Marburg Castle: the cradle of the province Hesse, from Carolingian to Ottonian times

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INTRODUCTION

The intention of the following paper is to focus on the current status of research concerning the development of the castle and city of Marburg from the ninth to the eleventh century.

The idyllic city of Marburg, with its many timber-framed houses, is located in Central Hesse at the upper reaches of the Lahn, surrounded by woodland. To the east, the valley is bordered by the Lahn Mountains, towards the west by the chain of the so-called Marburger Rücken (the “Marburg Ridge”). The Old Town was constructed on the slope beneath the castle hill, but not until the late Middle Ages did the bottom of the valley also become more and more populated (Fig. 1).

In the course of the restoration of the Old Town, from the seventies of the twentieth century onwards, a number of archaeological emergency excavations have taken place. In contrast, Marburg castle, today owned by the State of Hesse, was examined a lot more systematically. When extensive restoration, conducted by the Staatsbauamt Hessen – the Hesse state building authority – began in 1976, fortunately importance was attached to concomitant archaeological investigations. Until the completion of the restoration works in 2000, various excavations took place on the entire castle area. Therefore, the development of this site can be depicted rather well.1

Like many other cities which evolved in the Middle Ages, the settlement of Marburg developed in close dependency on the castle. From the municipal district only few archaeological features and finds from the ninth to the eleventh centuries are known so far. For the reasons mentioned above, I would first like to describe the development of the early castle complex and will subsequently illustrate the development of the town.

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1 For a comprehensive summary of these investigations, see Meiborg 1993, 10-15.
Marburg Castle

In the Middle Ages and in early modern times, Marburg Castle played an important role in the history of Hesse and in particular in the history of Marburg itself, being a residence of the Hessian landgrave. Even today, the castle as the town’s landmark is fundamental for the empathy of the residents with their city (Fig. 2).

From 1977 to 1985, archaeological investigations were conducted alongside construction works in the so-called Leutehaus, in sections of the north wing and in most parts of the so-called Wilhelmsbau. In 1989/1990 a complete excavation of the area of the basement section beneath the west wing was carried out. Another excavation in a sector of the Waldeck Hall in the north wing took place in 1992 (Fig. 3). In the following years, further small archaeological investigations were accomplished on behalf of the Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Hessen – the state of Hesse national trust authority – until all restoration works were completed in the year 2000.
From the numerous archaeological features and finds I would like to focus on the results of the major excavation in the west wing. During this excavation, well preserved remains from the earliest, hitherto unknown construction phases of the castle could be uncovered.\(^2\)

The west wing has always aroused the curiosity of the observer, as its lowest functional storey, the lower west hall, was constructed only between 6 and 8 m above the level of the surrounding area. Therefore, the building rests upon a massive wall without any openings to the outside (Fig. 4). In the course of the restoration works at the west wing, the archaeological investigation, starting from the floor of the lower west hall took place in August 1989. The works on site were carried out under my supervision. Within several weeks only, the archaeological team uncovered numerous walls and cultural layers under the floor, instead of the expected rock. Three core drillings distributed over the total area of the hall reassured that old walls lay beneath the floor of the hall down to a depth of 8 m.

What followed was a technical masterstroke, because a problem of statics had to be solved before excavations in the large hall could be advanced down to this depth. The architects and structural engineers of the state building authority designed a bridge-like steel construction in the upper west hall located above, diverting the weight of the

\(^2\) Latest related publication: Meiborg 2003.
building – otherwise resting upon the pillars – to the outer walls (Fig. 5). In the course of the excavation, the pillars, themselves weighing 50 t each, hung on thin steel bars above the heads of the archaeologists.  

In the following 15 months until October 1990, a large excavation team uncovered the inside of the west wing down to bedrock (Figs 3 and 6). From the numerous features documented at that time, the three oldest phases of utilization will be presented in the following section in the order of their uncovering.

Before long, the remains of a square keep with a side-length of 9.5 m appeared under the modern floor in the eastern section of the hall. Its west wall was well preserved, while the south wall ended after a few metres, cut off by the present-day east wall of the south wing. The two walls consist of small ashlar stonework. In the upper section of the southeast corner meticulous angular ashlar work emerged (Fig. 7). The actual floor space of the tower amounted to roughly 36 m²; the entrance was probably raised at the east wall, which was turned away from the main side of attack. Inside, the

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3 Concerning technical problems of the excavation: Clausdorff 1991.
cultural layers from the time of utilization had been removed due to the construction of the present-day west wing in the fifteenth century.

