

The castle project in the Spessart – scientists and volunteers explore a cultural landscape

by

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The castle project and the “Communal Dig”

In 2004, the ASP (“Archäologisches Spessartprojekt” – Project for archaeology of the Spessart-region) introduced a new model for cooperation between archaeologists and interested volunteers whose origins are to be found in the UK: the so-called “Communal Dig”. With this model, non-professionals get the chance to actively participate in an archaeological excavation alongside experienced archaeologists.

Quite contrary to first intuitions, it is not the main goal of the concept to reduce the costs associated with an archaeological undertaking, but to arouse people’s interest in local archaeology and the cultural heritage of their homeland and turn them into ambassadors for the cultural treasures of their vicinity.¹ Since the general awareness for our cultural heritage has gradually declined due to a variety of factors, it is as important as ever to make people aware of the cultural wealth that surrounds them and the significance of archaeology in unearthing and preserving that wealth for future generations.

The ASP doesn’t engage in time-restricted excavations carried out due to impending construction measures. When it comes to working with volunteers, the main target is to unearth archaeological features in teamwork with laypersons in order not only to communicate the importance of the excavated monuments, but also to integrate them into the surrounding cultural landscape as evidence of the local past. Involving the resident population in such projects is paramount to increasing their awareness and understanding of the local cultural heritage.

¹ GERHARD ERMISCHER, *Wege in die Kulturlandschaft. Einige Beispiele aus dem Spessart: Vermittlung von Kulturlandschaft*, ed. INGE GOTZMANN, CHRISTINA WALLRAFEN, 2008, p. 89–98.

HARALD ROSMANITZ: The castle project in the Spessart



Picture 01: During the excavation on the Gotthardsberg near Amorbach in 2010, most of the earthworks have been done by volunteers.



Picture 02: The group photo shows how many volunteers participated in the excavations on the Ketzelsburg and in Haibach in 2004/2005.

In parallel, involving and instructing dedicated residents, guarantees effective protection and maintenance of the monuments in question. The measures comply with essential requirements of several treaties by the Council of Europe, above all the Convention of Valetta² (protection of archaeological heritage) and the Convention of Florence.³

As the ASP has been able to plan and realize many mid- and long-term projects in the last six years, both communities and the general public have become aware of the monuments that were disinterred as part of the “Communal Dig”-model.



Picture 03: View to the upper castle of the “Old Castle”. Through a gradual removal of the surrounding forest in 2009 and 2010, the monument can now be seen in its complete size.

The positive results of this project have been overwhelming – and not only to scientists: In Kleinwallstadt, for example, the archaeologically relevant area has been barred to forestry in order to stop erosion and to safeguard the earth walls which were uncovered from damages caused by harvesters and logging. Through a gradual removal of the surrounding forest, both the castle and precursory fortifications have begun to show more clearly. Reconstructed

² <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/html/143.htm> [08.11.2010].

³ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/176.htm> [08.11.2010].

wall structures and hedges delineating the original location of the walls have been set up to make these structures permanently visible and tangible to the resident population. The charming castle complex is now a token of pride for the locals, and has become a favourite visiting spot for strollers and a venue for cultural events.



Picture 04: A medieval construction site with a treadwheel could be visited during the festivities on the castle “Bartenstein” near Partenstein in 2009.

More than a ruin – a close bond with the castle

On closer inspection, one will quickly discover the local population to have a certain, special bond with the castles and ruins that surround them. To many people, those places are almost magical and often tightly linked with their

childhood.⁴ The stories and myths surrounding these strongholds further serve in making them ever more attractive. Without the fascination connected with these castles, neither the resident population's general interest in the Middle Ages nor the willingness to take action helping research such monuments could be duly explained.



Picture 05: The “Key of the Ketzelsburg” is a fake made in the second half of the 19th century. In order to imitate a rusted and subsequently cleaned surface, the forger punched the key finely.

