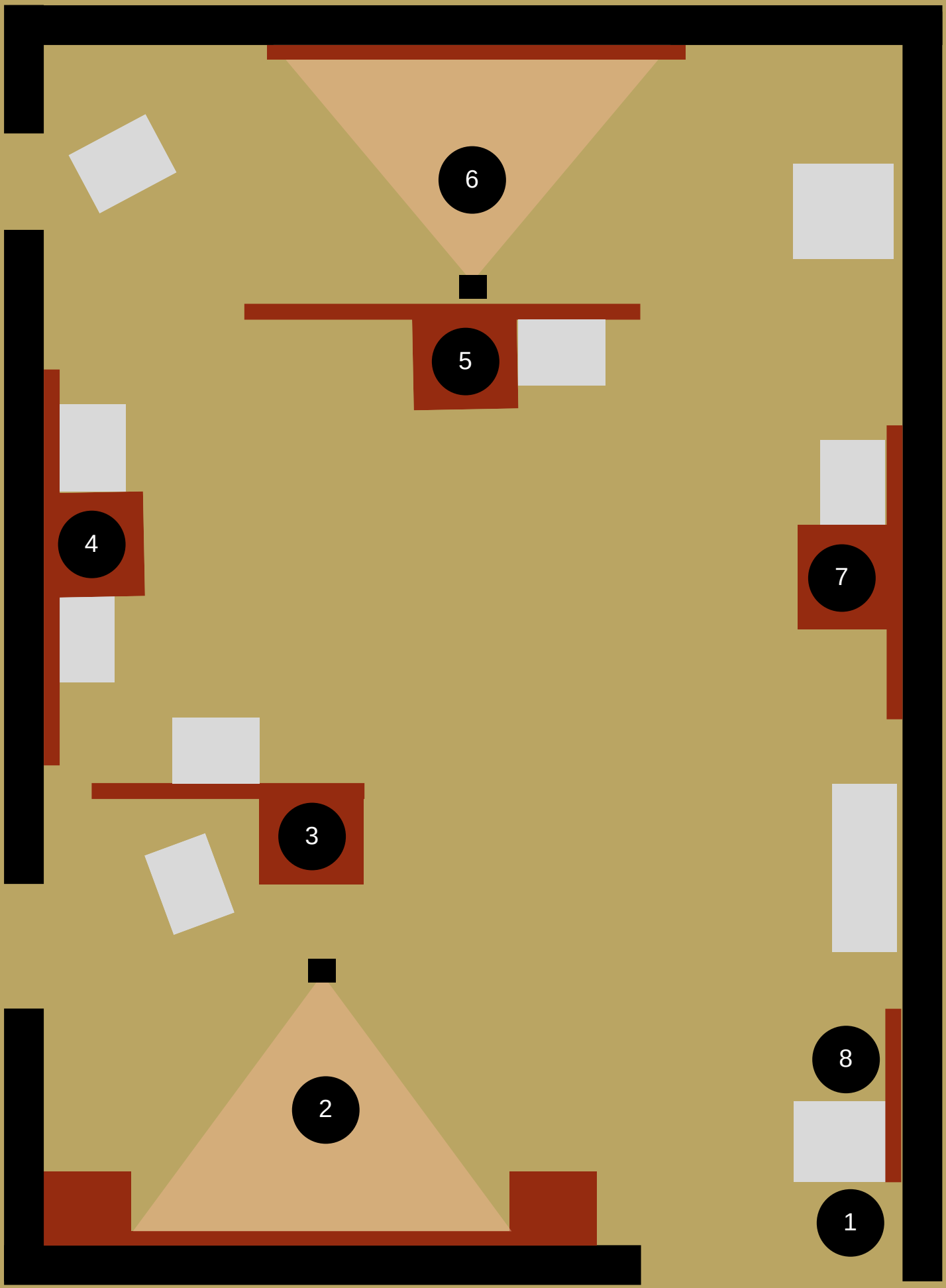
WELCOME TO "MEDIEVAL CASTLES IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY" EXHIBITION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CASTLES: BETWEEN LEGEND AND HISTORY 2

Almost everyone has an idyllic image of these fortified constructions that loom out of the mists of time, with their towers and moats, their ramparts and dungeons... the ideal setting for copious feasting and the scene of heroic deeds.

