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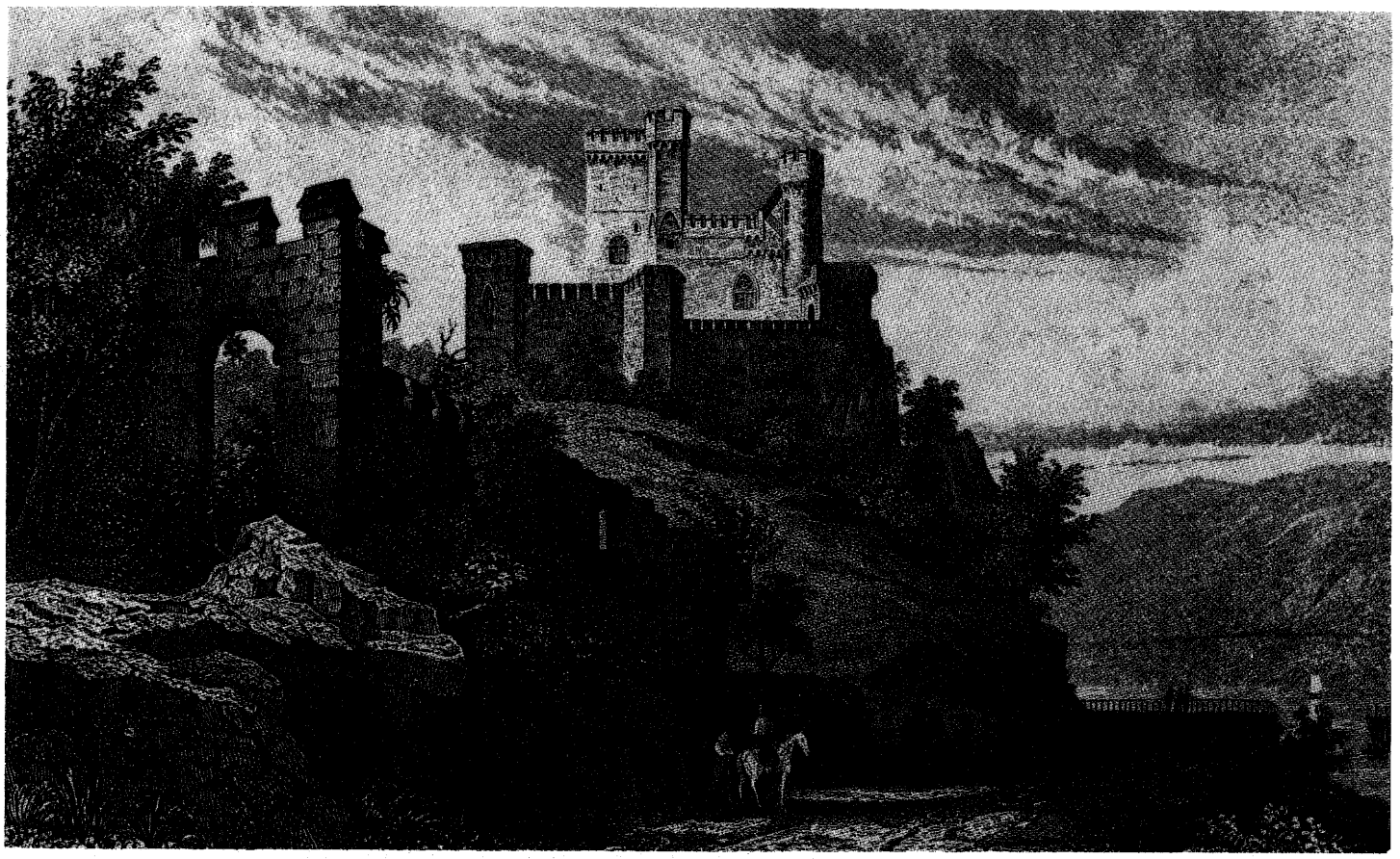


Who lives in that castle?

Building it is one thing, running it is another

by Katharine Kerr

In any role-playing game set in a medieval-style world, no matter how vaguely developed, the castle has an important place. The very sight of a lonely keep, rising above the mists on a hilltop, is one that promises adventure. In game systems that provide for player-character strongholds, a castle is usually the first thing a player thinks of when his character obtains the means to build a stronghold. And if the campaign has important non-player characters of noble blood, the gamemaster has to create, castles for them.

Although by using historical sources or gaming aids it's easy to design the actual castle buildings, stocking the castle with characters requires more thought. Living in and maintaining a castle requires many servants and officials, most of whom live in the castle with its lord. By describing the typical medieval castle household, this article offers guidelines for players and GM's alike who need to build a castle and set up its staff.

What is a castle?