The story of the key allegedly found at the Ketzelsburg is a quaint example for bonds forged with a castle or monument in general.⁵ According to reports, Konrad Roth from Haibach is said to have found a late medieval key at the site of the Ketzelsburg in 1860. Back then, the population paid a lot of deference to the finder as he was the first to provide evidence of the existence of the castle. Even today, this finding is kept in Haibach. It is rather large compared to other keys of this kind, made of hammered iron sheet, with a hollow shank and a key bit with two notches. It belongs to a bolt lock which

⁴ GERHARD ERMISCHER, RÜDIGER KELM, DIRK MEIER, HARALD ROSMANITZ, *Wege in europäische Kulturlandschaften*, 2003, p. 67–82.

⁵ HARALD ROSMANITZ, *Zwischen Fälschung und Corporate Identity – der Burgschlüssel: Die Ketzelsburg in Haibach. Eine archäologisch-historische Spurensuche*, ed. HARALD ROSMANITZ, 2006, p. 11–14.

was in use in Lower Franconia from the 11th through the 14th century – the key found, however, is twice the size of similar keys. An analysis performed in the 1990's revealed the key to be a definite fake made in the 19th century. That the forger created a true-to-detail replica ought to be of some credit to him. Even though it is now commonly known the key is a forgery, the local population continues valuing it. Thus it appears that the people in Haibach are closely bonded to the castle and the history of the village itself and how desperately they want a proof of the existence of the medieval castle.

A complex research project

The castle project is unique in Bavaria and focuses on medieval castles in the Spessart. In most cases, these castles are small fortifications that had been extensively built beginning in the 11th century. One example is the Ketzelsburg in Haibach.⁶ There are, however, also medieval administrative centres like the castle of Bartenstein near Partenstein⁷ and the hunting lodge in Wiesen. Though, the “Alte Schloss” (old castle) near Kleinwallstadt,⁸ the castle on the Gräfenberg near Rottenberg⁹ and the castle on the Gotthardsberg¹⁰ (which is still being examined) show completely different building structures as they were erected during territorial conflicts. The “Mole” in Heimbuchenthal¹¹ proves moreover, that various functions of castles (as fortifications and as administrative centres) may also be united in one complex.

⁶ HARALD ROSMANITZ, Die Ketzelsburg in Haibach. Eine archäologisch-historische Spurensuche, ed. HARALD ROSMANITZ (Neustadt a.d. Aisch, 2006).