On the west side, the tower was closely surrounded by a polygonal circular wall, preserved in the lower west hall over a length of approximately 30 m and up to a height of 4 to 8 m (Fig. 8). On the outside, it consists of small ashlar stonework of a somewhat larger size than that used for the tower, while the inside is composed of rather irregular roughly-hewn stones. Sand was systematically inserted between the tower and the circular wall, even at the time when the encircling wall was erected (Fig. 9). The filled-in material was soaked with lime water in order to consolidate it. The purpose of this backfill was to protect wall and tower from destruction in case of siege.
Alongside numerous ceramic fragments of so-called Kugeltöpfe (ball pots) a number of shards of late-Carolingian pots were found in the backfill layer between the tower and the circular wall. Besides, numerous iron nails, a fragment of a horseshoe and various grindstones could be retrieved.4

The construction of this hitherto unknown early castle complex, a so-called Wohn turmburg (a residential castle tower) characteristic for the Salian period, is estimated to have taken place at the time around 1100.5

In the course of further excavations, the west wall of the tower proved to be built on the remains of an older and larger building made of plastered, sizeable ashlar stonework. Altogether, the west wall of both building phases is still preserved up to a height of 8 m, whereas the lower 4 m belong to the preceding building (Fig. 7). During the excavation and the subsequent uncovering of the northern wall of the large stone building, a late medieval heating chamber that had been fitted into the basement section at a later date was discovered. The southwest corner, however, could only be retrieved through its foundation trench, which was set into the rock and overbuilt by the circular wall to the south. The northeast corner of the building could be measured during investigations in the courtyard of the castle that borders the eastern part of the west wing.

Finally, the side-length of the large stone building could be reconstructed as ranging from 16 to 9.5 m. The rectangular building showed no inner division; windows and doorways were no longer recognizable because of the marginal state of the building’s preservation (Fig. 10). In the southwest corner of the building the original floor surface had been preserved on an area of roughly 8 m². Underneath stretched a light-coloured layer, riddled with stones and plaster, considered to be the construction layer of the building.

4 A manuscript on the pottery from the oldest cultural layers of the west wing is currently in preparation by the author. First published in Meiborg 1999/2000, chap. Gefäß- und Ofenkeramik.
5 Böhme 1999, 61-65.
Besides various other finds, a dipterous arrowhead as well as an ivory chessman, a pawn (Fig. 11), was found in the utilization layer. The ceramic finds indicate that the building was constructed around the year 1000, or rather in the early eleventh century. The large stone building with approximately 70 m² of floor space is typologically to be addressed as a so-called Festes Haus. These kinds of large, representative stone houses with up to three stories and an entrance that is in most cases located on the ground floor have appeared more frequently since the middle of the tenth century. Other buildings of this time could not be excavated on the castle plateau so far. Only small remains of the wall westwards of the building, which is partly overbuilt by the polygonal circular wall, could be estimated as originating from this phase of construction.

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6 Kluge-Pinsker 1991, 48-49.
Underneath the construction layer of the stone house, a completely unexpected cultural layer measuring between 20 and 40 cm in thickness appeared above the bedrock. It also stretched along the side wall of the building as far as to beneath the foundation of the circular wall and was documented as having an entire surface of 48 m². Apparently, the oblong building was let into this already existent, older cultural layer during its construction.

Primarily, ceramic shards of late-Carolingian tradition and a small amount of very early Kugeltöpfe, probably from the second half of the tenth century, were found in the multi-layered horizon. Alongside numerous construction nails, grindstones and a stone artefact from the middle Stone Age, a turquoise-green, melon-shaped, corrugated glass bead could be retrieved, a bead-form that is frequently encountered in Northern Europe on ninth and tenth century-excavation sites (Fig. 12).  

This cultural layer proved that the earliest settlement on the castle plateau evolved in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries. Underneath the west wing, however, constructional remains from the earliest time of the castle are not preserved, only minor remains of the wall embedded in clay underneath the Leutehaus might date back to this time. Apparently, the first, possibly wooden construction phase was entirely removed with the construction of the oblong building.

