THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 78: UNDER SIEGE

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 78: Under Siege. In this episode, we're going to look at the outbreak of civil war in England – as King Stephen's power crumbled and forces loyal to Matilda took up arms against him. This civil war ultimately led to a breakdown of central authority and local barons soon filled the vacuum left in the wake of that collapse. They built castles and essentially became local warlords. In the process, warfare shifted from battlefields to castles. And that ushered in a new era of siege warfare. So, we'll also look at how siege warfare shaped the English language.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. I'm also on twitter at englishhistpod.

Before we begin, let me thank those of you who have left voice samples at the website. I continue to collect those, so, if you would like to add your accent or dialect, just go to the voice samples page at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com.

I also wanted to thank all of you who have signed up at Patreon.com. The new bonus episode will be posted there in a couple of days.

And also, I recently did an interview with Ran Levi of the Curious Minds Podcast about the discovery of the original Indo-European language. He does a great job putting the story together, and I recommend that you check out his podcast if you want to listen to that episode. Again, it's the Curious Minds Podcast – available where you get all of your favorite podcasts and also available at cmpod.net.

So, with that, let's turn to this episode and the outbreak of civil war in England. I want to pick up where we left of last time – with Stephen as the new King of England and Duke of Normandy. As I discussed last time, Stephen essentially usurped the throne when his uncle Henry died. Henry had designated his daughter Matilda as his heir, but Stephen got there first and secured the support of the prominent nobles. He had a lot of connections among the prominent nobles and he had a firm power base in the southeast and in London. So, he was able to secure the throne very quickly, and that left his cousin Matilda back in Anjou without the crown.

I also introduced another major figure in our story and that was Matilda's uncle David, who was the King of the Scots. He supported Matilda's claims and he also had designs on the northernmost region of England. So, shortly after Stephen became king, David launched an invasion into northern England. That initial dispute in the north, was soon resolved – at least temporarily. So, we have Matilda, her cousin Stephen – the new king – and her uncle David the King of the Scots. So, as we turn our attention to this episode, I now need to introduce another major figure. And this person was also a relative of Matilda. In fact, he was Matilda's brother Robert.

Now, I know what you're probably saying, "Wait a minute, I thought Matilda's brother drowned and she didn't have any other siblings." Well, Matilda's brother William had drowned, and he was

her only legitimate brother. But her father Henry had lots of illegitimate children. And one of those illegitimate sons was named Robert. So, Robert was Matilda's half-brother. And Robert was very close to his father Henry. In fact, he was one of his father's favorites. And over time, Robert acquired a great deal of land in western England. He was eventually made the Earl of Gloucester. So, he became known as Robert of Gloucester.

Now, technically speaking, Matilda, Stephen and Robert were all grandchildren of William the Conqueror. Matilda and Stephen were legitimate grandchildren, and Robert was illegitimate. So, why was that such an important distinction? If you think back, illegitimacy wasn't really a problem for William the Conqueror. He was also known as William the Bastard because he was also an illegitimate child. So, if William could become Duke of Normandy and King of England as an illegitimate child, why couldn't Robert succeed his father in much the same way?

Well, the answer is that the times had changed. The Church now played a much greater role in the selection of the new King of England and Duke of Normandy. The Church refused to recognize an illegitimate heir. So, under the rules of succession at the time, it wasn't really possible for Robert to succeed his father. So, he was never given serious consideration for that position. But he was the most important baron in the West Country. So, even though he couldn't be the king, he could be a king maker. If you wanted to rule England, you really needed Robert's support because his support ensured the support of much of western England.

Remember that the new king Stephen had been a prominent baron in the southeast. So, Stephen's base was in the east and Robert's base was in the west. So, Stephen needed Robert's support to keep the country unified. And he initially got that support. But that support was very weak. Robert was really closer to Matilda than Stephen. Remember, Matilda was his half-sister. He knew that their father Henry wanted Matilda to be the Queen. So, he was sympathetic to her claims. So, the initial alliance between Robert and Stephen was shaky. There was always a chance that Robert might switch sides. And Matilda was lobbying for his support. Remember, Robert wasn't the king but he could be a king-maker. So, he played a pivotal role going forward. Now, before we move on with this story, I want to tell you a little but more about Robert or Robert of Gloucester, as he was known. I mentioned that his base was in western England and I noted that he was the greatest baron in that region. Well, that fact actually impacts the story of English or at least the story of English literature. So, let me explain.