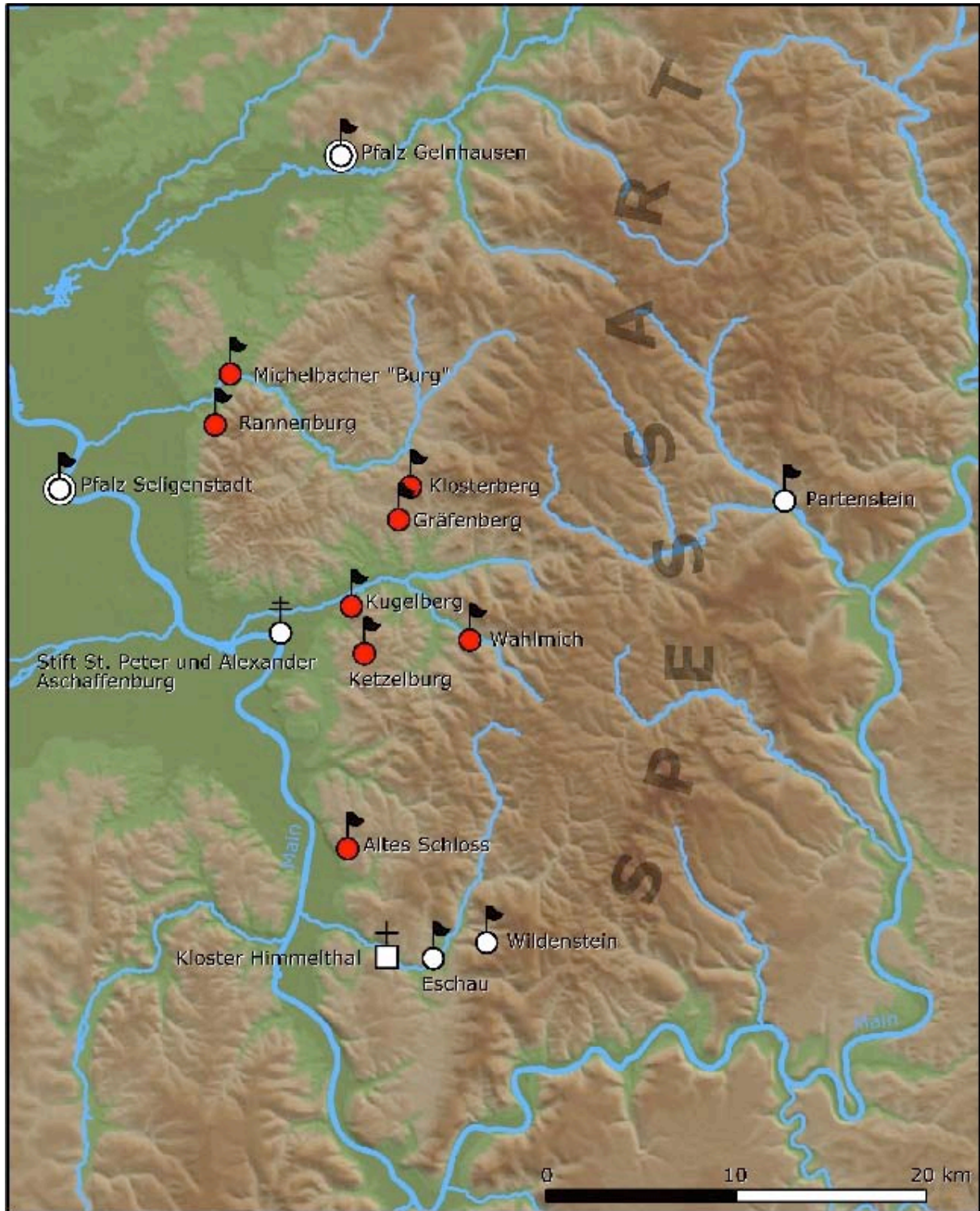
⁷ HARALD ROSMANITZ, Neues von der Burg Bartenstein im Spessart, Gemeinde Partenstein, Landkreis Main-Spessart, in: Das archäologische Jahr in Bayern 2005 (2006), p. 131–133.

⁸ HARALD ROSMANITZ, Burgenforschung im Spessart: das „Alte Schloss“ in Kleinwallstadt, in: Beiträge zur Archäologie in Unterfranken 2009 (Mainfränkische Studien 77) 2009, p. 243–286.

⁹ <http://www.spessartprojekt.de/forschung/rottenberg/index.php> [08.11.2010].

¹⁰ <http://www.spessartprojekt.de/forschung/gotthardsberg/index.php> [08.11.2010].

¹¹ HARALD ROSMANITZ, Der Burgstall „Mole“ in Heimbuchenthal, Landkreis Aschaffenburg, Unterfranken, in: Das archäologische Jahr in Bayern 2008 (2009), p. 161–163.



Picture 06: Sites of the medieval Spessart fortresses researched in the castle project. Map: Jürgen Jung, Kleinwallstadt, revision: Christine Reichert, Mainaschaff.

When it comes to the seven castles mentioned, the research objective is very complex. All these castles have one thing in common – they aren't directly

endangered by current building measures. Nevertheless, archaeological surveys and excavations are imperative as the castles not only suffer from ailing building fabric but are also adventured by mountain bike tracks or endangered by forestry. Archaeologists keep records concerning the quality and the amount of the building fabric still in-situ in order to avoid a total loss of the monument.



