

The history of the Castle landscape in the German Spessart

by

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Before leading the reader into the fascinating field of castles in the Spessart I would like to say some introductory words on the Spessart itself and the current research work going on in and on the region. The Spessart is one of the largest uninterrupted wooded areas in Germany. It lies in the middle of Germany, stretching eastward from Frankfurt on Main to the City of Würzburg. It covers an area between the River in Kinzig Hesse and the River Main in the North of Bavaria and comprises an area of about 2258 square kilometres. In the Spessart there are various valleys and hills ranging from 160 m to almost 600 m above sea level with ground-conditions of crystalline stone in the north and new red sandstone in the South East of the area. Today the image of the Spessart is of a rather backward and isolated area, its former importance has been somewhat forgotten.

In the middle ages, however, the Spessart was a much coveted area. The archbishops of Mainz, the princebishops of Würzburg, as well as many powerful nobles had a huge interest in possessing the Spessart. Furthermore, it was not only land for hunting that they were interested in but they saw the Spessart as of strategic importance and established villages and strongholds at crossing-points of several long-distance roads, encouraging medieval industry with mills and mines. Possession of land in the Spessart also provided income from road tolls and the sale of the timber. Nowadays the Spessart region and its history is in the focus of professional research. The department of Franconian history of Professor Helmut Flachenecker is highly interested in almost every kind of research in the Spessart region and is organizing several PhD projects. The Bavarian government is supporting this research work. It is important to encourage interest in local history and traditions which form the identity of the many, often neglected regions of Europe. The University of Würzburg is cooperating with the Archaeological Spessart Project (ASP), which is supporting several research projects in the Spessart. The ASP wants to increase knowledge and is keen on saving the cultural landscape and works closely with the local people in the Spessart. The archaeologists are

also inspired by English ideas, for example by the practice of the communal dig. In the last years there has been several successful excavations at castle sites, where the local population was allowed and encouraged to participate and to ‘dig’ with professional guidance.¹ The historians get the archaeological results and try to put the new information into the historical background of the Spessart in the Middle Ages. To be honest the current research is not the first to explore this region. In the 19th century, in particular, there was a spate of interest in researching the history, tradition, heritage and demography of the Spessart. Be they priests, farmers, teachers or amateur historians, there were many investigators attracted to this seemingly mysterious area of Germany. It is not disrespectful to say that these early local historians often didn’t work in an accurate academic way and were often prone to invent and interpret phenomena rather than study them scientifically. They often had their own particular axe to grind.

The dignitaries of the church of Mainz and Würzburg were in the Middle Ages not always on good terms with one another. Since the bishops were not only men of the cloth but also worldly rulers, they were intent on upholding and extending their power over this region and the wealth that it brought them. Especially in the Western region of the Spessart also the lesser nobles developed increasing self-confidence in the 13th century, which led to many conflicts and a huge increase in the building of castles. Apart from the practice of setting up towns, by the 11th century at the latest, the building or buying of castles had become the essential way of consolidating power. A high density of castles in a landscape shows the presence and the intensity of the visible claim to power. In order to have political success it was not necessary to own castles but to have a large amount of land holdings. A castle is not to be reduced to its military and protective functions only, but is also to be regarded as a status-symbol, as a centre of administration and of the local economy or as a court of justice.² So I have to agree with Joachim Zeune, a German archaeologist, in his characterization of a castle as a “building of multipurpose with deeply symbolic signs”.³ The symbolic signs are, for example, a tiled stove or pinnacles without a defensive purpose. This implies

¹ Further information is available at: www.spessartprojekt.de.

² GERHARD ERMISCHER, Niederadel im Wandel, in: HARALD ROSMANITZ (Hg.), Die Ketzelsburg in Haibach. Eine archäologisch-historische Spurensuche (Veröffentlichungen des Heimat- und Geschichtsvereins Haibach-Grünmorsbach-Dörmorsbach e.V. 6) 2006, S. 52.

³ Joachim ZEUNE, Die Burg als Symbol von Herrschaft und Macht. Gedanken zum Nachdenken 1, in: Arx 2 (2000) S. 18.

the additional message of the owner that he is of higher rank than the rest of the inhabitants of a village or a region. Archaeological sources speak of about 250 small-sized fortresses or small-sized castles in Franconia. Most of them were built to be visible or else for topographical reasons. Less than half of the 250 castles can be verified from historical sources – which is of course dissatisfying for historians –, less than one third have been verified by excavations.⁴ Picture 1 (p. 436) shows the distribution of castles in the Spessart (source: Spessart-GIS, Archäologisches Spessartprojekt).

