line of the old Roman road that followed the M74, and
was probably one of the main invasion routes into Scotland in medieval times.

A similar distance to the south is Lochmaben, the site of a strong castle, and to the north is Lanark,
the site of a royal castle of David I. It is likely that the two castles were positioned for strategic
reasons, and may have been purely military outposts. Nothing is known of their history or dates of
occupation, although Nether Abington was possibly held by the Lindsays and Auldton by the Bruces.

Nether Abington is sited next to the upper reaches of the River Clyde, and consists of an oval motte,
surrounded by a ditch. The motte is positioned on one side of a shield-shaped bailey, itself
surrounded by a bank and wet ditch, and is adjacent to the river, which also protects part of the
bailey. The summit of the 5.5 metre high motte is about 21 metres by 12; the enclosed area of the
bailey is about 65 metres by 60.

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Auldton, just outside Moffat, is close by the upper Annan Water. It is built upon a natural rise, and consists of a round motte up to 8 metres high with a 13 metre diameter summit, enclosed by a 6 metre wide ditch nearly 2 metres deep with an external bank. This is located in a corner of a kidney-shaped bailey about 73 metres by 36 in size which was at least partially surrounded by a bank and ditch.

Even in these best cases the match to standard morphology is not perfect. At Nether Abington, the bailey inside the ditch is protected by a bank, and is not significantly higher than surrounding countryside. At Auldton, the bailey is not completely surrounded by the ditch and bank, but is higher than the surrounding field, possibly created by scarping a natural rise, and the upfill used to enhance the mound and create the bank for the bailey.

The geographical distribution of the 331 sites containing the term “motte” is worthy of note. North of the Black Isle, there are only nine identified sites, the most northerly of which is at Brora. This is where the northern nobility from Moray expanded with the blessing of the Crown during the 13th and 14th centuries. As this would have involved active campaigning by armed forces from outside the area, it is quite surprising to see such a shortage of sites, but this was with the backing of the Crown, and accompanied by a steady decline of the influence of the Earls of Orkney, so the expansion may have been more peaceful as a result. In the aftermath of the MacWilliam rebellions it may be that any fighting and resistance was minimal.

Apart from the fertile lands around Inverness, there is a scarcity of sites across most of the Highlands north and west of Moray, which extends down to the Argyll and Lorne area. This region was dominated by the Lords of the Isles throughout the medieval period, and all but a separate cultural
entity. Castles were few and far between, and apart from the greatest clan chiefs, few in the Lordship of the Isles could afford to erect, or had need to erect, such a structure. Dun-type fortifications may well have been occupied by lesser lords well into the medieval period, and be indistinguishable except by excavation from earlier sites.

As may be expected there is a scarcity of sites around Angus, Fife and Perthshire, emphasising that this area was the royal homeland from an early date, and that conflict was minimal. It is also the case that the area was more heavily populated, and agricultural. The authority of the King and the distance from warfare carried out at the edges of the realm meant that the high status dwelling sites did not require substantial defences. Perhaps the extensive history of agriculture has also destroyed earthwork defences so that they are no longer recognised as such. It may also be the case that the greater wealth of this area meant that stone halls were more commonplace, stronger and easier to defend against attack.

Higher concentrations are to be found in Aberdeenshire and the Moray coast, and in the south-west; which reflects the conquest of Moray and Ross, and that of Galloway. However there is also a surprisingly large concentration around the western half of the central belt, perhaps reflecting the expansion of the Stewards into territory previously dominated by the Isles, and which appears to have been resisted fiercely. Perhaps more surprising is the complete absence of sites along the English border and the well-travelled invasion route through Lothian. As an extension of the royal heartland, perhaps another type of defended building extended from Angus through Lothian, the remains of which are more ephemeral; or they may have been destroyed entirely in times of war.

The distribution of “motte and bailey” sites is also worth considering. 25 of the 40 sites identified by the RCAHMS lie south of the Forth, 21 of which are south-west of Edinburgh. Even concentrating on those where a lower enclosure was actually present reveals that 20 out of 26 lie to the south of the Forth/Clyde, only 2 of which lie on the eastern side of the country. Broadly speaking this is a similar distribution pattern to the “motte” sites, although the emphasis is more heavily on the south-west. If three quarters of the sites containing lower enclosures in the whole country lie in the south-west, why would this be?

After the death of Roland’s son Alan of Galloway in 1234, a significant proportion of the nobles begged King Alexander II not to break the province up, but to grant it to Alan’s illegitimate son Thomas. At worst, they asked the King to become Lord of Galloway in person. The King chose not to do this, and instead split his lands between his three heiress daughters, married to men loyal to the King. Thomas rebelled, with the assistance of men from Ireland and Man, forcing the King to raise an army and invade Galloway. A battle ensued, which resulted in Thomas fleeing to Ireland. Shortly afterwards he invaded again, and was defeated a second time.