Picture 07: In 2008, the moat of the castle “Mole” near Heimbuchenthal was geo-archaeologically researched by the ecological centre of the University in Kiel. Although the research has not been finished yet, it begins to show that the interplay between the castle and the environs is mostly unilateral. In most cases, the need for building materials and the deforestation necessary in order to guarantee an unimpeded view on possible attackers caused massive erosion and subsequently the loss of fertile farmland close to the castle. At the same time, however, new structures like fishponds, mill ponds or game reserves developed and hills for viniculture were established. All this contributed to create the characteristic cultural landscape of the Spessart the way we know it today.

In close cooperation with the Department for Monuments, all castles were partially excavated. The main purpose was not to archaeologically analyze the excavated ruins, but to illustrate to the volunteers that results of trial trenches in outbuildings or ditches belonging to the castle are often more revealing than the excavation itself when it is necessary to understand the actual function of the castle. The results concerning the use and modifications of the complexes were completed by a geomorphic analysis carried out by the University of Würzburg and the ecological centre of the University in Kiel.

The lowland castle “Mole” and the cultural landscape of the Elsavatal valley

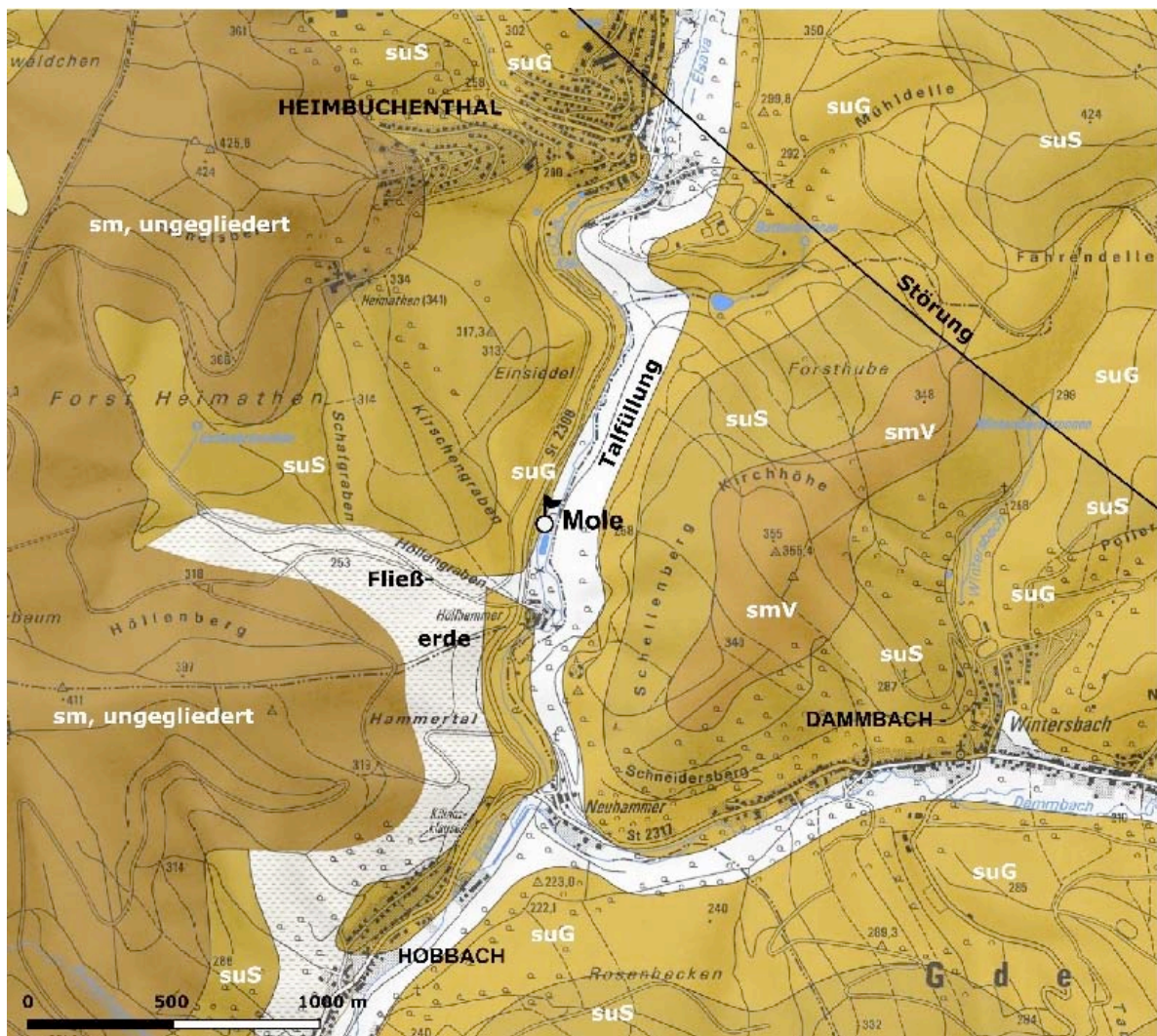
Analyzing the results of the excavation carried out at the lowland “Mole” castle, one can easily understand the connection between a castle and the landscape surrounding it. In 2008 and 2009, the site of the former castle in