Especially in the more crowded Western part of the Spessart, close to the town of Aschaffenburg, one can find a lot of small-sized castles. As already mentioned, throughout the Middle Ages, the Spessart was a region, where many players tried to consolidate their power. In the Western part of the Spessart, in particular, there was a conflict between the house of Staufen and the diocese of Mainz, which used the town of Aschaffenburg as an important base with a collegiate church and an important bridge over the river Main. Several towns were established by the Staufers in the Western part of the Spessart in order to regulate or to restrain the influence of the church of Mainz in this area.⁵ Also, a lot of larger and small-sized castles, which played certain roles in several conflicts between the Staufer family and the diocese of Mainz, were built.⁶ The Staufers installed the gentry and the aristocracy in these castles, who from there spread their influence further by building more castles. The example of the Counts of Rieneck shows, that the attempt to expand the influence over this region and the wish to realise the claims on the Spessart were also encouraged by aristocrats with initially close connections to Mainz. By the end of the 12th century the archbishop of Mainz complained about the behaviour of his tenant, the Count of Rieneck, who didn't respect some feudal rights regarding some castles.⁷ Subsequently, the self-confidence of the gentry and especially of the Counts of Rieneck grew. They were granted several rights, for example hunting rights or the right to clear

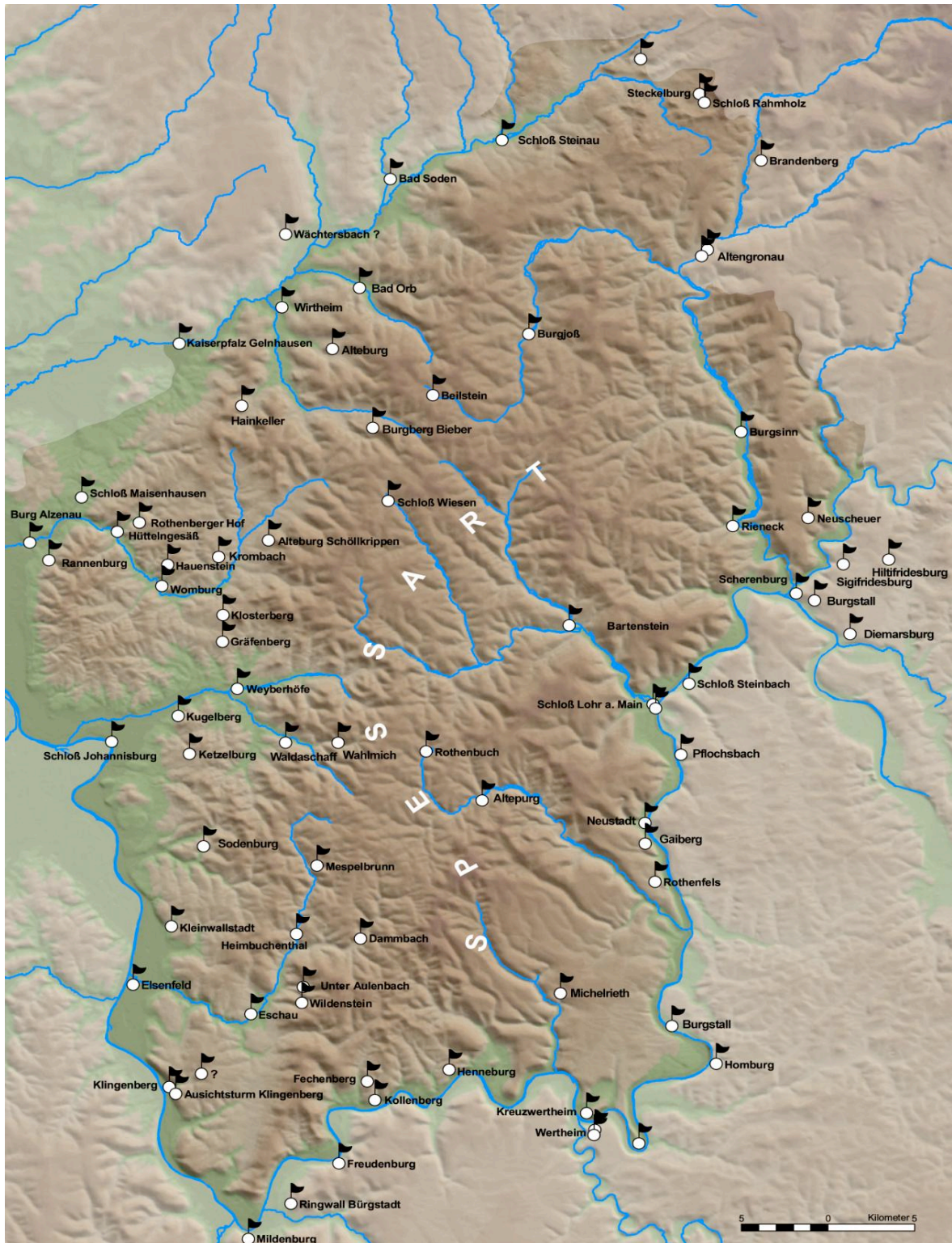
⁴ PETER ETTTEL.: Burgenbau in Franken um 1000, in: ERICH SCHNEIDER, BERND SCHNEIDMÜLLER (Hg.), Vor 1000 Jahren – Die Schweinfurter Fehde und die Landschaft am Obermain 1003 (Schweinfurter Museumsschriften 118) 2004, S. 133.