A great many different buildings are loosely described as castles, ranging from ghastly stone houses built by noveau riche film people to walled cities or military forts. Properly defined, however, a castle is the personal fortification of either a king or a member of the nobility. The true castle serves two purposes: it is a dwelling for a noble family in times of peace, and a fort in times of war. Thus, neither garrisons for professional soldiers nor public fortifications such as walled towns can be counted as castles.

The true castle is always supported by the profits from a manorial estate (also called a manor or a seigneurie). At root, the manor is simply a holding of agricultural land, worked by dependent tenants who live upon it, and granted to a fighting man to feed him and his family while he serves his king or some other powerful noble. From that root, however, grew many vast estates where the lord ruled in his own name and thought about the king as little as possible. At the same time, many manors were little more than large farms.

The land of a typical manor is divided into three parts. The first, the lord's demesne, is technically the only property that he actually owns. Although the demesne is worked by his tenants, all produce from these fields belongs to the lord. The second division, the holdings of his tenants, belongs to them in a kind of involuntary lease — that is, they may not leave the land without the lord's permission, but neither may he expel them from their farms. The remaining land is common pasture and forest, theoretically shared by lord and tenants, but in practice controlled by the lord.

The size of the manor varies so widely that it's impossible to give exact figures for creating them, but in general, the more powerful the lord, the richer his holdings. The richness of the manor depends as much on soil fertility and climate as it does on size. Thousands of acres of moor and fen cannot support a baron as well as a modest holding of good river-valley land.

At the bottom of the scale is the small fief of a single knight. As a rough estimate, it takes the labor of fifteen to thirty peasant families, working a holding of forty to one hundred hectares, to support one knight, his family, and his warhorse. (A hectare is 10,000 square kilometers, or about 2½ acres.) On such a small manor, the knight lives little better than his peasants.

Rich manors, however, cover thousands of hectares and are worked by several thousand tenants. In medieval France, for example, the average manor of a lord of the baronial class was about three hundred

square miles. About one third of this estate was under the personal control of the baron or count, while the rest was parceled out to his knights in small fiefs of varying size. (This process of giving out pieces of a manor is called subenfeoffment.)

When setting up a manor to support the castle for either a PC or an NPC, the GM must remember that large tracts of good land are necessary to support a lord in any kind of style. Medieval-level agriculture is extremely labor-intensive and inefficient; thus the surplus, which goes to the lord, is going to be small.

Kinds of castles

Possessing the revenue from a large tract of land is also necessary to build the castle in the first place. Building a large stone fortification is expensive, even when much of the labor comes from unpaid peasantry. Let's look at the cost of some English castles in the 12th century. At that time, the English pound was divided into 240 silver pennies, and 30 of those pennies would buy a healthy ox or a warhorse. To build the small castle of Scarbourough cost the king 656 pounds; to expand Wark on Tweed from a small castle to a medium-sized one cost 383 pounds; to build the elaborate castle at Orford cost 1,222 pounds — the equivalent of 9,776 warhorses!

Thus, not every petty knight living on a manor of 50 hectares is going to have a castle, even though possessing a proper castle is the ardent desire of every nobleman. Poor knights or PC's beginning to build a stronghold are more likely to have either a fortified manor house or a fortalice.

The fortified manor can take many forms, but its distinguishing characteristic is the use of wooden defenses instead of stone. The most common type is the motte-and-bailey. A wooden house sits at the top of the motte (a mound of earth heaped up, or a small natural hill). At the base of the motte, a palisade of heavy logs encloses the bailey (an open space useful for sheltering peasants in case of attack). Although the palisade is vulnerable to fire, a well-defended motte-and-bailey manor can withstand siege for several days, long enough for some ally or overlord to come to the rescue. Building and supporting a fortified manor house requires 40-60 hectares of land; a motte-and-bailey, about 100 hectares.

The fortalice is a step up for the wealthier noble. Such a fortification has a simple curtain wall of stone, enclosing a large ward, and perhaps has a fortified gatehouse. Inside the wall is a simple keep — usually a tall donjon tower, either round or square — that both houses the noble family and serves as a last-ditch defense if the wall is breached. A holding of around 150 hectares of land is necessary to build and support a fortalice.

The fortalice grades into the small castle proper. Although the small castle may have a separate dwelling house beside the donjon, most lords prefer to put the extra money into its defenses, adding ramparting and a barbican tower. it will take at least 200 hectares of land to maintain a small castle.

The true castle, with its rings of walls, multiple towers, and stone dwelling-houses, requires a manor of at least 500 hectares and is thus usually the property of a lord of the baronial class. It may also belong to a king, who can support more castles than he can live in by taxes from the royal demesne as well as from the manor attached to each castle. Such royal castles have a military purpose, like guarding an important bridge, and will house a castellan and his family — a nobleman sworn personally to the king but holding his position by hereditary right.