Picture 08: Castle “Mole”. View to the foundations of the residential tower and to the circular wall north of it.

Heimbuchenthal was excavated at the initiative of the Local Authority. Four years ago, geomagnetic measurements provided first information concerning the size and the building structure of the castle. The researches took two and a half months and focused on the central residential building, the outbuildings, the circular wall and the protective ditch.

Here, the main objective was to evaluate the state of preservation of the ground monument which today is covered by an intensively managed meadow. Due to hydro-engineering measures currently being carried out in the area as well as the lowering of the ground water in the course of the reshaping of the Elsavatal valley, it became imperative to at least partially document the remains of the castle.



Picture 09: Site of the castle “Mole” in the Elsavatal valley. Map: Jürgen Jung, Kleinwallstadt.

The lowland castle “Mole” is situated in the south-western part of the Spessart in the Elsavatal valley between Heimbuchenthal and Hobbach. It lies in a widening of the valley on the southern edge of an alluvial fan consisting of sediments from a nearby ditch (“Kirschgraben”). In the North, the area shares a border with the former iron hammer called “Höllhammer” and some fish-ponds. As the valley didn’t provide any natural protection like steeply sloping hills, a moat filled with the water of the Elsava River was the only protection against enemies. The position of the castle, however, is in no way exposed – it could only be seen from the immediate area. As the castle is built on ground consisting of sand, gravel, scree and partially loam, long-term stability was not guaranteed. The castle “Mole” is, however, not the only one of its kind in the Spessart region: comparable buildings are to be found in a radius of 10 km (Schloss Herbroch near Dammbach/Krausenbach, the castle in Oberaulenbach and the moated castle in Eschau-Sommerau¹²).



Picture 10: Medieval moated castles in the Elsavatal valley.

¹² WOLFGANG HARTMANN, Zur frühen Geschichte von Sommerau und seiner Wasserburg, in: Spessart. Monatszeitschrift für die Kulturlandschaft Spessart, Juli 2009, p. 3–11.

When and by whom the castle “Mole” was built is uncertain as there are no surviving records to this effect.¹³ In August of 1282, the Mainz archbishop Werner von Eppstein stayed near Heimbuchenthal¹⁴ – maybe in the castle.¹⁵ During the excavations in 2009, a wooden, late-medieval building construction could archaeologically be proven to have existed on the north-eastern edge of the area. The pottery found dates to the second third of the 13th century. Only a few traces of this building have survived in the soil as it was completely destroyed by a fire and rebuilt in the 14th century.



Picture 11: The black burnt layer in south-east corner of the castle is the last remain of the earlier settlement in the 13th century.

¹³ MANFRED AULBACH, Von den Anfängen bis ins Hohe Mittelalter, in: ed. KARLHEINZ BACHMANN, Heimbuchenthaler Geschichtsbuch 1282–1982, 1982, p 18–50.