The western part of England shares a border with Wales and Celtic influences from Wales often leaked across the border into western England. This was also the same part of England that had a long-standing cultural connection to Brittany in northwestern France. Remember that when the Anglo-Saxons invaded a few centuries earlier, a lot of Celtic Britons in southwestern England had fled across the Channel to Brittany. And that's why Brittany is called Brittany – from the Britons who settled there. And as I've noted before, the Bretons were allies of William the Conqueror. So, after the Norman Conquest, many Bretons were settled in this part of England. Many of them likely considered this to be their ancestral homeland. So, Celtic influences from Brittany also poured into southwestern England.

In the years after the Conquest, as these influences came in from Wales and Brittany, a story was told about a legendary Celtic warrior named Arthur who had once fought against the Saxon invaders. In the early 800s, a Welsh writer named Nennius had composed a history of Britain in Wales. His history was written in Latin, and it was called "Historia Brittonum" – literally 'The History of the Britons.' It was a fascinating history mixing legend and fact. It traced the early Britons back to a figure named Brutus, who was a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas. So, it makes a connection between the Britons and the legendary Trojans. This history eventually moves forward to the period of Anglo-Saxon invasions in the 6th century, and it describes a warrior named Arthur who fights twelve battles against the Saxon invaders. It's a short entry, but it's the first real picture we get of this shadowy figure named Arthur. Now, we don't have a proper Arthurian legend yet. But by the current point in our story, these legendary stories of Arthur were being told throughout Wales and they had spread into southwestern England.

So, you're probably saying, "What does all of this have to do with that guy Robert of Gloucester – the illegitimate son of Henry I?" Well, Robert was smart and literate and he was also a patron of the arts. And specifically, he was the patron of a writer named Geoffrey of Monmouth. Around the current point in our story in the year 1136, Geoffrey completed one of the most important books of the entire Middle Ages and he dedicated it to his patron Robert of Gloucester. That book was called 'The History of the Kings of Britain.'

Now, Geoffrey's background is a little unclear. He was known as 'Geoffrey of Monmouth,' and Monmouth is in Wales, so he was probably born in Wales. He also shows an interest in Breton matters, so many scholars think his parents may have been Bretons who settled in Britain after the Norman Conquest. Either way, he clearly had a knowledge and affinity for these Welsh legends. And he was also familiar with that earlier book by Nennius.

So, Geoffrey had set about writing his own history of Britain, based loosely around that earlier book composed in Wales. Geoffrey took some parts of that earlier book and he expanded them. And one part which is expanded is that story of Arthur. In Geoffrey's new version, Arthur wasn't just a warrior – he was a king. He develops the story with Arthur becoming king and subduing the Saxons. Arthur also defeats the Scots and the Irish. He then conquers Gaul. He was depicted as kind of a British Charlemagne – a king who ruled over a massive British Empire. Geoffrey also created the early figure of Merlin by combining the features of some earlier legendary figures. He also gives us Arthur's wife Guinevere. And he gives us Arthur's final resting place – Avalon. Geoffrey's book is considered to be the first proper telling of the story of King Arthur, even though the story would continue to develop over the next few centuries, with more plot lines and more characters being added later. But it was Geoffrey of Monmouth who gave us the basic outline of King Arthur.

It's important to keep in mind that Geoffrey was mixing legend and history here. The book purported to be the 'history' of Britain and it was based around much of the known history at the time. But that history was just the background for a lot of good stories. For example, Geoffrey maintained the earlier legend about Brutus – the descendant of the Trojans who supposedly founded Britain. According to the story, Brutus was the first King of Britain and the island of 'Britain' took its name from him. So, it mixed history and mythology.

But here's the thing. At this point in the 12ᵗʰ century, most people didn't really know what was history and what was myth. So, it made for a fascinating read. And many people came to believe that these stories were true. For much of the later Middle Ages, Arthur was widely believed to have been a real-life King of Britain.

Geoffrey's book was written in Latin, which was the standard literary language of the period. That also ensured that the book would be read throughout Western Europe. And it proved to be one of the most popular books of the entire Middle Ages. The nobility in England and Normandy loved it. And it quickly became a best-seller among those who could read and afford books, so among the literate nobility of Western Europe. Its popularity is attested by the fact that so many copies have survived the centuries. We're lucky to have even a single surviving copy of most of the manuscripts produced during this period. But there are about 200 surviving copies of Geoffrey's history. That's an incredible number of surviving manuscripts. And that shows just how popular the book was at the time.