The noble inhabitants

Castellans, however, are the rarest sort of castle inhabitants. Most will be lords from the baronial class, which includes any noble above the simple status of knight — barons, counts, dukes, margraves, and so on. During the actual Middle Ages, these various noble titles were considered equal in rank, rather than being graded into the strict hierarchy of later times. What truly determined a noble's status was the size of his manor and the strength of his holdings.

The lord and his immediate family live inside the donjon in a small castle, or in a palais (a separate dwelling-house) in a rich one. Besides his wife and children, the lord's family includes any younger brothers or sisters still dependent on him and probably his widowed mother, the dowager. Since noblemen lived short lives, on the whole, usually the eldest son inherited the manor before his siblings were grown. He was then responsible for raising them and either making good marriages for the sisters or finding land and a position for the brothers. (How well selfish lords fulfilled these duties is another question.)

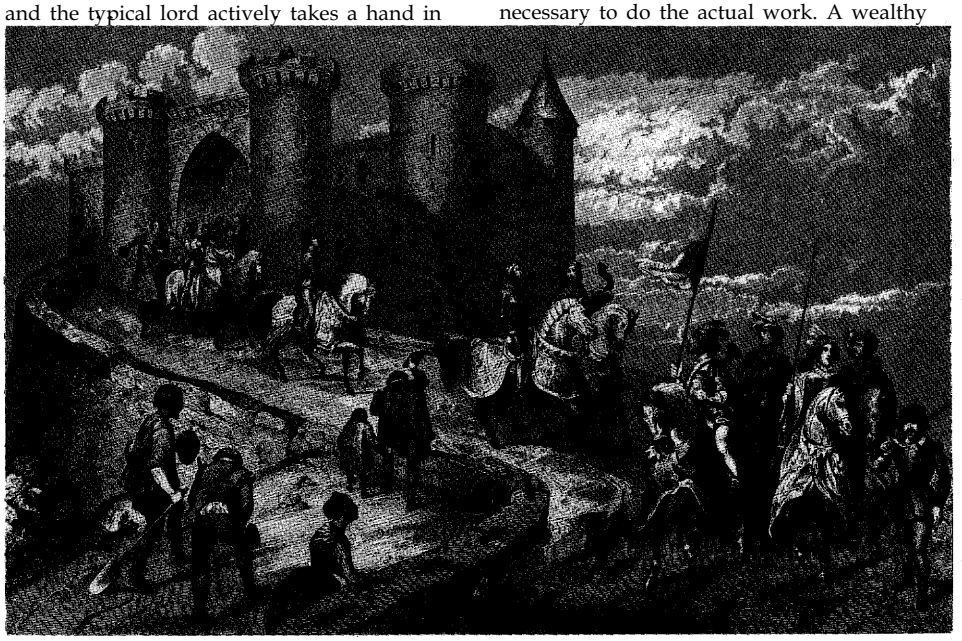
Although the lord's primary duty in life is war, in peacetime few lords live idle lives. They are, after all, the administrators for vast estates with power over many lives, and the typical lord actively takes a hand in running his land. On any given day, he is just as likely to be found discussing business with his bailiff and provosts as he is training with arms or hunting. Since the lord of the baronial class usually has the right of high justice over his tenants and dependents, he also spends much time acting as judge and jury for every legal dispute, crime, or petty squabble on his land, right down to arguments among peasants over a chicken or hog.

A word must be said about the typical noble lady of a castle. Although under medieval law a woman had few rights and was barred from most activities — she could neither own property nor bear arms, for instance — in practice such legal cavils were ignored. Usually the lady also takes an active part in running the estate; many important officials report directly to her, and she is responsible for all the daily accounts and doings of the servants. She is also her lord's hostess, which is a very important job in a world where a lord's reputation depends on his generosity.

Furthermore, the noble lady is also trained to hold her castle against siege while her husband is gone on campaign. During such crises, the men-at-arms and household knights obey her without question. Some ladies have even been known to take the field of battle, armed like men, to rescue their husbands from imprisonment. Thus, rather than the fragile flower depicted in modern romances, the feudal lady is a person with an air of command. If her husband is the commander of their domain, then she is his most trusted general, with true power over the household.

Retainers and officials

Any good-sized castle shelters a surprisingly large number of servants of varying degrees of rank. Since generosity is one of the marks of true nobility, supporting a large household brings status to the lord of the household. The lord will maintain as many people as he can feed, far more than necessary to do the actual work. A wealthy



'Any good-sized castle shelters a surprisingly large number of servants . . .'

baron, for example, might have three hundred people living behind his walls.

The most important member of this crowd are the retainers and officials of noble rank. In medieval society, there was absolutely no shame attached to performing the most menial services for a person of higher rank — to the contrary, it was an honor to be chosen for the task. Likewise, having retainers of noble blood increases the status of the castle's lord. It is the goal of powerful lords to have as many noble retainers as possible, even for such mundane jobs as falconmaster. Exactly how many castle officials will be noble-born depends, of course, on the castle-holder's wealth and reputation.

