

The "Mobile Castle"

A Chapter in the "Traditional Migration" of Wooden Structures In the Middle Ages

by W. Haio Zimmermann

(Translation by Angela D. Ferguson, Language Professor, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama)

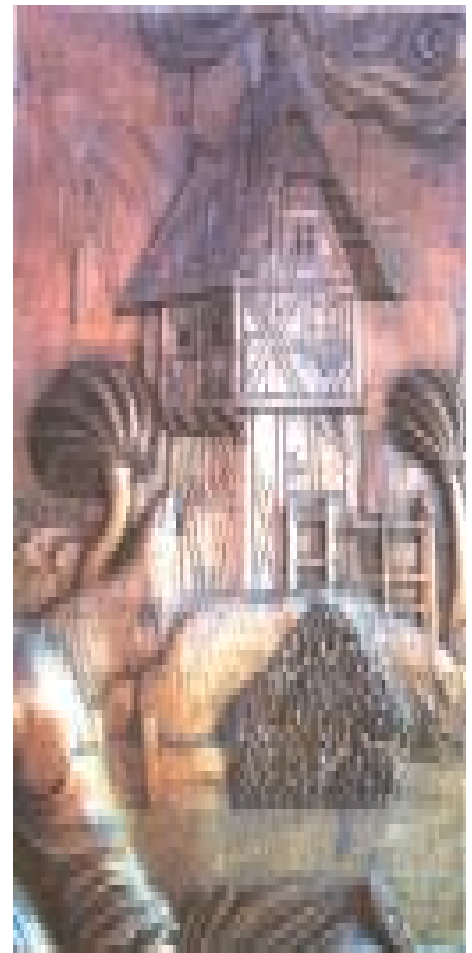
(Editor's Note: This publication reported in the December 1977 issue (Volume 15, Number 3) "The first record of a house being moved was printed in "The Survey of London", dated 1598, by John Stow. Dr. W. Haio Zimmerman, recently retired director of the Historical Institute of Germany in Wilhelmshaven, has published a paper on mobile castles in Europe. This article has been translated and presented here to document the movement of towers and portable castles over 600 years earlier (984) than previously reported. It, indeed, verifies structural moving as the oldest recycling industry in the world.)

1. Introduction

The fairy tale and legend motif, in which the Devil constructs a palace or a farm, etc., in a single night and before the first cock-crow, in order to receive a soul as a reward, is widespread throughout Europe (Talos 1393-1397). In East Frisia, the honoree's area of specialization¹, for example, it is a barn, the "Düvelsschüür" in Strackholt, that was built by the Devil: "...de Plaats mutt weer up desülvige Stee stahn, wor de oll stahn hett, un he sall nett so groot un rümelk wesen, un he mutt de anner Mörge, ehr dat de Hahn kraiht, klar wesen." In return, he demanded the first-born child of the farmer's wife. In this particular legend, as in all similar legends and fairy tales, the Devil was deceived and lost his reward. The build-

ing was complete, except for a small hole which had not been and could never be closed - because "this was where the devil could enter and exit" (v. d. Kooi and Schuster 1993, 80-84).

This particular fairy tale and legend theme of the structure erected over night might go back to a concrete fact, namely the existence of prefabricated timber castles. As both post-and-beam and modular structures can at any time be disassembled and then re-assembled at another location, prefabrication was an early technological possibility. In our study about the transition from the method of pole construction to post-and-beam construction, as well as in an essay about "mobile buildings", we provided several examples



III. 1: Hill-top Tower.

Wood Panel, Copy after Dürer: "Madonna with Monkey" from the 16th century. (State Museum of Baden, Karlsruhe, Inv.-No. C 6456)

of same (Zimmermann 1998 and 2005). But only when it was strategically necessary did this occur in such an extremely short period of time as one night. As this surely made a huge impression on people, it became part of the storytelling tradition.