⁵ WILHELM STÖRMER, Staufische Reichslandpolitik und hochadelige Herrschaftsbildung im Mainviereck, in: HERWIG EBNER (Hg.), Festschrift Friedrich Hausmann, 1977, S. 506.

⁶ STEFAN GRATHOFF: Mainzer Erzbischofsburgen. Erwerb und Funktion von Burgherrschaft am Beispiel der Mainzer Erzbischöfe im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter (Geschichtliche Landeskunde. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für geschichtliche Landeskunde an der Universität Mainz 58) 2005, S. 165.

⁷ THEODOR RUF, Die Grafen von Rieneck (Mainfränkische Studien 32/1) 1984, S. 128.

woodlands and thus in the 13th century the conflict between the archdiocese of Mainz and the Counts of Rieneck reached its peak. The Counts of Rieneck



founded monasteries and started to build castles, which were then instated with aristocrats who had a close relationship to the Rieneck family.⁸ This was an unacceptable affront to the archdiocese of Mainz. The archdiocese of Mainz managed to use their power in order to secure the district and to prevail in the conflict with the Counts of Rieneck, especially in the years between 1260 and 1271. Charters show that the Counts of Rieneck were forced to destroy some of their castles or the castles of closely related noblemen. So a lot of these small-sized castles in the Spessart only existed for a short time. Also the Rienecker had to promise not to build any further new castles. The archbishop of Mainz had all the rights which were necessary to use the wood in an effective way. The period between 1260 and 1271 is still today regarded as being the “decisive period in the development of the Spessart into a territory in the hand of the archdiocese”.⁹

The question, what kind of role all the small-sized castles in the Spessart played in this development into a territory has not yet been solved. The significance of the castles in the Spessart was not only a matter of size. One can see a lot of these buildings as a farmstead with a small ditch, a mound, a wall or/and a tower. As time is limited for this paper I will leave out the discussion about the question “What is a castle?”, although the importance of this question is crystal-clear. One has to admit that even if these buildings in the Spessart were small in size, provocative names like Burg Landesehre, which means Castle Honour of the country, show the self-confidence of the Rieneck family regarding their claims in the Spessart. In a certain way even the small castles had at least a little influence to the direct surrounding.

Today most of the sites are only visible after academic excavations and there is often no evidence of them in medieval sources. To resolve this lack of sources it is essential for the historians to cooperate with other disciplines like archaeology, geography or geology. During the last years several excavations have taken place at castle sites in the Spessart. Further excavations are planned for the near future.

The so called Ketzelsburg in Haibach, close to Aschaffenburg, was excavated in 2006. It is a small area, 35 m by 50 m. While there are impressive ruins of other castles in the Spessart there are no visible remains of the Ketzelsburg. What one can see is a groundwork which was constructed after the excavation in 2006 in order to at least show the interested people the dimensions the

⁸ RUF, Grafen von Rieneck (as note 7) S. 133ff.