Even the poorest lord has at least one noble retainer, his squire. (Wealthy lords have three or four squires, for status.) The squire is a boy of noble blood who at age twelve or thirteen comes to live in another lord's family to receive his final training in arms and courtesy. Common opinion holds that no man can train his own son properly, because he would go easy on the boy, rather than being as harsh as a warrior's training demands. While living with his lord, the squire acts as both valet and companion. He helps his lord dress in the morning, waits on him at table, tends his personal horses, and runs whatever errands the lord needs to have run.

Just as the lord has his squires, the lady has her waiting women, girls of good family who are usually friends more than maids. The waiting women dress their lady, take care of her clothes, help with the children, and join her in the endless sewing of clothes that's such a large part of life for medieval women. Since a lord gains status by supporting many waiting women for his wife, the usual lady has a retinue of many girls around her at all times. Most of these will eventually marry, but some waiting-women prefer to remain with their lady to avoid an unwelcome marriage. Such a woman will be the lady's chief confidante and thus a person of power within the castle.

Other noble-born retainers act as officials, coming between the lord and the actual servants. The exact number and positions of these officials will of course vary, depending on the wealth and size of the castle. A poor knight will only have one man to scurry around and do whatever he has time to do, while a rich baron will have the full staff listed below.

The chief officer in a large castle is the seneschal, who has many varied duties. He is the lord's right-hand man, the overseer of the fief as a whole, the lord's companion in battle, and his trusted political councilor. He disburses monies or food to the other officials, keeps an eye on their accounts, and solves whatever disputes are beneath the notice of the lord. In wartime, he is the second-in-command of the men-at-arms and vassals in the lord's army. If only one official in a household is noble-born, that one will be the seneschal.

The steward, overseeing the butler, cellarer, and cooks, is responsible for feeding the castle household — no easy job with three hundred people at table! He oversees the provision and storage of food from the actual farmland, sets the menus with the lady of the castle, gives orders to the cooks, and organizes any feasts or festivities. At mealtimes, he becomes a head waiter, coordinating the servants who are bringing in the food.

The chamberlain is responsible for the household work exclusive of food preparation. He supervises what little cleaning gets done, the hiring of common-born servants, the purchase and care of furniture and hangings, and the dispensing of any gifts the lord and lady care to make. He also has the important task of tending to the comfort of any guests. Both the steward and the chamberlain report directly to the lady.

The marshal; or equerry, is in charge of the stables, which are the core of the lord's military power in a cavalry-dominated world. The marshal supervises the stable boys and the groom, buys or trades horses as necessary, and assigns the horses owned by the lord to whomever needs to use them. Since most noble lords spend a lot of time discussing their beloved horses, the marshal usually has personal influence over the lord and thus great personal power.

Another person of great influence is the lord's chaplain, the priest who lives in the castle and performs religious services for all its inhabitants, noble or common. Beyond his religious duties, the priest knows the common law and is expected to advise the lord when he is dispensing justice. He also acts as the castle's almoner, dispensing charity to the poor who show up at the gates. In a fantasy world with pagan societies, this priest will not be a Christian father, of course, but most lords will keep a priest of their favorite god close at hand.

A wealthy lord also maintains as many men-at-arms as he can afford to keep in his barracks. Particularly if this force contains archers and pikemen, the men-at-arms are likely to be from the yeoman (free middle) class, but at their head will be at least one household knight of noble birth. In areas where there is constant warfare or danger from bandits and suchlike, the lord will maintain as many household knights as he

can afford, but in peaceful regions, he will enfeoff his knights on part of his manor.

The average household knight is a poor noble, usually a younger son with no chance at an inheritance, who spends his whole life in the lord's castle for what amounts to room and board — and the all-important chance to prove himself in battle. Some knights, however, are vagrant adventurers — noble-born, of course, but kicked out by their families for one shameful reason or another. These lesser knights own their own horses and equipment, rather than receiving them from the lord, and thus are paid a small fee in addition to their maintenance. In the castle hierarchy, these knights-errant, as they are called, come near the bottom as necessary evils, not to be trusted unless under the firm control of the seneschal.

In fantasy-world castles, great lords also have a personal wizard or sorcerer living with them. Such a magician is expected to use his skills in his lord's defense during war and to influence political events during peace. He also gives the lord counsel from his arcane lore and interprets omens that are beyond the range of the priest. Kings and particularly powerful nobles will have a personal alchemist in their castle as well.

Servitors and servants

Among the ranks of common-born servants in the castle there is a further distinction — between servitors, who have a certain amount of respect and position, and the crowd of peasant servants who do the actual daily labor. The servitors have a craft to offer, such as blacksmithing, cookery, or hunting technique. These skilled laborers hold their positions by hereditary right, passing the job down to their sons or daughters as long as they have heirs. Servitors are generally proud of their position and very loyal to their lord if he's any kind of a decent man at all.

