

## Caernarfon Castle and Eleanor of Castile

The origins of the design of Caernarfon Castle, and specifically that of the Eagle Tower, have been the source of much speculation over the centuries. Some parts of the mystery – such as the role of the discovery of the body of the alleged Magnus Maximus in the decision to build a castle on the site - have been partly unravelled in recent years. But many question marks remain.

Does the banding in the walls echo the Theodosian walls, and if so, whose knowledge is influential in this design feature? Are the eagles on the Eagle tower intended to reference Roman Eagles, or the eagles of Savoy? Can echoes of the Roman Pharos tower at Dover be discerned? Why does the Eagle Tower have three mini-towers?<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this article is to consider whether the influence of Edward's beloved Queen, Eleanor of Castile, who was among other things a keen property developer in her own right, can elucidate some of the remaining questions.

One needs to start with a little background. When Edward and Eleanor came to Caernarfon in 1283 it was already a place of ancient history and legend. The Romans had certainly had some sort of fort here, known to them as Segontium. They had presumably come here because of the river Seiont which provided sheltered tidal waters to facilitate their maritime traffic. From that fort's existence came two names: Caer Seigeint or Caernarfon (meaning the fort in the land opposite Mon/Anglesey). Between the heyday of the Roman fort and Edward's arrival, little is known. A church in the Roman town, Llanbeblig, was apparently named after someone bearing the Roman name Publicus. And shortly after the Conquest, a Norman motte and bailey castle was erected at Caernarfon. Llywelyn Fawr (the Great) is recorded as having convened his court at this castle in the thirteenth century and it continued to be visited by Llywelyn ap Gruffydd<sup>2</sup>.

But in the intervening years myth had been busy. In the series of long standing Welsh folk tales brought together in the C13 as the Mabinogion, a local tradition was encapsulated in a story called "The dream of Maccen Wledig". Folk memory associated the site of Segontium with one Magnus Maximus. In these stories he was held to be the father of the Emperor Constantine and the husband of Empress Helena, herself the discoverer of the True Cross. The pervasive nature of these folk tales is demonstrated by the fact that they were echoed in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannia*, written in the middle of the twelfth century. He posited Magnus Maximus as the first independent ruler of all Britain.

The story, of course, had no foundation in fact. The real Magnus Maximus was the Roman leader in Gaul, Spain and Britain in the late fourth century (383-387) – about half a century after the Emperor Constantine's rule. There is in fact no evidence to suggest any connection to Constantine's father Constantius Chlorus, or to his mother Helena, though there may have been a link to the family of the (unrelated) Emperor Theodosius. Magnus Maximus (or Maximianus in Roman history) left Britain in 383 before leaving to pursue his imperial ambitions – unsuccessfully, dying in 388. What happened to his family after his execution is unclear.

However the story was there, and in the poetical version doing the rounds in the folk tale, it did not just link Magnus Maximus to Caernarfon, it added plenty of detail about the alleged heyday of the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Allen Brown, Howard M. Colvin, Arnold J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works* (London, 1963), i. 369-71

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Taylor Caernarfon Castle pp 2-7

Roman town. In the version given in “The Dream of Macsen Wledig” in the Welsh Mabinogion Macsen Wledig had a dream in which he travelled to a great city and then on to another great city in Wales, where he found his true love Elen. The cities of the story are described in some detail, and boasted in particular the following features: coloured walls, many towers and a throne decorated with golden eagles.

A second interesting feature of the Macsen Wledig myth in this context is that there is material which demonstrates that Macsen was claimed as a progenitor by the royal houses of North Wales including that of Llywelyn the Great. His famed castle might therefore be seen as the ultimate symbol as far as the Welsh royal family was concerned.

The myth therefore was well established. It is therefore a remarkable coincidence that it was in early May 1283, just after the effective fall of the Welsh princes, that a Roman sarcophagus was found at the town of Caernarfon, and its owner was immediately identified as Magnus Maximus or, possibly Constantine, who was associated with the town in other folk tales.

With military affairs temporarily at a standstill pending the capture of the renegade Dafydd ap Gryffud this was an opportune moment for diversion. So in mid May Edward and Eleanor headed to the nearby Dolwyddelan Castle, where they stayed until the beginning of June. During this period the body was “identified” as Magnus Maximus and was reinterred in the local church on Edward’s orders.

