

## **Picturing Ballintober: The Medieval Castle and the Modern Imagination**

This paper explores how the medieval castle is constructed in the immediate and nostalgic minds of its modern audiences through a case study of the fourteenth-century castle at Ballintober in County Roscommon, Ireland. My project was inspired by a summer research trip I took in 2017, when I had the opportunity to live in a small town in western Ireland and work at an on-going archaeological excavation within the walls of Ballintober Castle. The experience of living amongst and working closely with the Ballintober community inspired me to consider this castle as “an enduring fantasy”<sup>1</sup>. My approach to research was modelled after the work of Abigail Wheatley, who has analyzed castles in their urban, spiritual and imperial contexts, exploring the influences and implications of castles in literature, art and history<sup>2</sup>. My project considers similar questions at Ballintober, examining the representation of the castle in local memory and the visual arts to uncover how this particular castle and its landscape are represented in modern imagination, providing a link between past and present.

Between the dates of July 2<sup>nd</sup> and August 2<sup>nd</sup> I worked on an archaeological dig in Ballintober, County Roscommon, Ireland and conducted independent research simultaneously, based on art historical analysis, archaeological discovery and social/anthropological observation. The project in its third year of excavation, entitled “Castles in Communities”, was sponsored by Foothill College in California and included directors, experts and professors from Foothill College, Columbia University and the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. Through my archaeological work, I was able to begin constructing a better, more illustrative understanding of the medieval structure. In addition to the archaeology, I carried out independent research for a

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<sup>1</sup> Kline, Naomi Reed., editor. *Castles: An Enduring Fantasy*. A.D. Caratzas, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Wheatley, Abigail. *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England*. York Medieval Press, 2004.

larger project on the status of the castle in modern thought. The overall focus of the investigations stemmed from my interest in the relationship between the castle and its surrounding community, the castle as an embodiment of people and place. I interviewed local residents, collected oral histories of Roscommon, and spent time in local archives studying video footage and primary source documents. Furthermore, I was able to examine and study the paintings of Ballintober Castle preserved near the site, housed at the Clonalis House estate in Castlerea, County Roscommon.

My work was rooted in personal curiosity and previous knowledge of medieval architecture, though it bloomed into something bigger where the castle became an avenue for exploration of the intersection between the disciplines of art history and anthropology. Perhaps the most evocative symbol of the Middle Ages, castles – both ruined and rebuilt – are scattered across the landscape of the British Isles. The idea of the castle in Irish and British history has captured the hearts and minds of scholars and amateur historians alike. This project is ongoing and I aspire to present a “finished product” in 2019 at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, finally culminating as a publication in a scholarly journal thereafter. I have been enchanted by castles since I was a child and have pursued that passion, letting it guide my scholarship. My hope is that the expressive power of the architecture of Ballintober Castle can be harnessed to help write the narrative of its historical past in a way that attracts involvement with the wider Irish community as relates to tourism, heritage and preservation. My goal is to continue with this research well into my forthcoming academic career. I plan to attend graduate school in Wales where I will earn a Master’s degree in Medieval Studies, with the goal

of working in heritage and historic preservation influencing my work and specific research in the program.

By using one specific castle in rural Ireland as a case study, my objective is to encourage future engagement with historic landmarks and medieval remnants which will in turn enrichen the community that lives adjacent to the ruins. Connecting with the past in a more physical way begins to flesh out the ways that the castle is represented, equally by artistic rendering and anthropologic perception. The tangible beauty of the ruinous stone enchants and endures in our minds a sense of longing and deep familiarity. There is something powerful about the reminiscent past, a past in which we can occupy and engage and castles – as an idea and concrete beings – provide the perfect platform to do so.



[Ballintober Castle, northwest tower, exterior]



Figure 11: Bigari's drawing of Ballintober Castle, 1779.

[Angelo Maria Bigari, National Library of Ireland, 1779]