The servants, recruited from the peasantry on the manor, are treated like valuable farm animals. Kicks and curses are their daily lot from those above them in the hierarchy. They sleep wherever they can find a spot, usually on the floor or on a table in the lord's hall, or out in the stables. For wages, they receive food, one suit of clothes a year, and a few small coins at Christmas. Yet, odd though it seems to modern minds, being a servant in a castle is a sought-after job. Since status demands that the lord have more servants than are necessary for the work, no single servant works more than three or four hours a day — a much better lot than breaking one's back on the farm. Servants are also assured of getting enough to eat, which is not the case for other peasants.

A great castle will have close to a hundred servitors, counting their wives, and another hundred or so servants. Following are descriptions of some of the most important servitors, who will be found in any castle of decent size.

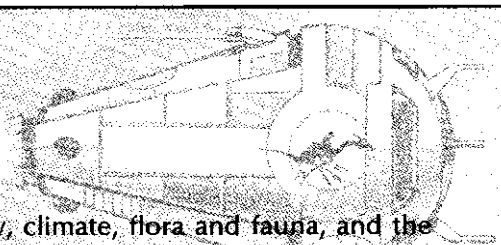
Working under the seneschal are those responsible for the security of the castle, the chief porter and the watchmen. Although the watchmen are recruited nightly from the men-at-arms, the chief porter has a hereditary job. Usually he and his family live in a gate-house, which is either just inside the gates or built into the wall over them. He is responsible for greeting — and scrutinizing — every person who comes to the gates and for deciding whether or not to admit them. If the visitor is noble, the porter must greet him with the ritual courtesy due his rank. If the visitor is judged undesirable, the porter must turn him out — by force if necessary. Thus, porters are trained in the use of weapons.

A lord who dispenses justice has an important servitor in the person of the sworn executioner. Although not the most popular man in the castle, the executioner is treated with respect. He's responsible for hanging or otherwise dispatching criminals, "persuading" suspected criminals to reveal evidence, and putting minor infractors in the stocks or flogging them. Oddly enough, the executioner also serves as a doctor for broken bones and wounds. Since he's trained to break bodies, he knows a good bit about repairing them as well.

Another person who serves as a doctor from time to time is the barber, sometimes known as a barber-surgeon. Although he shaves the noblemen of the household and cuts their hair like a modern barber, he also

TARSUS

World Beyond the Frontier



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knows much primitive medicine and can dispense herbal potions for various ailments. His most common treatment, however, is bleeding the sick, either by opening a small vein or by applying river leeches to suck out the "bad blood."

Since the hunt is a very important part of castle life, providing not only amusement but much-needed meat, every castle has a staff of servitors devoted to hunting. The kennelman cares for and trains the lord's hounds; during the hunt, he supervises the pack. The falconer tends the falcons and hawks; he also has the unenviable job of raiding nests to steal young birds. The average falconer will have many scars on his face. The master huntsman tends and repairs the special hunting weapons, trains the beaters and netmen, and tracks game when the hunt is up.

Another crucial part of the castle's food supply is the garden, tended by the chief gardener and a crew of peasant servants. This garden supplies vegetables, pot herbs, and medicinal herbs as well as flowers. The flowers, however, are considered a "necessary luxury," because they are a bright spot of color in an otherwise drab life. Even the most battle-hardened lord will wear flowers in his hair for special events like weddings.

Even if a castle is near a town, the lord prefers to keep his own craftsmen within his walls. After all, one can't send to town for supplies during a siege! Every castle will have a carpenter, a tinker, a potter, and a stone-mason, but the most important of these servitors is the blacksmith. In fact, a large castle is likely to have two smiths, who, besides shoeing the small herd of horses within the castle, also produce nails, bolts, arrowheads, lance heads, shield bosses, and even chain mail. The smiths also repair broken weapons and horse-gear.

Working cloth is another important castle industry, because every piece of clothing or blanket used by those who live there is produced by the household. The castle's lady supervises a large staff of women who spin wool from the lord's sheep, weave it into cloth, dye it with herbal dyes, and then sew it into clothes to be dispensed as wages or gifts. The lady herself will sew her lord's clothing, perhaps adding a touch of fancy needlework if she has the time.

Head cook, baker, head groom, dairyman, poultryman — all are important servitors, and all will have lesser servants to help them at their work. The bailey and ward of a large castle are actually a village, filled with wooden shacks and workshops, housing the people who turn the produce from the land into the necessities and sometimes the luxuries of life.

Who pays for all of this?

Whether bushels of wheat or silver coins, disposable wealth has to come from somewhere, and the "somewhere" of the manorial economy is the labor of the tenant peasants, or serfs, as they are commonly known. Although many lords have subsidiary incomes from bridge tolls, river rights, or town taxes, the bulk of their wealth comes from the land.