Although this definition is to a certain extent correct, such an image is however quite superficial and rather corresponds to a romantic evocation akin to a vintage picture postcard. The Middle Ages spanned one thousand years, from the 5th to the 15th century AD, a period that saw profound social and cultural transformations, so important in fact that the material reality of the concept of a “castle” necessarily evolved in step with them.

Today, thanks to archaeology, we are able to be more precise, not only about the forms they took, but also about their functional evolution and their historical significance.

THE AGE OF CASTLES
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The golden age of castles ran from the 11th to the 14th century, a time when the feudal system was at its height and when society was organised in such a way that while one part of the population prayed and another part went off to fight, the vast majority laboured to sustain the former: a society of warriors, clerics and peasants.

Given that they had a legitimate monopoly on violence, castles were built by warriors, who made them the symbol of their power.

The group was by no means homogeneous. It was made up by kings, counts, lords, knights and noblemen who, although they did not all enjoy the same wealth or the same social position, were nevertheless related through complex networks of personal dependence based on gratuities, donations, marriages, pacts and, more often than enough, war.

THE AGE OF CASTLES
3

It was during the reign of Sancho III of Pamplona (1004-1034) and his successor García of Nájera (1034-1054) that more and more castles began to be built, their management being handed over to members of local families, counts or lieutenants, who first acted on behalf of the monarch, but later sought to distance themselves from him by privatising them.

Few castles are known to have been built in the Basque Country prior to the 11th century and we have but scant information about them. There are only a few cases where carbon-14 dating takes us back to the times of the disintegration of the Roman Empire or the penetration of the Muslims into the Peninsula

FROM DEFENSIVES WATCHTOWERS TO PALATIAL RESIDENCES.

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The first castles were probably mere vantage points, watchtowers or barriers in mountain passes and ravines, built of wood or earth, occasionally reinforced with stone foundations.

Castles built after the year 1000 were erected at a certain distance from the villages, on steep slopes that had to be terraced. Their stone walls contained small enclosures with quadrangular or circular towers and other structures such as warehouses, workshops, homes or the water cisterns that were vital for the subsistence of the garrison charged with guarding them.

A few castles were built towering over population centres or royal villas endowed with their own charters. More complex than the previous ones, given that they were also the residences of the nobility or royal families, these latter feature several different enclosures that were separated by walls and moats and contained various towers, palaces, churches and in some cases even a town itself, as in Portilla and Rada.

FROM DEFENSIVES WATCHTOWERS TO PALATIAL RESIDENCES.
4

In the 13th century, and particularly in the 14th century due to the crisis of the feudal system, the main lineages of the Basque territories began to privatise the old high castles and to build their own towers at crossroads, ports, fords and bridges over rivers, or in the very centre of towns or villages.

Master stonemasons, bricklayers, carpenters and peasants from the surrounding villages were drafted into the construction of these works that were commissioned by the lords of the land.

DEFENSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS, CENTRES OF DOMINATION AND SYMBOLS OF POWER
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The first and most basic function of a castle would appear to be that of defending a kingdom and its territory. In the burgeoning kingdom of Pamplona, which bordered on land under Islamic rule, or in the territory of Álava, which suffered the frequent incursions ordained by the emirs of Cordoba, castles must have been built, but we barely know anything about them.

We know more about the 13th century fortresses that were used to protect the border between Navarre and Castile; or those of the 14th century that defended the rights of the Lords of Biscay against the pretensions of the monarchs, or those of the early 16th century that resisted the last onslaughts of the troops of Castile, which led to the disappearance of the former kingdom of Navarre.

But not only were castles the scenes of battles, assaults and resistance, they were also centres of feudal power, built by kings, lords and warriors to ensure their rule over a given territory, to display their privileged social status, to wield armed coercion over the peasants and to appropriate rents and rights to which they were not entitled.

DEFENSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS, CENTRES OF DOMINATION AND SYMBOLS OF POWER

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Castles also played an important role in the organisation of the local settlement: in some cases, concentrating it around them and even enclosing it within their walls. In other cases, they organised the settlement in a hierarchical manner by becoming political-administrative centres that assumed the role of the head of a township or tenureship. In others, they were set up inside towns and villages to ensure control of the administration and the sources of urban wealth.

Finally, they were also stately residences, from which monarchs consolidated their political power and the upper nobility their estates. In them, they gathered a suitable court around them, made truces, arranged marriages and waged wars to perpetuate the system.

A WEAPON AND A SHIELD FOR WAR
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When it comes to analysing the warlike function of castles, several factors must be taken into account. Two in particular: the material means available for their construction and the technical and cultural constraints. Both will explain to a large extent their location, layout and the expertise that went into their defence, not to mention the tactical and strategic principles of the art of war.

A number of historical sources provide an insight into the events that led to the conquest of various castles and towers; here are two that took place in our area.

THE PACE OF LIFE
7

Castles in the 11th century were not manor houses; they were places that accommodated a garrison made up of a small group of knights and warriors acting on behalf of the king or the lord of the castle. These garrisons had to work hard to survive: they cooked, they mended and prepared weapons and they looked after the livestock, but they also had leisure time which they spent playing dice, for example. Although it was a man's world, women were expected to contribute to the upkeep of the castles by carrying out such tasks as fetching water, food and other materials, as far as we can tell from later documentation.

As the Middle Ages wore on, in the 13th century to be more exact, as more and more castles began to fall into the hands of feudal lords or to be built by them, they became fortified residences.
The kings of Navarre temporarily established their court in the castles of Pamplona, Tiebas or Olite. More modest lords lived in the numerous fortified towers that dotted the country.

THE PACE OF LIFE
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Their residents included the lady of the tower, her sons and daughters, servants and maids, and even vassals, under the watchful eye of the head of the lineage, the Family Elder. From there they administered their rents and patrimony, concluded marriage agreements, signed contracts, held feasts and solemn acts, imprisoned their opponents and even read and wrote, as was the case with Lope García de Salazar.

Although they were residences, they were neither comfortable nor were the furnishings all that abundant, but they were at least functional. They contained:

- chests of different sizes in which clothes, foodstuffs, ornaments and ostentatious objects, weapons or deeds were kept.

- simple beds for the servants and canopied or enclosed beds with wooden panels for the lords and ladies.

THE PACE OF LIFE
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-tables made up of boards set on trestles surrounded by benches and a few chairs.

- wooden, ceramic or metal crockery distributed throughout the different rooms, but particularly near the hearth, placed in cupboards built into the walls themselves.

-Work utensils

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
8

Castles gradually became obsolete towards the end of the Middle Ages, either because they were no longer compatible with the new military tactics, or because their inhabitants were simply looking for a more convenient location and a more comfortable building to live in, or because kings and lords found other ways to impose their rule, more in line with the politics of the absolutist monarchies of the Modern Age.

Since then, the castles of the Basque Country have become mere shadows of the past, so much so that even the memory of their existence has been lost: their ruined walls were used as quarries for new constructions, several towers were demolished to build palaces and others were transformed into makeshift farmhouses occupied by tenant families. This all goes to explain why hardly anything remains of all the castles that once dominated the Basque Country in the Middle Ages. We do however know about them today, thanks to written sources and archaeology.

DE LA OSCURIDAD A LA LUZ
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Written sources such as the chronicles of Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada (1170-1247), Chancellor Pedro López de Ayala (1332-1407) or the partisan Lope García de Salazar (1399-1476). Documents have also survived and are safeguarded in the General Archive of Navarre, the General Archive of Simancas and the National Historical Archive: these include everything from minutes of meetings, codices, parchments and diplomas to account books and maps.

But it is archaeology that we have to thank for having corrected the romantic and epic vision of these castles by making it possible to physically recognise their original formal characteristics and to correctly situate them in time, as well as to recover abundant material relating to the daily lives of those men and women: fragments of pottery, iron tools, weapons, decorative objects and scraps of food, which reflect the transformations that took place in the tastes, economic interests, political ambitions and systems of exploitation of the feudal elites who controlled the levers of power in those kingdoms and in the estates of the nobility.

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