¹⁴ JOHANN F. BÖHMER, Regesta Archiepiscoporum Maguntinensium. Regesten zur Geschichte der Mainzer Erzbischöfe von Bonifatius bis Uriel von Gemmingen 742?–1514 II. volume: Von Konrad I. bis Heinrich II. 1161–1288, ed. CORNELIUS WILL, 1886, p. 416, no. 555.

¹⁵ AULBACH, Von den Anfängen (as note 13) p. 32.

The “Mole” was first mentioned in a document dated May 20th May, 1363.¹⁶ On December 29th, 1434, Hans of Hetttersdorf received the castle as a fief from the Mainz archbishop Dietrich of Erbach. As the archbishop and the Messrs of Hetttersdorf were at loggerheads until the fief was renewed in 1438, Dietrich of Erbach had the wooden building on the “Mole” removed and brought to Steinheim near Hanau.¹⁷ An historical document confirms this relocation before 1437/1438. With the wooden construction being dismantled, the tiles from the roof and the loam from in between the frame work were thrown into the castle yard and there formed the youngest layer (it dates to between 1434 and 1437/1438) of the history of the castle.

In the following years, the “Mole” is only mentioned as a locality. There is no further information concerning building measures. A drawing from 1795 shows that the cultural landscape has hardly changed in 200 years.¹⁸

According to two pictures from the first half of the 19th century, parts of the “Mole” were still visible back then. They give a good idea of what the last remains of the monument looked like.¹⁹

One can see in the pictures that the ruin was the centre of an open landscape. Furthermore, they prove that several storeys of the tower stump still existed at the beginning of the 19th century. We obtain a more detailed picture by a man called Mangold who described the ruin as follows: “*North of the Iron Hammer (Hellhammer), not far from it, there is a partially ruinous building with a circumference of 130 foot and a height of three storeys. It is surrounded by a yard, walls and a moat of unknown width.*”²⁰

Finally, all visible ruins were removed at the latest in 1851 when the iron hammer was extended.

¹⁶ AULBACH, Von den Anfängen (as note 13) p. 32–33.

¹⁷ Mainzer Ingrossaturbuch 23, 107 (Staatsarchiv Würzburg). The Ketzelsburg in Haibach is an archaeological proof for such a relocation at the end of the 12th century, HARALD ROSMANITZ, Die archäologischen Untersuchungen auf der Ketzelsburg Ein Überblick, in: HARALD ROSMANITZ ed., Die Ketzelsburg in Haibach. Eine archäologisch-historische Spurensuche, 2006, p. 61.

¹⁸ FRIEDRICH SCHUNDER, Die Rexroth-Geschichte. Hämmern, Gießen, Bewegen 1795–1995, 1995, p. 19.

¹⁹ ROSMANITZ, Der Burgstall „Mole“ (as note 11) p. 161; SCHUNDER, Die Rexroth-Geschichte (as note 19) p. 19.

²⁰ MANGOLD, Kurze topographische Beschreibung des Hellhammers und dessen nächster Umgebung, in: Archiv des historischen Vereins für den Untermainkreis 1/3 (1833), p. 143.



Picture 12: A pipe bowl from porcelain shows the foundations of the residential tower on the castle „Mole“.

The seven sections that were cut during the latest excavation campaign gave information concerning the dimensions and the development of the castle.²¹ In cooperation with the ecological centre of the University in Kiel, two more sections north of the “Mole” were opened in order to get more information about the moat and the alluvial fan of the “Kirschgraben”.

It soon became clear that the centre of the complex erected soon after 1330 was a massive rectangular tower 9,3 x 8,3 metres around and walls of 1,30 metres thickness. The foundation trenches for the residential tower were dug half a metre into the alluvial fan of the “Kirschgraben”. From 1400 onward, the plateau surrounding the residential tower was covered in a multitude of buildings. Although there were stables, outbuildings and sanitation in order to guarantee the maintenance of the residential tower, the castle was not self-sufficient in all aspects.