'Every castle has a staff servitors devoted to hunting.'

As mentioned above, about one-third of a manor is the lord's own land, the demesne. All produce from the demesne belongs directly to the lord. The tenants holding the rest of the manor also work on the lord's demesne, usually for three days a week. This service, called the ***corvee,*** is paid only by the head of each tenant family, but it is strictly enforced.

The other members of the family are then technically free to work their own land for their own profit, but in practice, the lord skims off a large share of their labor. For starters, each peasant has to pay an annual head tax, the ***chevage.*** If the lord has justice rights over the peasants (and most do), each family pays a further annual tax, the ***taille.*** Whenever the head of a family dies, his son must pay the lord a further tax to inherit the land.

Most onerous of all, however, are the ***banalites,*** duties and fees that must be paid constantly in order to live daily life. Peasants must grind their grain in the lord's mill, bake their bread in his ovens, use only his bull and stallion to stud their cows and mares, cross only his bridge at the stream — on and on, and all for a fee. These charges are enforced by physical violence, such as floggings or even maiming.

The French historian George Duby has estimated that the total charges upon a peasant amounted to 50% of his family's total output, and this is over and above the ***corvee.*** (And you think the IRS is bad?) The average peasant family, therefore, lives close to starvation. Their clothes are torn and filthy; their hut is tumbledown and drafty; their children die with heart-breaking regularity from malnutrition and small fevers. Most peasants also live in a state of sullen resentment that at times breaks out into open rebellion, but the lord's armed justice is swift to torture, maim, or kill any protestor. At its most basic level, the manorial system resembles nothing so much as that well-known gangster ploy, the protection racket.

To keep the peasants in line and to extort all these fees, the lord requires a number of manorial officials, sometimes noble-born but more usually middle-class servitors, again holding their positions by hereditary right. At the top of the hierarchy is the bailiff, who might live in the castle, but who more likely lives in a farmhouse on the estate. The bailiff is the working overseer of the estate, making his daily rounds on horseback to collect work-gangs for the corvee, make decisions about plowing and planting, and supervise the collection of taxes and fees. Since they must make detailed annual reports to the lord and the seneschal, most bailiffs can read and write.

To help him, the bailiff has a varying number of assistants, the provosts. (Some lords dispense with a bailiff and have the provosts report directly to them.) The provosts directly supervise the ***corvee,*** and some do actual physical work as well, such as loading the taxes onto carts or tending the lord's horses when they are brought outside to graze.

Two other important estate officials are the forester and the game warden. The forester keeps track of all firewood cut from the lord's forest and of course imposes a fee upon the peasant for cutting it. The game warden's primary duty is to make sure that no one poaches any wild game from the estate. All deer, rabbits, and boars are the lord's property; any peasant who kills so much as a rabbit, even to protect his crops, will be summarily hanged.

The player character's castle

Now that the GM understands the requirements of a working castle, he is in a better position to supervise any players who wish to have their characters build strongholds, a process far more complex than the modern procedure of buying a piece of real

estate and hiring a contractor. At all stages, the GM should retain firm control of the process and put plenty of realistic obstacles in the character's way. In a sense, the GM will be role-playing the entire medieval environment and property system.

The first problem is acquiring enough land — not merely for the actual castle itself, but also for the manor to support it. Most players will protest that their characters don't need a manor, because they plan to support their castle with the coin from adventuring. Unfortunately, all the coin in the world can't buy food that isn't there to buy. Medieval agriculture is so inefficient that it's highly unlikely that the neighborhood peasants will have any food to sell after fulfilling their obligations to their lord.

Besides, their lord will probably outright forbid any sale of food to the adventurer in the neighborhood because any new castle is a rival for power. Even free farmers will sell only what food they can spare, leaving the character's castle vulnerable to bad harvests. Thus, the PC's castle requires a manor to feed it.

Buying land outright for coin is unheard of in a medieval-style world. At the most, a PC could obtain a small amount of land on a perpetual lease by paying a money rent, but it is far more likely that any manorial estate will come enfeoffed or entailed in one way or another. There are two kinds of land available for new manors: virgin territory, or farmland from a great lord's already existing manor.

Any virgin territory within a kingdom is considered the property of the king; squatters will have a war on their hands. Legally settling virgin territory requires a royal charter granting and establishing the new manor. In the case of manorial land, the lord who has rights to it must be persuaded to subenfeoff it to the PC. In both cases, the granter of the manor will wangle as many obligations as he can from the PC.

To obtain a manor from an overlord, whether king or baron, the PC has to acquire the lord's favor and convince him that he will be a loyal vassal in the future. Here's where all those coins and jewels can come in handy. Besides giving lavish presents to the overlord, the PC will have to bribe his important officials to get them on his side and perhaps even to get an audience with the overlord. Once the grant of land is offered, the PC has to swear homage to his new overlord, or suzerain, as it was often called.