More importantly, at the same time plans were first hatched for the building of a new castle on the site, and by June work had already started at what was to be known as Caernarfon. This event on the timeline helps to make sense of much that has been regarded as puzzling about Caernarfon: why Edward, having started a massive project such as Conwy, would then change his mind about the main power base for Wales, why he chose this lesser site<sup>3</sup>.

And if one tentatively posits the causative influence of the tale and looks at the details of the version in the Mabinogion, much else becomes clear. If the alleged Roman Emperor is the spur to presence here it explains why, unlike Conwy, the structure is very much a Roman structure in design terms (with strong echoes of the Roman Pharos tower at Dover with its polygonal tower and banded masonry). It also provides one reason for the inclusion of the eagles on the Eagle Tower, referencing the emblems of the Roman legions. But the Mabinogion tale explains much more: it speaks of many colours incorporated into the design of the castle (the coloured banding of the walls), it provides a reason for the many towers which the individual towers sprout, and it also references eagles. The fact that all of these features do exist suggests strongly that the Mabinogion was indeed a key source of inspiration. One may well therefore only need to look to this source for the inspiration for these features at Caernarfon – there is no need to trace people who had viewed the Theodosian walls or try to find parallels with the construction of those walls (a task which Abigail Wheatley has recently demonstrated is by no means easy)<sup>4</sup>.

Altogether, when one looks at Caernarfon it is hard to resist the conclusion that the Mabinogion account had considerable influence in the design. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the next stop on the royal itinerary after the birth of Edward of Caernarfon in 1284 also references the Mabinogion – and is hard to explain by reference to any other reason. Thus in the latter part of June 1284 a two week break was taken at the remote manor of Baladeulyn. This manor was on the site of a Roman palace, but more importantly it was close to the supposed burial place of Mabon ab Madron,

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<sup>3</sup> Cockerill Eleanor of Castile; *The Shadow Queen* pp 302-3

<sup>4</sup> Wheatley in *The Impact of the Edwardian Castles in Wales*, Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 112-45

a hero who features in the Mabinogion, and to the site where another hero of those tales (Lleu, himself sometimes seen as a prototype for Llewellyn the Great) was supposed to have transformed into an eagle<sup>5</sup>.

If one accepts that the Mabinogion was playing a part in royal thinking at this point, one is driven to ask: whose was that thinking? Eleanor of course must be the prime suspect. Her passionate interest in books is well documented. Eleanor had commissioned such books as the Douce Apocalypse and the Lord Edward's Vegetius. She maintained her own scriptorium and exchanged books with her brother Alfonso the Learned. But more significantly she can be shown to have had a real interest in local myths and heroic tales. This is seen both in her commissioning of the Northumbrian "Escanor" story from Girard of Amiens – the outlines of which she apparently recounted to the writer herself – and in her commissioning of the romanz d'Isebart, whose hero was a mythical early count of Ponthieu<sup>6</sup>. If there was a collection of Welsh folk tales in circulation, one would therefore absolutely expect Eleanor to acquire a copy. And the timeline suggests that this was very possible.

While Wheatley suggests that the Mabinogion was first written down in the fourteenth century, this is not quite correct. The first complete version dates from then. However the earliest surviving partial Mabinogion manuscript, Peniarth 6, now in the National Library of Wales, dates probably from around 1225, and contains fragments from the second and third "branches" of the cycle<sup>7</sup>. There was therefore probably a written version of the Mabinogion emerging at the exact time that Eleanor was at a loose end in Wales for nearly two years. Moreover at least some commentators employing textual analysis of the Macsen Wledig tale as it appears in the Mabinogion place its emergence to the early to mid part of the thirteenth century. It was therefore in circulation at the time, and may well have been written down – if by no-one else, by scribes employed by Eleanor.