²¹ A virtual reconstruction by Torsten Kroth gives an idea of the original dimensions of the castle „Mole“ http://www.tokrox.de/tobo/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=22&Itemid=46 [08.11.2010].



Picture 13: The cuts opened during the excavations on the castle „Mole“ in 2008 and 2009. Drawing: Sabrina Bachmann, Heimbuchenthal & Claudia Binder, Mannheim.

Apart from the small size of the complex, there are also other things pointing to the fact that the castle was built rather quickly:

Both the residential tower and the circular wall belonged to the same construction phase as their masonry technique is identical. There was only one gateway, probably near the stable. Moreover it may be assumed that – in contrast to the residential tower – the wall was not plastered, implying little time was available for embellishments.

By reinforcing the lowest foundation layer of the wall with sand laced with mortar, the wall was prevented from being washed out. This sand mixture was supposed to be massive, but yet it proved to be the Achilles' heel of the

entire complex. Relying on the stability of the concrete-like mixture, the foundation of the wall turned out to be insufficiently deep.

Additionally, at several places the alluvial fan beneath the foundation was completely removed during the construction works. Thus, the foundation partially rested directly atop a viscous layer of clay which was pushed into the moat by the weight of the wall.

Another weak point of the castle complex is to be seen in the only slightly compressed filling between the circular wall and the residential tower. When digging the foundation for the wall, the overburden was heaped up between the circular wall and the residential tower in order to gain an elevated position for the tower. The loose material, however, was only slightly compressed and soon began to push against the wall which wasn't stable anyhow. Thus, the wall began to incline.



Picture 14: One of the two stabilizing pillars built in front of the circular wall.

At least two buttresses were built into the moat in order to avoid further inclination. Around 1400, the wall was in an advanced state of decay and massive building measures were the only way to prevent parts of the wall

from collapsing. So the western side of the circular wall was stabilized by an arch of one metre in width, but the same mistake was made twice: the foundations of the pillars – like those of the walls – didn't have any substructures and only a few years later, they also began to incline.



Picture 15: View to the western circular wall and its stabilizing arch.

This raises the question to why this very location was chosen for the castle. First of all, the original wooden building from the second half of the 13th century was part of a series of similar buildings in and around the Elsavatal valley. They were built in order to separate the dominions of the Mainz archbishop and the Count von Rieneck. When the border disputes escalated in about 1260,²² many castles were established in the north-western Spessart region as permanent border fortifications – maybe the castle “Mole” was one of them. Moreover, there is evidence that the Elsavatal valley experienced an economic boom in the second half of the 14th century like it also did in the 18th and 19th century. Finds from the excavation like high quality oven-tiles and

²² ROSMANITZ, *Burgenforschung im Spessart* (as note 8), p. 254–256.

window glass indicate a high standard of living in the castle and of course also the wealth of its inhabitants. Fragments of flushing cinder suggest that the main source of income probably was the smelting and processing of bog iron ore.