As an interesting aside, Thomas of Galloway remained in captivity for more than fifty years, only to be freed in 1296, when as an elderly man of eighty-eight he was installed as Lord of Galloway by Edward I, presumably as a counterweight to the Balliol lands and influence in the area.

It appears likely that Galloway remained an unstable region, and as it was considerably more Gaelic in its outlook than the royal heartland, the installation of a sizeable number of nobles from outside the area may have created social tensions based around race and culture. In such circumstances, it stands to reason that the extended households of the newcomers may have required additional defences, or that the lower platforms were in fact small defended burghs designed to impose regularised trade, markets and so on upon the Gallowegians. This would make the earthwork castles of Galloway more akin to the original motte and bailey castles of the eleventh century in England.
and France. The removal of the sites in the south-west reduces the number of sites with confirmed lower platforms throughout the whole of the rest of Scotland to just six.

**The problem of definition**

The word “motte” – from the French *mote* - is defined as a mound forming the site of a castle or camp. The word “bailey” probably came from the French *baile* meaning enclosure. Linguistically speaking, any defended mound is a motte, and any defended enclosure is a bailey. However, their use in a Scottish context is misleading and unhelpful. The term “motte and bailey castle” is inextricably linked with the Norman Conquest of England and parts of Wales, and can obviously be used in reference to sites in France since they are identical in concept and execution.

It is unfortunately the case that there are no neat phrases that can be assigned to Scottish earthwork fortifications. “Earthwork castle” is perhaps the most apt, in association with “peninsular”, “knoll”, and “island” to indicate the location where relevant. In the majority of cases, however the use of the word “castle” seems excessive, and “fortified mound” along with “fortified enclosure” seem to make more sense. The difficulty then comes with defining at what point a fort – commonly associated with the word “Pictish”, and the prefix “hill-“ becomes an earthwork castle. This is all the more problematical because the two may have been contemporary at times.

There does, however, seem to be a cultural point of reference north of the Stonehaven/Aberdeen area. Beyond this was the northern kingdom of the Picts, which was to all intents and purposes conquered by the Norse in the period AD 800 – AD 850. At this point, the dominant aristocracy became Norse and the forts had been mostly destroyed. The Norse did not use fortified sites, and therefore the occupation of forts ceased.

There is no such clear-cut cultural change further south. War with the Dublin Norse, the Dalriatan Scots, the Strathclyde Britons, and the Northumbrian Angles was a convoluted affair, which ended in descendants of the Dalriatans becoming kings of the southern Pictish kingdom in the second half of the ninth century, and being in a position to invade and reconquer the northern kingdom during the tenth. At the same time Strathclyde was absorbed into the new Kingdom of Alba (first referred to in AD 900) after its capital Dumbarton was sacked circa AD 870 by the Norse of Dublin. It is not possible to determine a date for this process in the southern kingdom itself.

We can therefore place a necessarily artificial cultural line in the northern Pictish kingdom and Strathclyde, with the external dominance of Alba. A central King with peripheral territory subject to external attacks could place or use dependent nobles in positions of local authority. We can define a “fort” as being part of an independent state, and an “earthwork castle” as being almost seigneurial in concept in these areas, and belonging to the Kingdom of Scotland.

This also fits comfortably with the pattern already observed in the royal heartlands of Alba, where there are very few earthwork castles. Defended sites in these areas remain forts, such as that at Dunsinane, traditionally associated with MacBeth, while many sites were undefended such as the capital at Forteviot, and possibly Dunkeld and Scone.

**Conclusion**

Looking at the evidence, fully artificial motte and bailey castles constructed of upfill from defensive ditches were not built very often – if at all - in Scotland. The only two which definitely conform to the type are both built in the far south-west of the country, within close proximity to one another, and along a main invasion route. Although visually similar in some respects, Scottish earthwork castles made far greater use of natural strong points, which were then augmented.

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The proliferation of motte and bailey castles in England and Wales can be put down to the initial Conquest period, and then to the bitter civil war that split the country between 1135 and 1153, when marauding armies needed a safe place to base themselves in “enemy” territory, and the erection of earthwork castles reached a peak.

Scotland was not conquered by an external power in this period, and did not suffer occupation. The development of fortification was parallel to, but independent of, that in England, which is why there is a distinct set of castle types that can be assigned to earthwork fortifications in Scotland. Although some earthwork castles in Scotland have a low enclosure beneath the “motte” feature, this is usually determined by site morphology, and the majority (86%) do not have such an enclosure. Of the sites labelled as having a lower enclosure, the feature is only present in 20 out of 41 sites, just 6% of the total. By comparison 59% of relevant sites listed on the Heritage Gateway for England have a lower enclosure or bailey.