There is also evidence that by the time of Edward II the royal family somehow acquired a book in Welsh: Edward II's inventory of the Exchequer of 1323 speaks of such a document (described as a document "written in a language unknown to the English"). Since almost every book Edward II is proved to have owned can be traced back to Eleanor, including the copy of Roderigo of Toledo's *De Rebus Hispaniae* listed with this book in the inventory, it is a fair assumption that this book, too, was originally Eleanor's<sup>8</sup>. From here it is a small step to theorise that Eleanor had acquired a book in Welsh, and that book was the Mabinogion. It may even be that the fact that in reality Magnus Maximus was not Welsh, or Roman, but Spanish, was known to Eleanor, and encouraged her interest in this story.

There are also other reasons to link Eleanor to the Caernarfon design and symbolism. The entire episode presents a parallel with the annexation of the supposed graves of Arthur and Guinevere in 1278. Then the alleged graves opportunely "rediscovered", following prompting from Henry II<sup>9</sup>, were opened and examined amidst a ceremony of great symbolism<sup>10</sup>. Here there was another thoroughly opportune "discovery", connected with a reputed ancestor of the Welsh royal house, which was then used as a springboard to emphasise English power in Wales. In both cases there was a fairly forceful message that past Kings were dead and gone; and that the here and now belonged to the Plantagenets. The message is repeated in the massive highly fortified gatehouse which was erected

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<sup>5</sup> Cockerill p 308, Parker Four Branches of the Mabinogi (2005) pp. 283-284

<sup>6</sup> Cockerill pp. 238-240

<sup>7</sup> Leeming, Oxford Companion to World Mythology p 243, Mac Cana Mabinogion 1992, 22

<sup>8</sup> Phillips p 58, Downey/MacLennan Spanish/Irish Relations through the Ages p 7

<sup>9</sup> Evans The Death of Kings p 149

<sup>10</sup> Morris A Great and Terrible King p 162, Saul For Fame and Honour p 78-9

in the latter phase of building, which features above the doorway a life size statue of a king (probably ultimately Edward II).

As Michael Prestwich has argued and I have theorised elsewhere<sup>11</sup>, Eleanor was far more likely than Edward to have been the driving force behind the Glastonbury episode. The evidence is very slim for any real Arthurian interest by Edward. While there are obvious uses of the Arthurian myths in Edward's reign, all the Arthurian occasions before Eleanor's death can be at least as credibly posited to be Eleanor's ideas, and there is a complete Arthurian gap in Edward's widowerhood. By contrast Eleanor's paternal family had their own demonstrated interest in Arthuriana and her family on both sides had demonstrated a propensity for making political points by reference to history and myth. Her Castilian family had made much political capital out of reconquest, along the way appropriating key sites such as the mosques to the new regime, while her Ponthevin family had used literary commissions to foster political points against the French monarchy. Eleanor's heritage therefore suggests her as a person who would have an understanding of how to harness useful myths to political pointmaking<sup>12</sup>.

One should perhaps pause here and consider the case, made principally by Loomis and Richard Morris that there are Arthurian resonances at Caernarfon<sup>13</sup>. They suggest in the first place that poetic references to Snowden from Anglo-Norman Arthurian romances from the twelfth century were intended to reference Segontium as, inter alia, the birthplace of Perceval and in the second that Arthur – who was said to have set out to conquer Rome - may have been based on the mythic figure of Magnus Maximus. This seems to me to be a fairly thin trail, but even to the extent that this is the case, again Eleanor is the more likely reader of such works and hence the source of this allusion than Edward or his other advisers.

Thus far therefore the literary background suggests the possibility of Eleanor's involvement. However there are perhaps other traces of her hand in the design of the castle which point to her more directly. Dominating the inner bailey of Caernarfon stands the Eagle Tower, which was the first part of the castle to be built; being constructed to three floors by the time of Eleanor's visit in 1284<sup>14</sup>. This tower has two interesting features. Firstly it features three tall projecting turrets emerging out of the main polygonal tower. These are not echoed in the other towers and explanations for their presence have been thin on the ground. The most prominent, and demonstrably wrong, is that they represent Prince of Wales' feathers; this badge was not adopted by the Princes of Wales until a considerably later date. Some towers, of course reflect the Mabinogion. But why three?