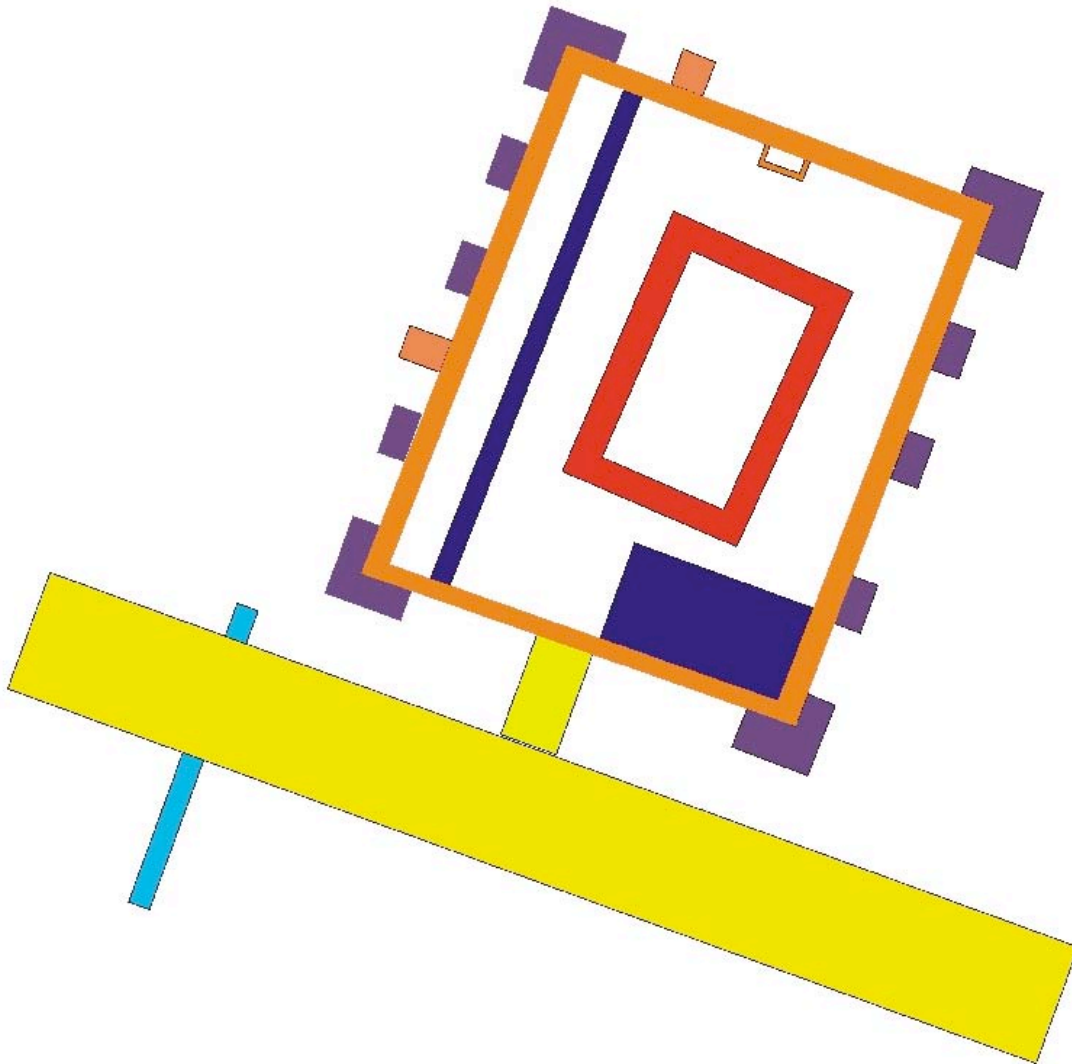
So, the castle evolved from being a mere border fortification into the bustling administrative centre for an economically successful region. It must have been very profitable indeed as despite the unsolvable structural problems, the castle wasn't abandoned. On the long run, however, the deterioration was unstoppable – in 1437/148, the castle had to be abandoned for good.



Picture 16: The water level of the moat was controlled by a wooden pipe.

Conclusion

The castle “Mole” is only one example for the fact that only archaeological excavations can provide reliable information as to the history, functionality and usage of a building.



Picture 17: Schematic ground plan of the castle shortly after its renovation in about 1400. The older building parts are marked in red/orange. The dam and the entrance ramp (yellow) are probably also part of the older construction phase. The wooden drainage channel is marked in blue.

In conclusion, let me observe that our ideas of landscape research and the goals of a good landscape management have changed while working with so many different kinds of people over the past years. We have learned that landscape research is only possible when the people inhabiting this landscape are actively involved in our projects. Communicating with local people is essential if you want to understand their environs and the history of a region.

HARALD ROSMANITZ: The castle project in the Spessart

It is possible to realize a viable long-term landscape management in accordance with the requirements of the Heritage Board only with the help of engaged and interested volunteers.

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