Until the high Middle Ages, timber castles were often still the rule. In the source materials, they are designated *castellum materia lignea* (Rau 1958, 282, 283). Despite much corresponding written evidence, scholarly literature has for some time only reported about that, which is largely still available, namely castles built of stone, although Cohausen (1898, 158-160) had early alluded to castles constructed of wood. Hinz (1975) was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to discuss the mobility of castles on the basis of a number of examples. A longer discussion of this topic, which has attracted too little interest, was written by Herrmann and published in a 1989 French and 1991 German edition. Both he and, shortly thereafter, Higham and Barker (2004, first edition 1992) were the first to reveal how large the proportion of timber framework construction was in medieval defensive installations. As a re-

Continued on page 22



III.2. Building a half-timbered tower.

Excerpt from: Mathis Gerung: "Melancholy in the Garden of Life", 1558, Oil on Lindenwood, 88 x 68 cm, (Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Inv. No. 2619)

¹ [Translator's note: this article first appeared in a collection, *Tota Frisia*, in honor of Hajo von Lengen on his 65 Birthday, 2005.]

sult of the two previous publications, the wooden castle was the topic of two conferences. The first, 1997 in Lons-le-Sanier, treated a partial aspect of the problem, namely: "Wood in the Stone Castle" (Poisson and Schwien 2003). The second, held in 2003 at Schloß Sayn, had "Wood in Castle Architecture" (Hofrichter 2004) as its theme. The publications by Hinz, Herrmann, Higham and Barker also allude to the mobility of wooden castles. The final overview about mobile or prefabricated castles is thanks to Strickhausen (2004) in the Hofrichter conference publication (2004).

It is unnecessary to reintroduce the examples cited in the above-mentioned works here, but we would rather limit ourselves primarily to supplementing these as well as providing further examples of the topic. We are grateful for valuable tips from H.-W. Heine, Hannover; C. Adamsen, Højbjerg; T. Barry, Dublin; I. Köhler-Zülch, Göttingen; and A. Ödman, Lund.

The Honoree, one of the most knowledgeable scholars of East Frisian history, including both the castles mentioned in literary sources as well as those still physically present, knows (according to a friendly indication of same) of no commensurate sources in his field on mobile castles. This same observation could be made in a number of different regions. Although a widely dispersed phenomenon in Europe, it was only attested in writing to a limited extent.

2. Mobile Structures

The *mobile castle* can only be understood in the context of the mobility of buildings in general in the first and early second millennium CE. In another publication we extensively discussed the topic of mobile buildings (Zimmermann 1998, 2005). In March 2004 a conference on the phenomenon, "The Transfer of Buildings in History - Motives and Methods", by the "Workgroup for Home- and Structural Research in Northwestern Germany", took place in Lüdinghausen. The presentations are currently in publication (Kaspar 2005). For this reason we are only able to briefly quote from Zimmermann 2005: while the transition from pole to post-and-beam construction promoted mobility, pole structures could also be moved. Because of the generally short life span of pole structures this was only beneficial under certain circumstances, e.g. when wood was scarce. There is only limited archaeological evidence of mobility, such as the secondary use of building materials. The transfer of entire structures, in contrast, can hardly be captured. For this reason, evidence depends primarily on written records and, for earlier time periods, even on pictorial evidence. The earliest written records for migration are from the middle of the first millennium CE, but mobility itself is likely much older. The methods of moving buildings were dependent, among other things, on the construction method, as well as the distance over which the structure had to be moved. Buildings were moved small distances up to several kilometers. They were moved on rollers, on sled runners and on planks lying length-wise. Over even terrain, without any particular obstacles, such as heath land, pushing large structures on rollers was typical. Over greater distances, which in some cases could be



II. 3 (above) and 4 (below): Excerpts from a panel by the Master MS: Visitation of Maria, from a 1506 Altar, Tempera on wood. A high castle is shown, partially made of a timbered framework, with a wooden palisade (III. 3) and a castel between the cliff and a lake (Abb. 4). (*Magyar Nemzeti Gallery, Budapest*)



hundreds of kilometers, only disassembly and reassembly at the new site were possible. In this case, the materials were transported by ship or cart.