I would suggest that when one looks at the Eagle Tower next to a depiction of the arms of Castile it becomes apparent that the tower's turrets offer an exact echo of the castle depicted on the arms of Castile. The Castilian arms are, in fact, a polygonal tower with three projecting turrets. The obvious objection to this theory is that the Eagle Tower was not completed until Edward II's reign. However, as stated above, the tower had been started by 1284 and its design probably decided on<sup>15</sup>. Two factors point in this direction. The first is the interior form of the castle. The turrets effectively grow out of the complex interior geometry of the castle – which must have been determined at an early stage. In the second place, the complex interior geometry of the Eagle tower is a close parallel to that of the

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<sup>11</sup> Prestwich Edward I p 120, Cockerill p 282

<sup>12</sup> Cockerill p 240

<sup>13</sup> Roger S. Loomis, 'Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast', *Speculum*, 28 (1953), pp. 114-127, Richard K. Morris, 'The Architecture of Arthurian Enthusiasm: Castle Symbolism in the Reigns of Edward I and his Successors', in Matthew Strickland (ed.), *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in Medieval Britain and France* (Stamford, 1998). See also following them Saul, *For Honour and Fame* pp 82-3.

<sup>14</sup> Cockerill p 307 HKW i 393-4

<sup>15</sup> HKW i. p. 394 agrees.

castle at Orford, that this geometry has been described as complex for cleverness' sake, and therefore likely to appeal to someone of Eleanor's stamp – and that Orford was part of Eleanor's dower property and had been visited by her in April 1277.<sup>16</sup>

One other point, though very slight, is worthy of mention. It is often thought puzzling that Edward II took the arms of Castile as his personal badge<sup>17</sup> when he hardly knew his mother; though given the fact that he had French descended half-brothers and a French wife the tendency to lean to his Castilian heritage may have been not unnatural. But if indeed the Eagle Tower did reference the arms of Castile, there was a double resonance for him, since Caernarfon, and possibly even the Eagle Tower itself, was his actual place of birth.

There is one final feature of the Eagle Tower where Eleanor's hand may be inferred. This is the tower's eyrie of birds, which originally comprised three eagles, one for each of the turrets. There is an obvious Roman link in the inclusion of the eagles, symbol of Rome's victorious legions, and they can therefore be seen as another imperial statement or link to Macsen Wledig's story. However there are personal resonances for the English royal family. The eagles also echo Edward's love of birds and falconry – he possessed a very luxurious mews at Charing and another outside London<sup>18</sup>; and he even offered prayers for the recovery of a particularly prized hunting bird. That hobby appears to have been enjoyed also by young Alphonso, judging by the clever and repeated depictions of birds in the Alphonso Psalter which Eleanor commissioned for his enjoyment. The eyrie of eagles may therefore have been in part intended as a joke for the benefit of Edward or Alphonso - or both. Such a supposition is lent strength by Eleanor's acts elsewhere. The Alphonso Psalter vividly shows Eleanor's fondness for referencing the hobby in a playful fashion. So too does the design of the fountain she gave Edward for his mews, where the spouting leopards heads were surmounted by a falcon<sup>19</sup>.

It might be suggested that a role in castle design would be unusual for a queen. However in Eleanor's case this argument is demonstrably wide of the mark. Indeed her involvement should hardly surprise us, when Eleanor's role as an acquirer and manager of property is considered. When we know that Eleanor bought both Leeds Castle and King's Langley and instituted major building programmes at those sites, the kind of knowledge and interest which would encourage her, while separated physically from those properties, to become involved in the planning of Caernarfon is established, and another reason for accepting the conclusion of her involvement is added.

Overall therefore, while there is no incontrovertible proof that Eleanor of Castile was integrally involved in the planning of Caernarfon Castle it is suggested that there is a sufficient body of material which links plausibly to her for her involvement to be treated as a probability, rather than a possibility.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Prestwich will advance a further point in favour of this theory in a forthcoming article "Edward I, a chivalric King?" to be included in Brill Publishing's Festschrift in honour of Richard Kaeuper.

<sup>17</sup> Burke General Armory of England p lvi. Steane Archaeology of the Medieval Monarchy p 28. Kathryn Warner in Edward II: The Unconventional King also notes his use of the devise on personal items such as a scabbard.

<sup>18</sup> Prestwich p 115, Cockerill 235, 237

<sup>19</sup> Cockerill 234, 236-7