Traditionally, castles in Britain as a whole are seen as a Norman innovation; and that there was a linear progression from motte and bailey through stone buildings into courtyard castles with multiple wards, reaching a high point of military development in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century before becoming grand palace fortresses, and finally becoming redundant with the development of artillery.

Unfortunately Scotland refuses to follow this model. Given the conflicts that persisted throughout Scotland up to the thirteenth century, it is extremely unlikely that fortified sites were out of vogue. Large hillforts that were in use up to the fourth and fifth centuries may have been abandoned in favour of smaller scale, easier to defend sites since attacking armies were so much smaller – mainly rival warbands in all likelihood. However the newly occupied sites, also using natural strongpoints, were just smaller versions of them stylistically, with familiar banks and ditches, palisades, and drystone walls. Until such time as something more formidable was needed, it is unlikely that the nobility would have erected anything different.

Unfortunately, the continuity of these defensive features makes it very difficult to assess dates of occupation without excavation, and possibly carbon dating, and this is something which has been done haphazardly and rarely. Very few sites warrant the expense without imminent threat of destruction! Some carbon dating has been done, however, such as at Burghead and Mither Tap, which shows that these sites were occupied into the eighth, and in some cases perhaps into the late ninth century.

So we are left with a situation where we have recognisably Scottish forms of defence up to and including the eighth and ninth centuries, and then a series of earthwork castles dating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that have marked similarities in scale, concept and design to the earlier forts. It is unlikely that for a period of three hundred years there were no fortified sites in use in Scotland, particularly given that it was a period of ongoing conflict. It is more likely that a proportion of existing forts and duns were occupied – or indeed built – during this period, and that they looked similar to earlier examples. It is also quite possible that as part of the process of consolidation, and the changes in land ownership associated with failed rebellions and defeated nobles, new sites were chosen in strategic places in addition to repairing existing sites destroyed by fire.

The sites that are dated firmly to the twelfth and thirteenth century are basic in design, and are contemporary with the erection of stone castles by the Crown like Roxburgh. It is therefore the case that it was not technically beyond the Scots to erect stone castles at this time, and in fact the greater nobles did do so, Durward at Coull, Comyn at Ruthven, Inverlochy, and Kingedward, Stewart at
Renfrew and Rothesay, Gospatrick at Dunbar, and Mar at Kildrummy. But these were not the norm, and most were content with simpler castles and residences.

These earthwork castles, with terraces, ditches, banks and mounds, situated on hillocks, ridges, promontories and islands, with walls of timber, not stone, are representative of a lineage of similar fortifications that goes back much further in time than the motte and bailey castle invented in France. If it had been the case, as was once believed, that King David imported an entire new nobility to Scotland when he ascended the throne in 1124, we might well have seen a proliferation of motte and bailey castles. However the number of aliens he brought with him was small, and the grants of land he made to them were limited. There was no revolution in castle building in his reign.

In fact there is ample evidence to demonstrate that he, like his brothers before him and his grandsons after him, built castles to a varied Scottish template that had endured for generations before him, and would continue to be used for generations afterwards. His new castle at Roxburgh was a simple quadrangular enclosure on top of a ridge where two rivers meet. There is no evidence of a keep, and no bailey. The ridge is surrounded by a deep ditch on three sides, and drops to the river on the fourth. Outside the ditch is a large bank, and defending the approach from the wider ground is a more massive ditch and rampart, outside which is a further ditch. It is likely that these were created from natural contours, and the upfill used elsewhere in the castle. This was David’s “statement castle” that announced his power to the King of England, and showed that he was no slave to Anglo-Norman fashion.

*Part of the defences of Roxburgh Castle, showing the hillside and ditch. The rampart outside the ditch is hidden by the scale of the hill.*
The Scottish earthwork castle had a distinct and separate path of development, which can be traced back at least three hundred years earlier than the first motte and bailey castles of Anjou. It has proved very convenient to assign the terms “motte and bailey” to sites which can be seen to resemble those sites south of the border. In some ways they served a similar purpose to a motte and bailey castle, particularly when it came to providing a secure residence for a lord, but that was not the reason a motte and bailey castle was built. It was built as a tool of war, a weapon. In Scotland, where an offensive castle was required by an invading army, a motte and bailey was not the form followed.

The early earthwork castles and forts of Scotland are an important and unique part of the built heritage of the country, and although cosmetically similar in some ways, are not the same as motte and bailey castles. To refer to them as such is to devalue them, and to reject their cultural significance.
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