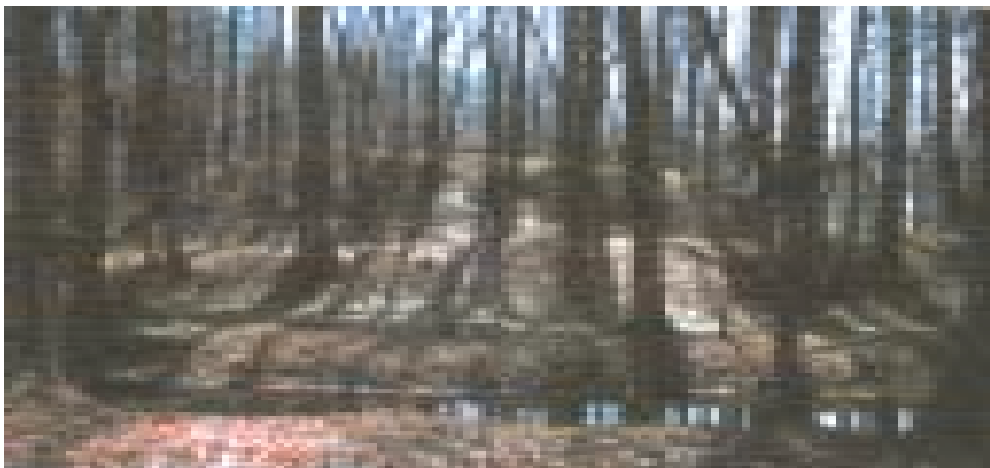
The motives for moving houses were more varied than those for moving castles. In 2005 we defined them as follows: Geographical Conditions, Relationships of Law and Ownership, and Tactical and Economic Grounds.

In post-and-beam structures, mobility was pre-programmed: the wooden sections would be initially laid out or assembled at a production site, following which they would be disassembled. The wooden components or sections of the structure would then be transported to the building site and erected there. In the case of castles, which were often erected at locations unfavorable to the production process, such as mountain- or hilltops, this general practice was particularly advantageous.

3. Wooden Castles

Evidence of medieval wooden castles is available in literary and pictorial sources, as archaeological remains and, less frequently, as extant buildings, parts of the same, or as impressions on the inner shell of later stone structures.

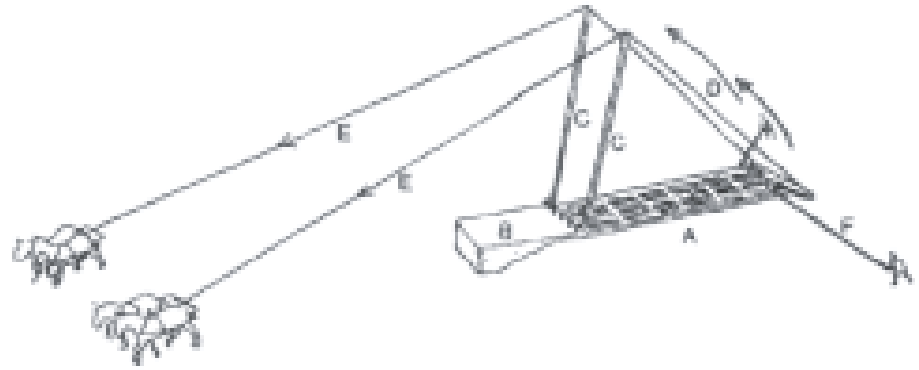
Pictorial evidence provides a particularly illustrative introduction to wooden castles. First, here are two examples from southern Germany: the wood panel (III. 1), a copy after Dürer: "Madonna with the Monkey" from the 16 century shows a good example of a tower castle. In the thart of Dürer and his contemporaries, such towers are frequently represented. The painting by Mathis Gerung (around 1500-1570): "Melancholy in the