The mighty castle ruin at the base of the west wing was braced and stabilized after the excavation. Today, the discoveries and findings of the excavations are presented in the restored west hall and in addition, glass openings permit a view of buildings from the period of the year 1000 to the fifteenth century (Fig. 13).

Thus, what do we know about the development of a settlement at the foot of the castle?

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8 Steppuhn 1998, 33.
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Town of Marburg

Historical sources relating to the castle and the settlement begin with the mention of a knight “de Marburg”, a liegeman of the Thuringian landgrave in 1138/39. From the ninth and tenth centuries we have only some single scattered finds of ceramic shards from the present-day Old Town-area. Further singular finds are scattered over the present-day northern area of the town (Fig. 14). The position of the settlement connected to the castle which served for its provisioning, could to this date not be located exactly.

Also, only few eleventh-century archaeological finds are known. In 1994, excavations in the area of the former millstream were carried out on the occasion of the building of a new hotel at the foot of the Old Town. In the course of these excavations, rich sediment layers were uncovered, in which organic materials were excellently pre-

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9 Locations of the findings based on files of the Archäologische Denkmalpflege Marburg (the Marburg archaeological conservation authority).
served. As a result, several posts were able to be excavated that apparently belonged to a former reinforcement of the bank, by means of dendrochronology these could be dated to the early eleventh century. Remains of fish traps indicate a continuous utilization of this area for fishing. Furthermore, large numbers of almost complete pots, mainly stemming from the thirteenth century, could be retrieved from the alluvial sand. Numerous well preserved leather remains indicate a nearby shoemaker’s workshop (Fig. 15), while fragments of cattle-skulls with horn pegs point towards a tanner – both of these professions were practised outside the city gates due to their smell.\textsuperscript{10}

Regarding the twelfth century, our knowledge concerning the development of the town of Marburg increases significantly. With the new owner of the castle, the Thuringian landgrave from the House of the Ludowingians, the castle gained new importance, as the estates of the landgraves were administrated here. Around 1140 Marburg obtained its own coinage.\textsuperscript{11} The first urban settlement in the area of Killian’s Chapel and north of it, located in the present-day Old Town, can be made out for the early twelfth century. Initially, it was probably only enclosed by a wooden stockade and trench, while the steep east side was protected by its natural scarp\textsuperscript{12} (Fig. 14). Stratified ground findings from the town area of the twelfth century are rather scarce, too. At that time, the town extended towards the west. A first town wall made of stone can be dated to around 1180, a further extension probably took place in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Marburger Mittelalter 1995.
\textsuperscript{11} Leister 1966, 7.
\textsuperscript{12} Strickhausen 1997, 14-16.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 18-29.
Conclusion

In the ninth or at the beginning of the tenth century a first castle complex existed on the Marburg Castle hill, possibly constructed of wood. Due to topographical considerations, its spatial centre must have been in the present-day west wing. In the second phase around the year 1000, a stone building, a Festes Haus, was erected on the top of the plateau. No adjoining buildings, nor the encircling wall of this construction phase could yet be excavated, moreover these even might have been destroyed by later overbuilding.

Around the year 1100, this complex was probably considered to be outdated, so that it was converted into a residential castle tower, a Wohnturm, typical for the Salian period. The square keep, protected by a circular stone wall, stood in the centre of the building complex. Further buildings from this third phase have not yet been identified. The entire inside of the castle grounds was back-filled with sand and it is only owing to this back-filling that essential parts of the earliest castle periods have survived until today. The owners of the castle were first mentioned together with the Thuringian landgraves, around 1138/39.14

14 Concerning the early possessory rights of the Mar-Burg, the “Mar-Castle”, see Reuling 1991, 169-176.
Fig. 14. City map according to Görich with discovery sites. Oldest area of town marked by grey line
The first settlement of Marburg dating from between the ninth and the eleventh century and having probably developed in the vicinity of the castle, could not be located so far, as definite ground findings from the town area are as yet still missing. Possibly, it extended in the area of the present-day Old Town east of what is today known as the market place around Killian’s Chapel, as the first municipal settlement can be reconstructed originating there in the early twelfth century.

The archaeological investigations of the last 35 years have yielded numerous new findings concerning the history and the development of the castle and the city of Marburg. During this time, it also became evident that only those excavations can render adequate results, that can be conducted with sufficient financial resources combined with plenty of time, as has been the case for the excavations at the castle.

Bibliography