In homage, the PC promises to become the overlord's vassal for the rest of his life (the PC's life, that is) and to perform certain services in return for the land. The minor ones can be widely varied, but the most common small obligations are to visit the overlord's court once a year, to entertain him sumptuously whenever he appears at the vassal's castle, and to help him with the expense of wedding or knightings of the lord's children when they come of age.

The major obligation, of course, is military service. The vassal must provide a specified number of soldiers and their provisions for forty to sixty days a year. Whenever summoned, the vassal must personally fight at his lord's side. In some cases, it's possible to get out of this service by paying scutage, a money payment sufficient to hire and supply as many men as the vassal is failing to provide. The GM should decide whether the overlord in question will accept scutage. In a real emergency, the overlord will not.

If the PC has received a grant of manorial land that's already being farmed, he can proceed to building the castle. In the case of virgin territory, however, the PC will have to find farmers to work on the new manor. Peasants on an existing manor are usually willing to become colonists if they receive a better deal than they're already getting — an easy enough matter, considering their lot. It was common for colonizing lords to allow — reluctantly, of course — their colonists to lease the new land with rents due instead of full feudal service.

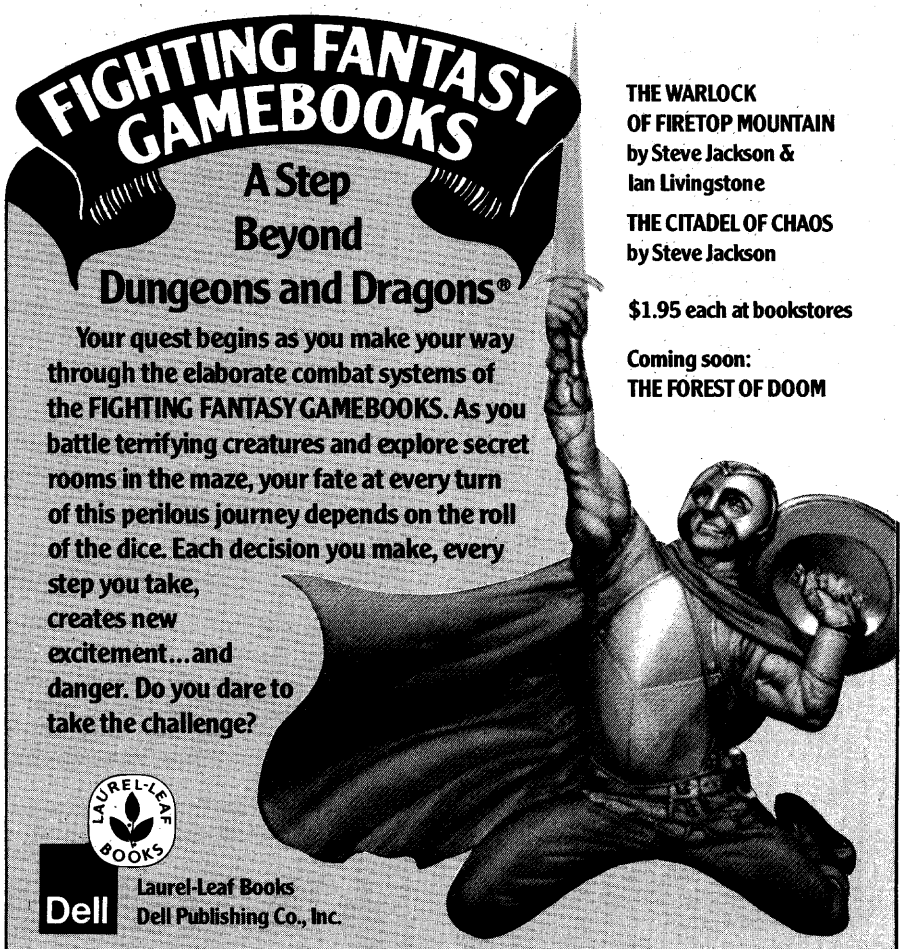
Since serfs are legally free men, not slaves, buying them out of serfdom is a ticklish business. While trying to keep up appearances, their former lord will try to get as much coin as possible per head. Lords will never risk underpopulating their own lands, of course, and thus will probably only allow 10-15% of their serfs to leave at any given time.

Once the farmlands are settled, the PC will also have to acquire servitors from the middle classes and whatever noble officials or henchmen he can attract. To build the actual castle requires skilled, well-paid craftsmen brought out from towns. Most fantasy-game systems have prices in their rules for the actual cost of building. Craftsmen will demand to be paid in coin, not produce, but they will take part of the wages in living expenses while actually working.