The Anglo-Norman nobles embraced the book because it depicted a British king who was comparable to the great French emperor Charlemagne. Now, French nobles tend to look down their noses at the Normans and to a certain extent the English as well. It was thought that French history and culture was far superior to that of Normandy and England. And of course, that cultural dominance was also reflected in the language. French was perceived as a language of culture and sophistication, having been descended directly from the great Roman Empire. English was perceived a crude language descended from Germanic barbarians.

The Anglo-Normans deeply resented this cultural arrogance. And Arthur provided a counterweight to that great French hero Charlemagne. Arthur had even conquered Gaul, which, of course, was early France. So, that's probably why the Anglo-Normans embraced the story, even though Arthur was ultimately a Celtic hero, not English or Norman. And it also explains why so many were willing to believe that Arthur was a real-life figure – because they wanted to believe it.

So, in the rise of the Arthurian legend, we start to see a counterweight to French culture. It was an early sign that the Anglo-Normans were starting to distinguish themselves from the Frenchmen who lived beyond Normandy.

For now, many Englishmen were still trying to imitate French culture and the French language. But we'll soon get to the period of the Hundred Years War between England and France. And that's when everything starts to change. That's when French influences start to fall out of fashion. And that's when the French influence on English starts to wane. And that's when the English kings start speaking English again and English is embraced as a national language for government and literature. And that's also when the legends of Arthur reach their height. So, Geoffrey's character of Arthur was planting the seeds for something that was to grow and blossom in the upcoming centuries.

As I noted, Geoffrey wrote his history in Latin – not English. So, we still don't have an English version of the Arthur story. However, Geoffrey's book was soon translated into Norman French.

And from there, in the early 1200s, the story of Arthur was translated into English, which, of course, was an early version of Middle English. And that was the first English version of the story, and we'll look at that Middle English translation in a future episode.

By the way, I am going to discuss Geoffrey's book and his version of the Arthur legend in more detail in the next bonus episode at Patreon. So, be sure check that out if you're a member there.

Now, I began this discussion by noting that Geoffrey's patron was Robert of Gloucester – Henry's son and Matilda's half-brother. Geoffrey even dedicated the book to Robert. So, without Robert's support, we may never have had Geoffrey's history, and even if Geoffrey had written it anyway, it may not have achieved its international popularity and acclaim. So, without Robert of Gloucester, King Arthur may have remained an obscure Celtic legend and we may never have had centuries of Arthurian romances.

I should also note that Robert was a patron of William of Malmesbury – one of the great historians of the period who I've mentioned before. So, Robert played an important role in both politics and literature. He is a fascinating figure. But as we move forward, I'm going to focus on the crucial role he played in the civil war between Stephen and Matilda.

For now, he continued to support Stephen. And that support ensured that the first two years of Stephen's reign were relatively peaceful and stable. I noted last time that a baron in the west named Baldwin had rebelled against Stephen. And then David up in Scotland had invaded. But those two threats were resolved pretty quickly, and for the next couple of years, everything stabilized.

In fact, the scribe at Peterborough didn't even include an entry for the year 1136 – the year after Stephen became king. Apparently, the scribe didn't feel that anything of note happened in that year.

Now, we have to keep in mind that this final Peterborough scribe was writing around the year 1154, so nearly twenty years later. So, he was looking back in time as he composed these entries. And even though he didn't include an entry for 1136, he did include an entry for the following year – 1137. And that entry is very important because it's really a summary of the entire period of civil war and Anarchy.

It's a long entry – several times longer than the typical entries in the Chronicle. In modern print, it covers about two or three pages. And from this entry, we get a preview of what was to come. This is one of the reasons why scholars know that this scribe was writing at the end of that period. But beyond the history, this entry is important for another reason. It's considered to be one of the first extended pieces of literature composed in Middle English. Almost every sentence shows a break from Old English. We see new words and new grammar, new syntax and new spellings. So, let's begin our look at the beginning of anarchy in England with the words of the Peterborough Chronicle.

The Chronicle begins this entry by noting that Stephen traveled to Normandy in that year.

