Archaeology and history confirm that, from prehistoric times, people created fortified places, and others tried to capture them. Ancient civilisations such as Greece, Rome, Persia, India and China reached high levels of strength, sophistication and advanced technology in both defence and attack.

Two of the last great empires of the ancient world, Rome (in its western division) and Persia, were replaced altogether between the fifth and seventh centuries AD, leaving a much transformed eastern Rome (Byzantium) as the sole memory of the classical world in Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East and North Africa. China underwent dramatic upheavals, with “barbarian” invasions and new dynasties, while maintaining cultural continuity.

The following thousand-year period is known to Western historians as the Middle Ages, and it had sufficient common characteristics to justify it being seen as another historical era. The term “medieval” has been used to suggest an interval of ignorance, superstition, barbarism and “darkness” between the glories of classical civilisations before, and a more enlightened modern age after, born in Europe with the Renaissance, then exported to other corners of the world (whether wanted or not) through imperialist expansion. This book tries to view medieval history in its own terms. But medieval times were ignorant, barbaric and, for most of humanity most of the time, miserable. Only for a period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries (in Europe) was there sustained economic growth and prosperity, and even then economic development was very slow, despite significant technological innovation that made for substantial improvements in productivity. Normally, much of the surplus that was generated from the economy went (or was expropriated) to sustain the religious institutions and the lifestyle of the numerically relatively small class of rulers. Although medieval societies were different from each other and changed substantially over time, sometimes making the upper levels of the peasantry or townsfolk barely distinguishable (in economic terms) from the lower levels of the nobility, the rural knights, the fundamental shape of society remained the same, and status or caste continued to maintain social distinctions. The glories of the age, the magnificent architecture of cathedrals and major castles, stood in extreme contrast to the misery of life, most of the time, for the overwhelming majority. All the evils of underdevelopment in the twenty-first-century world — vulnerability to famine, disease and infant mortality, short life expectancy, lack of education, and the persistence of superstition — were the common fate of medieval peoples for most of the period.

There were other important distinctions. Economic and social structures
differed profoundly from modern industrialised societies. Every early medieval state — be it in Europe or Asia — could only function by devolving power to regional and local élites. These élites were the landowners (both lay and ecclesiastical), and land was the only significant source of wealth, power and influence. To the owners of the land also belonged the right to bear arms and the right to build fortifications - not, as was once commonly argued, to contest the royal power, but as a normal part of the social superstructure. Only towards the end of the time covered by this volume were more centralised, less personal and more bureaucratic forms of government beginning to emerge in some areas.

Today, anachronism abounds in the information about the Middle Ages presented by the media. But at least modern cinema sometimes recognises that siege warfare was the predominant form of war. Modern warfare, following the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and the writings of Clausewitz, was based until the current age on mass armies and decisive battles. Medieval warfare was different in almost every respect (with the exception of the disastrous consequences for those caught up in it), with different objectives and methods. Rarely was annihilation of the enemy through decisive victory the strategy — on the contrary, all good advice of the age proposed battle as the last resort because of the uncertainty of the outcome. Even where battles were “decisive”, they rarely led on their own to the end of conflicts. Often they were actually the result of or precursor to sieges. War could have many different objectives, just as at any other time, and the notion that medieval rulers were incapable of military planning is another long-standing myth. Whatever the objective, the securing or defending of strong places was routinely an essential element.

This book therefore is a study of how siege war was conducted, how it developed, what the connection was between evolving techniques of attack and defence, and how fortifications developed. There have been many studies of individual sieges, of siege warfare as an element within the events of particular wars, and of siege weapons. Studies of castles (and, lamentably far behind castles, town walls), have advanced our understanding of the role, function and purpose of these structures out of all recognition. New volumes are added to the shelves every year. What this book seeks to do is to place all of this within the context of global development across the Middle Ages. Using contemporaneous evidence, I seek to reconstruct what actually happened, and where archaeology has revealed what stood at the time, the link has been made. I have been able to visit quite a number of the sites described. By comparing this information with developments elsewhere at the same time, a clearer picture of the process of development emerges.