The process of settling a manor and building a castle should take game-years, not months. The PC isn't slapping up a modern condominium of lath and sheetrock, but building in stone for the ages. The GM will probably have to rule that the PC doesn't have the resources to build his dream castle all at once but must either adventure again or wait until the land begins producing enough revenue to finish the work.

Most PC's, in fact, will have to start a stronghold as a fortified manor or fortalice. Although players will gripe about this, the GM should hold firm. After all, a recurring problem in long-running campaigns is the rich and incredibly powerful PC who unbalances the game by his very presence. First building, then maintaining a castle is an excellent way to drain off not only wealthy but playing time from such a PC.

First of all, the PC will have to spend playing time fulfilling his obligations to his overlord. The military service will always come due in summer — prime adventuring



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CALL of CTHULHU

Based on the stories by H.P. Lovecraft

Approved by Arkham House

ROLE-PLAYING
for
INVESTIGATORS
of the
OCCULT

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weather. An overlord's visit will cost a great deal of money for the lavish feasts and entertainments that are necessary to keep the overlord's good favor.

Second, running a large manor takes time. If the PC is away from home too often, the officials are likely to turn dishonest and begin stealing revenues, or turn so ruthless that they cause a peasant revolt. The PC must also maintain a court of justice and be at home to receive taxes and homage from those below him.

Finally, a powerful PC on a rich manor is going to cause envy, and thus emnity, among his neighbors. Petty feuds and envious disputes are common in a medieval-style society, and they're always settled by the sword. Fighting a local war is a much better use of a powerful PC's talents than is stripping hapless dragons of their wealth.

The castle in the campaign

Since building and maintaining a castle is such a difficult proposition, castles aren't going to exist in every hex of the campaign map. The common pattern, in fact, will be one powerful castle for every, two or three hundred square miles, surrounded at intervals by the fortalices of the rich lord's vassals. Royal castles will be even rarer. In a kingdom with a weak central government, there may be no royal castles at all except for the king's personal dwelling.

Because of the large number of servants, servitors, and retainers who live in a castle, drawing up a castle minutely for an NPC is as much work as creating a small town. Fortunately, unless the NPC has a crucial central role in the campaign, or the GM wishes to run a series of scenarios in a particular castle, there is no need to create every single inhabitant and give them full stats. After all, unless the player party is a bunch of murderous brigands, they are unlikely to engage in combat with the blacksmith's wife or the pig-boys.

As a starting point, the GM should write a descriptive paragraph for each truly important inhabitant in the castle, such as the lord and his family, the noble officials, the chief household knight, and such servitors as the player party is likely to meet, such as the chief porter. Here's an example of such a sketch: "Sir Gervase, the seneschal, is a strong middle-aged man with great skill with weapons. He uses his quick wits and considerable worldly wisdom loyally in the service of his lord." Then, if stats are necessary at some later time, the GM can either roll them up or simply decide them within the parameters of the sketch.

Lesser servitors and servants can be merely listed and noted, for instance: "twelve serving wenches, two very pretty," or "Hubert the blacksmith; lives in the bailey; strong arm with war hammer."

When it comes to running the castle, impressionistic story-telling will fill a lot of gaps. For example, let's suppose a player party is entering a castle for the first time. After an actual encounter with the chief porter, they go through the gates. The GM can say something like this: "Out in the bailey, you see a large number of wooden sheds and huts. Servants hurry around carrying food and firewood; a couple of grooms are currying horses by the main well; you hear the clang of a blacksmith's hammer over the general din." Such a scene-setting gives the feel of castle life without stats and continual dice rolls.

When mapping out the manor for an important castle, likewise, the GM should indicate where the peasant villages are and how many families live in them, but it's unnecessary to make a detailed placement of every hut and field. The map can indicate the lord's forest, major streams, and other such natural features on a simple hex-by-hex basis. If the player party is the sort that's likely to get into trouble, by poaching on the lord's forest preserve or robbing someone, then the GM can set up the daily route of the bailiff, provosts, and gamekeeper and give them some combat stats.

The time spent working up a realistically populated castle will pay off in the fun of running it. All these assorted NPC's provide opportunities for encounters and character interaction beyond the usual combats — love affairs, resentments, friendships, diplomatic squabbles — all in a fantasy setting that will still seem "real" to the players. A truly well-realized setting adds enormously to everyone's enjoyment — and that's what fantasy role-playing is all about!

A note on further reading

GM's and players who are interested in more detail about castle life can find many books available these days, some in paperback. One of the best is ***Life on a Medieval Barony*** by William Stearns Davis (Harper and Row, 2nd ed. 1953). Serious role-players, especially ***Chivalry and Sorcery*** fans, will find that reading this or some similar book adds enormously to their fun. Hard-working GM's who want more information about the manorial system and the sizes and population of average holdings should gird their loins and attack ***The Cambridge Economic History of Europe,*** Volume I: ***The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages,*** edited by M. M. Postan (Cambridge University Press, 1966).

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