⁹ RUF, Grafen von Rieneck (as note 7) S. 151.

Ketzelburg had when it was in use in the 13th century. Unfortunately there is no written mention of the Ketzelburg in medieval sources. The oldest indication is from the 16th century, where the whole area is called “Ketzelburg” in correlation with some other aspects which have no connection with the castle or whatever had remained at that time.¹⁰ So there are no information’s about the owner of the Ketzelburg yet. Thanks to the archaeological findings one can say that this castle – or probably rather a kind of farmstead with a tower – was in use in the 13th century. The place might have been left afterwards.

Another very interesting example of a castle in the region of Aschaffenburg is the so called Burg Waldenberg. It is not complete clear where this castle was located but luckily we have at least two medieval documents which tell us some interesting facts about the history of the Burg Waldenberg. It was a castle built by the archdiocese of Mainz at the end of the 12th century, certainly erected as a reaction to Staufer claims in the Spessart. Another reason for building that castle might be the upcoming development of self-confidence of the Counts of Rieneck which I mentioned earlier. One charter explicitly declares that the Burg Waldenberg should act as a stronghold to protect the property of the diocese of Mainz in the Spessart.¹¹ A charter of 1227 mentions a nobleman called Friedrich von Kälberau who was holding the castle as a tenant of the archdiocese of Mainz.¹² Interestingly, the family of Kälberau was probably originally close to the Counts of Rieneck.¹³ So the history of this family is a further example of the change in the wide field of family policy which played an important role in the Spessart at that time. The gentry in the Spessart was often either related to each other or connected in close friendship to each other.¹⁴ But sometimes family interests were cast aside in favour of new territorial gains, perspectives or advantages which the archdiocese of Mainz was able to promise. The succession of the tenure after the death of Friedrich von Kälberau was well-regulated in order to keep the castle in the possession of the Kälberau family.¹⁵ This shows that it was

¹⁰ Staatsarchiv Würzburg, Mainzer Ingrossaturbuch Nr. 61, fol. 258.

¹¹ VALENTIN FERDINAND DE GUDENUS, *Codex diplomaticus anecdotorum* 1, 1743, S. 509 Nr. 200.

¹² Staatsarchiv Würzburg, Mainzer Domkapitel, Urkunde 3209; GUDENUS, *Codex diplomaticus anecdotorum* 1 (as note 11) S. 927 Nr. 443.

¹³ RUF, *Grafen von Rieneck* (as note 7) S. 154.

¹⁴ WOLFGANG HARTMANN, *Zur Geschichte der Spessartburgen Waldenberg und Kugelberg und ihrer Herren*, in: *Aschaffener Jahrbuch für Geschichte, Landeskunde und Kunst des Untermaingebietes* 19 (1997) S. 9–53.

¹⁵ GUDENUS, *Codex diplomaticus anecdotorum* 1 (as note 11) S. 927 Nr. 443.

planned to use the castle for a long time and to ensure that it is – at least from the point of view of the archdiocese of Mainz – in the “right” hands.

The problem in the Spessart of locating certain castles which are mentioned in different medieval sources has been troubling historians and archaeologists for a long time and probably will continue to trouble them in the future. But the question is permitted, whether it is even necessary to localize these castles. Their existence even allows one already information which makes it possible to divine the “ideology” of the gentry and the archdiocese of Mainz at that time. It is the further ambition of historians at the moment to provide a precise and comprehensive look at the landscape of castles in the Spessart. There are still a lot of castle sites which haven’t been explored yet in an academic way. Further excavations are planned for the near future. Various questions have yet to be answered and to resolve the lack of medieval sources it is highly auspicious to draw a profound comparison between the Spessart and the landscape of castles in wooded regions in the UK, the Netherlands or even in Poland. One must have a look at the effects of castle sites to the surrounding landscape, villages and regions as it is for example the case in projects like Clarendon Palace, England.

All the small sized castles in the Spessart lie at the heart of various tales and stories. For generations the local population has grown up with these sites and is familiar with at least the folklore version of the castles’ importance. There is an undiminished interest in the excavations and the various publications. Therefore, one should not only regard these castles as manifestations of power and within the context of the Mainz-Rieneck conflict, but as an essential component of a local history and heritage of various villages and regions in the Spessart. To some, these castles are an object of pride, and consequently constitute and evoke a sense of identity. This should always be respected.

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