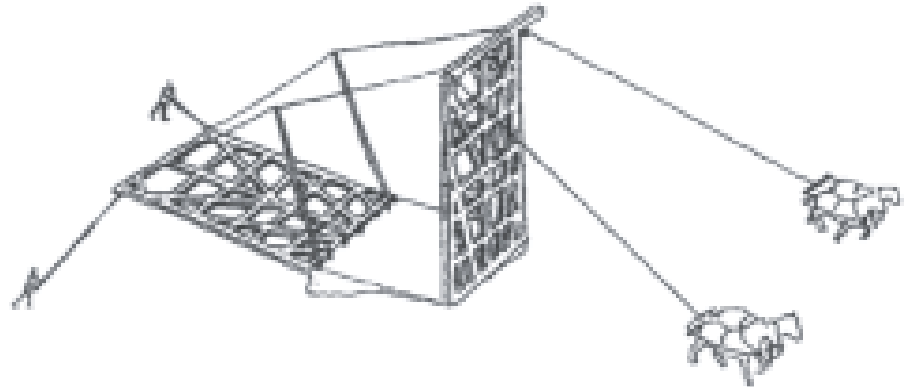
III. 5: High Castle, Lindern Monastery, Bockhorn Municipality, District of Friesland.

Continued on page 24

Garden of Life”, which was created in 1558, shows the construction of a timber framework tower (Ill. 2). The wood is being processed on site. It remains open, however, whether this is the production site or if it is the final location. The Gerung image is enlivened by his use of contrast: thus, in contrast to the tower being erected in our excerpt, further to the left the painting shows, antithetically, a burning castle, which has been struck by a powerful stream of fire (Eichler 1993, 118; friendly tip from Kirsten Voigt, Karlsruhe). This makes clear that we are in this particular instance dealing with a castle tower. Mathis Gerung was active in Lauingen, Danube, in the region of Dillingen.



The wood panel by Master MS, a member of the Danube School, “Visitation of Mary”, comes from an altar built in 1506 in the Church of St. Mary in the former northern Hungarian mountain city Banská Stiavnica, currently located in Slovakia. The city is known as Slmecánya in Hungarian and Schemnitz in German. Master MS was active in and around this important mining center. The image shows an idealized mountain landscape. We have taken two sections of this wood panel (Ill. 3 and 4). A castle, clearly in part a half-timbered construction, with a wooden palisade is depicted at the top of a cliff, and another is portrayed between that cliff and a lake (on the left of Ill. 4). The latter includes fortifications in the same lake (Ill. 4). This pole structure is most likely a defensive structure like the *Kemladen*² in the Mecklenburg and Schleswig-Holstein regions



Ill. 6: Erection of the timber frame tower in Nollich above Lorch am Rhein, between 1150 and 1250. (from Herrmann 1991, Ill. 19)



Ill. 7: Storming the walls of Jerusalem during the First Crusade in the year 1099 using two siege engines. On the left a driveable siege tower, from which the attackers reach the walls by means of a drawbridge, and on the right a trebuchet.

Depiction is from an illuminated French manuscript from the 14 c. Français 352, th folio 62 (Bibliothèque nationale de France): Guillaume de Tyr: *Lieux Saints de Jérusalem* (Excerpt).

(Heine 2004, 92). There is evidence of such structures on stilts throughout Europe and elsewhere. A painting that was created in honor of the wedding of Philipp III, the Good, to Isabella of Portugal in 1431 shows a similar small castle. A wooden platform on strong stilts holds the castle, which is surrounded by a high palisade made of oak posts. A copy of the picture, which is attributed to the Burgundian School, is in Versailles (Alexandre-Bidon 2003, with further examples).

Archaeologically, the original site of earth and timber fortifications often only remain as a mound and/or ditch and rampart. As an example we have included (Ill. 5) the picture of one of the best-preserved motte castles in northern Germany, the high castle of the Lindern monastery. The monastery was formerly.....

To read the rest of this story and other articles in this issue of Structural Mover, contact IASM for information on Membership. Structural Mover is published by IASM for members. As a member you receive all issues of Structural Mover

² [Translator's note: *Kemladen* were small castles built on wooden platforms in the middle of seas or marshes.]