Lesson 19

The Great Age of Castles

Castles seem like magical places to those who have only read about them in fairy tales. The reality, however, was much different. True, they were homes to queens and kings and to great ladies and lords. Yet, we can tell from the castles that have survived that they were not pleasant places in which to live.

Their outside walls were made of **massive** blocks of stone and were up to twenty feet thick. Living inside such thick stone walls must have felt like living in a cave. The rooms inside the castle were often **clammy**. In the winter, icy drafts blew through the narrow, glassless windows. In the heat of summer, the **stench** from the animals kept inside the castle, as well as from the unwashed bodies of the people, would have been overpowering. **Fragrant** herbs were used to mask the smells; one of the servants’ jobs was to **strew** them on the castle floors.

The great age of castle building was the seven-hundred-year period from around 800 to 1500. Castles built at the beginning of this period were fairly simple wooden **constructions**. These have long since disappeared. The ones built later were made of stone and were much more **elaborate**. They had many private rooms and splendid **furnishings**. There was a great hall where banquets were held and visitors were greeted and entertained.

The main reason for building a castle was to provide a sanctuary in times of danger. The castle protected not only those who made their homes inside its walls but also those who lived in the **vicinity**. They could move inside the castle grounds if a hostile army approached. An attacking army had first to cross the moat, a wide, deep trench filled with water that surrounded the castle. Then the attackers had to scale the high, outside walls on ladders or platforms. Those defending the castle could **retaliate** by shooting arrows at them or by dropping rocks or pouring boiling liquids on them. If the attackers were **repelled**, they might begin a siege. The purpose of a siege was to starve the defenders into surrendering. It could last for many months before one side or the other gave up.

When gunpowder came into use around 1500, cannons could **breach** even the thickest walls. Castles were no longer the **havens** they had once been. Many were abandoned and fell into ruin, but a number of them are still
standing. In some cases their modern owners have restored them and made them more comfortable for today’s occupants by installing modern plumbing and electricity. Many castles are open to the public as museums or luxury hotels. Today you can enjoy some of the bygone magic of castles by visiting castles in Germany, particularly along the Rhine River, and in Great Britain.

▶ Answer each of the following questions in the form of a sentence. If a question does not contain a vocabulary word from the lesson’s word list, use one in your answer. Use each word only once.

1. What were the two main functions of castles?

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2. What is the meaning of construction as it is used in the passage?

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3. What would be the advantage of building castles near stone quarries?

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4. Why are castles today more convenient and comfortable places to live in?

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5. How did the building of castles evolve over the centuries?

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6. Why would buying a ruined castle not appeal to a person of modest means?

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7. How might a modern owner make a castle’s rooms less clammy?

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8. What furnishings might you find in the great hall of a castle?

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9. What quality would have been valued in herbs grown in the castle gardens?
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10. What difference would bathing regularly have made in the living conditions of the castle’s inhabitants?
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11. What use was made of the herbs grown in the castle gardens?
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12. When might a castle have become overcrowded?
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13. What is the meaning of repelled as it is used in the passage?
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14. Name two ways that a castle’s inhabitants could retaliate if attacked.
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15. What is the meaning of breach as it is used in the passage?
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The adjective formed from the verb **construct** is **constructive**, which means “helpful” or “useful.” Its antonym is **destructive**, which means “damaging” or “unhelpful.” **Constructive** criticism is intended to be helpful; **destructive** criticism can be damaging to a person's self-confidence.

**Mass** is the noun from which the adjective **massive** is formed. Mass is the amount of matter in a body. It is separate from weight, which is a measure of how strongly gravity is pulling on the object. A spaceship in orbit has a great deal of mass but weighs nothing because gravity is not pulling it to Earth. Even a relatively small boulder contains a great deal of mass. A blimp, on the other hand, although it may be many times larger, contains very little mass; it is enormous but not massive.

**Massive** is also used in a figurative sense to describe something large in comparison with what is usual (a **massive** dose of a drug; a **massive** blood clot causing a stroke).