This year went forth the King Steven over sea to Normandy.
Ðis gære for þe king Stephne ofer sæ to Normandi.

So, why did Steven head over to Normandy? Well, the answer is Matilda and her husband Geoffrey of Anjou. Geoffrey was causing instability in the southwest of Normandy and Stephen went to Normandy to shore up his support with the barons there.

The scribe then notes that the Norman barons accepted Steven and felt that he should be treated as his uncle Henry had been because Stephen was now considered to be Henry's heir. And he had inherited Henry's wealth. The scribe wrote that Steven had gotten his uncle's treasure: "for he hadde get his tresor."

This is the first use of the French word *treasure* in the English language. Here the word *treasure* is used in the more general sense of 'wealth.' That was the original sense of the word and that's how we got the word *treasury,* which was the 'room where wealth was kept.' Old English had the word *feo-hus* – the 'fee house' – or the 'property house.' But '*feo-hus* was about to be replaced with the French word *treasury*.

By the way, the word *treasure* has Greek roots. It was one of the many words that the Romans had borrowed from the Greeks. In Greek, it was *thesauros* and it also had the sense of wealth or the place where wealth was stored. In the 1800s, English borrowed that Greek and Latin root again – this time as *thesaurus*, meaning a *treasury*. Some writers called a collection of words a *thesaurus verborum* – literally a 'word treasury.' And that title was later shortened to just *thesaurus*. So, *treasure*, *treasury* and *thesaurus* all come from the same Greek and Latin root. And that root first came into English as '*treasure* in this entry for the year 1137 in the Peterborough Chronicle.

The Peterborough scribe then notes that even though Steven had inherited Henry's *treasure* – or wealth – he squandered it. The scribe wrote that Stephen 'dealt it out and scattered it foolishly':

"he todeld it 7 scatered sotlice"

Sotlice meant 'foolishly.' A *sot* was a stupid or foolish person and it still survives in some English dialects as *sot*, often meaning a drunk person who acts foolishly. It was used in late Old English. And many centuries later, when tobacco was introduced from the New World, it was sometimes called 'sot weed'*,* which meant 'fool's weed.' Well, here the scribe used the word as *sotlice,* which is literally fool-like or foolishly. And he says of Henry's wealth, that Stephen had it 'scatered sotlice' – scattered foolishly.

This is also the first known use of the word *scattered*. The ultimate evolution of the word is a little bit obscure. It is generally thought to be a variation of the word *shatter,* which was a native Old English word. Remember that Old English had a lot of words with an 'sh' sound where Old Norse had the same words with an 'sk' sound. So, English *shirt* and Norse *skirt*. So, by this

point, in the North of England, where there was a heavy Norse influence, English often had two versions of the same word – one with the /sh/ sound and one with the /sk/ sound. And some of those pairs survived. So, again, *shirt* and *skirt*. Sometimes, one version survived and the other died out.

But since there were a lot of these pairs where one had the /sh/ sound and one had the /sk/ sound, it is believed that some speakers started to confuse those two sounds. And sometimes they switched them around and used them interchangeably. So, a native word like *shatter* was sometimes pronounced as *scatter*. And this is believed to be the origin of *scatter* since *scatter* isn't actually attested in Old Norse. So, it appears to be a native English word that was created under Norse influence in the north of England. And by this point, it had filtered down to Peterborough in the East Midlands. And the Peterborough scribe gave us the first known use of that word in the English language.

So, we now know that King Steven was spending and scattering Henry's wealth foolishly. So, what was he doing with it? Well, in part, he was paying off barons and mercenaries for their support. So, it was going to bribes and mercenary payments. The scribe seems to have a major problem with all of this.

Remember that Henry had amassed a tremendous amount of wealth. He was a great tax collector. He turned the Exchequer into a tax collecting machine. And he got every penny that was owed to him. But now Stephen was doling it out to supporters and mercenaries.

Stephen had traveled to Normandy in part to defeat Matilda's husband – Geoffrey of Anjou. But he ultimately failed in that mission. Geoffrey continued his incursions into Normandy. So, Stephen decided to return to England. And he never went back to Normandy after that.

The Peterborough scribe then notes that Stephen returned to England and held a great council at Oxford. He wrote:

Then the king Stephen to England came, then he made his gathering at Oxford.
Þa þe king Stephne to Englalande com – þa macod he his gadering æt Oxeneford.

