History Revisited? A critical evaluation of historical methods in castles research

The case of Sønderjylland/DK

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Traditionally, the discipline of medieval history is one of the main contributors to castle research. Basing their models on a variety of (mostly) written sources like, f.i., toponyms, maps, charters or chronicles, many scholars of history developed more or less comprehensive models of individual castles or even landscapes.

In my current PhD-Project, I develop a spatial and temporal model of castle development for the historical region of Sønderjylland in southern Denmark during the Late Middle Ages. An integral part is the harmonization of data from different disciplines, incorporating historical findings as well as such from disciplines like archaeology, geo- or bioscience. The process has shown that recent methodological and theoretical developments in the latter disciplines often revise models based on written sources. This is mostly due to the general scarceness of sources, but also due to quality and a significant amount of uncertainty. However, many models mostly relying on historical sources are still very powerful in modern castle research. Just recently, I was able to show that a site in the city of Flensburg, which has been an integral part of the city's historical narrative for many decades, was the result of biased and unfounded assumptions and conclusions.

In my contribution, I will provide a critical evaluation and discuss the uses of historical methods and the future role of the discipline of history in castle research. By comparing findings from neighboring disciplines to those of medieval history for the case study of Sønderjylland, I argue that stand-alone historical research often fails to provide a proper picture of single castles, especially when data from archaeology and geo- or bioscience is available. Thereon, I stress the necessity of both a critical evaluation of existing historical models and efforts towards a comprehensive history of castle research.