Why cover the whole (then known) world? Because if, at the bottom, society was usually literally parochial, higher up the social ladder it was international. The ruling classes were often well travelled, national borders as known today did not exist (the boundaries of lordship being usually more significant), and ideas, 

1 The development of cities followed different patterns in Europe from that in the Far East. Many studies exist. But in neither did the urban élites become an alternative source of power to the landed class, even in places where cities themselves became, locally, independent, such as in Germany and Italy.
knowledge and experience crossed large distances without trouble. Religious institutions, whether Christian or Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu, ignored state boundaries and provided common culture and languages. People with technical skills might serve many different masters across many different lands, and unlike today’s increasingly narrow specialisation, many of them could as well design a cathedral or castle as construct a battering ram, according to their paymaster’s needs. Some learnt from textbooks, just as some rulers learnt their military skills from books. Some were of ancient origin (for example Vegetius in Europe or Kautilya in India), while others were newly written by contemporaries. As will be shown, they had wider use than might have been suspected. This was also a process, and I will look at the evolution of the science of siege warfare — poliorcetics.¹

The novel geographical extent of this book is essential to achieve this book’s objective, but it entails its own problems. I have relied on translations into Western languages of the medieval texts from Asia or the Muslim world. These translations cover only a small proportion of the histories and records of China, hence the smaller space devoted to these countries. However, the detail of medieval Chinese accounts puts contemporary Western histories to shame. Similarly, while many Arabic sources have been translated into Western European languages, some major histories remain inaccessible in part. Here it has been necessary to rely on secondary accounts that have used this material.

In contrast, if the evidence from early medieval European sources is limited, as the centuries passed the quantity increases dramatically. Voluminous published texts exist covering every European country, often as a result of decisions made in the nineteenth century to consolidate “national” medieval histories. Mile upon mile of chronicles, records, “lives”, letters and other material fill the library shelves, and offer an immense mine of information — often incidentally — about medieval siege warfare. Often (and especially for the earlier period) the detail is minimal; for the most part, chronicles and other records were written for other purposes altogether. But the information that can be gleaned from the detail, sometimes accidentally revealed, constitutes the evidence base for much of what follows here. Adding this to the more substantial information provided by direct accounts of many sieges that have attracted the notice of later historians (and have therefore been discussed many times) enables a broad picture to be formed. To obtain a true picture of medieval sieges, it has been important to spread the net wider than most histories that either concentrate on a few relatively well-known events or limit themselves to one geographical area or one particular time. Many other events were of no less importance, and deserve to be noticed. For every remembered siege there were scores more that attract little attention, but study of which is necessary to grasp the whole picture. Siege warfare was paramount and endemic, and through comprehensiveness, hopefully, will come a fuller understanding, as well as awareness of some past events that were actually of great significance in their time or their region even if largely forgotten now.

Some compromises have been made in presentation. Since the majority of

¹ From the Greek word πολιορκητής, “besieger of cities”.

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material stems from sources themselves using the Christian calendar, this system
has been used. Consistency with the names of people and places is impossible.
Generally, I have used the modern name where it exists, but not always. Consider
the names of historical Welsh or Irish people or places. The sources used earlier
versions, often imposed by a conqueror, later studies “modernised” them, but
modern usage has reverted to the original language. Consistency would lead to
confusion rather than clarity, tolerance therefore is urged! Many places changed
their names several names (often into forms completely different from the first) as
a result of boundary changes — the Balkans and Asia Minor (Anatolia) give many
examples. I have tried to use one form, offering alternatives in brackets. But even
the original names often had different forms, no single one of them being “correct”.
Measurements have been quoted in both imperial and metric forms throughout.
But medieval weights and measures (and currencies) offer their own challenge,
with units with the same name having different values altogether. Where experts
have identified modern equivalents, I have used them.

I have tried to allow contemporary sources to speak for themselves. Modern
studies have been called upon where this is the only way to reach the original texts,
when dealing with scientific evidence, or reconstructions. Modern archaeological
studies naturally play an important part, although problems with this kind of
evidence should not be forgotten.¹ I hope that my own prejudices (which will
peep through from time to time) will not prevent readers from reaching their own
conclusions on the evidence put before them.

¹ They are discussed in Chapter 9.