At that council or gathering, Stephen turned his attention to a prominent family who held several key positions in the government and the church. The head of this family was Roger of Salisbury. Roger was a bishop, and he had basically been second-in-command in England during Henry's reign. He effectively ruled England when Henry had been away in Normandy. He had two nephews who were also bishops. And his son became Stephen's royal chancellor. So, this was a very prominent family. But Stephen had received word that they were plotting against him – that they were going to switch their support to Matilda. It is unknown if there was any truth to this rumor, but when Stephen returned to England and held that council at Oxford, he arrested the entire group. The Peterborough scribe wrote that Stephen seized the men,

And threw all into prison till they gave up their castles
7 dide ælle in prisun til hi iafen (/yah-ven/) up here castles.

I should note here that word *prison* is a French word, and this is one of the first uses of that word in an English text.

So, Stephen arrested the men who he thought were plotting against him. But all of this quickly back-fired. Roger and his two nephews were bishops, so the Church immediately condemned Stephen's actions. You might recall from the last episode that Stephen's brother was the Bishop of Winchester and he was one of the most important clerics in England. At this point he also broke with Stephen.

So, Stephen's first two years of relatively peaceful rule were about to come to an end. He was facing rebellion from several different directions. And at this point, all of his enemies saw an opportunity and they all started to line up against him. In Normandy, Matilda's husband Geoffrey of Anjou continued to campaign throughout the region. His goal was to conquer Normandy for Matilda. And Stephen had not been able to stop him.

Meanwhile, up in Scotland, Matilda's uncle David launched a second invasion of northern England. And in the West Country, Matilda's half-brother Robert of Gloucester finally broke with Stephen as well. He announced that he was switching his support to Matilda. So, Stephen now faced war in Normandy, invasion in the north of England and rebellion in the west of England.

Over the next few months, Matilda's support within England had grown strong enough that she decided to head there to claim the throne for herself. In September of 1139, Matilda landed on the southern coast of England.

Now, Matilda's arrival was not a surprise to Stephen. In fact, at this point, he had the chance to seize her and throw her into prison, but he didn't. It isn't entirely clear why he let Matilda go, but it proved to be a big mistake. She promptly joined her brother Robert at his castle in Gloucester in the west of England. So, from this point on, there were two rival courts in England.

Generally speaking, Stephen's base was in the east, and Matilda's base was in the west with her brother Robert, who was her closest ally going forward. But don't make too much out of that geographical divide, because conflicts soon broke out in every corner of the country.

Up in the north, Stephen's forces were able to secure a victory against David's Scottish forces at a battle called the Battle of the Standard. Even though David was defeated, he was still powerful enough in the north that he was able to negotiate peace terms with Stephen. As I noted last time, those peace terms gave Northumberland to David's son, Henry. The son acquired Northumberland as a vassal of Stephen, but he governed there as essentially an independent ruler. He even minted his own coins. So, by this point, Stephen had lost control of the northernmost part of England.

What happened in the north was a harbinger of things to come. Stephen's rule was also challenged throughout the rest of England. As the civil war erupted, the king's centralized authority disappeared. England no longer had one central ruler. It now had two different leaders at war with each other. Law and order broke down in the countryside. Without a king who could

impose order, a power vacuum occurred. And the local barons had no choice but to impose their own law and order over their lands and their peasants. England became fractured as these barons essentially became local warlords. They often found themselves at war with each other. So, it wasn't a simple case of Stephen's forces against Matilda's forces. It was more a case of every baron for himself. And that's why this period became known as the Anarchy.

The Peterborough scribe captures this period in the next part of his entry for the year 1137. Again, this is in the entry for 1137, but it is really a description of the entire period. The scribe doesn't put all the blame on Stephen. In fact, he expresses some sympathy for Stephen. He notes that Stephen was a relaxed and gentle ruler at a time when the country needed a powerful king like his uncle Henry. Stephen's kindness had helped him to win over the barons early on. They preferred his laid-back style to Henry's strict rule. But now, Stephen's relaxed rule was seen as a weakness. And the barons started to disregard him and act a mini-kings over their own lands. The Peterborough scribe refers to these rebellious barons as *suikes*. This was an Old English word that meant 'traitors' and it still survives in some dialects of northern England and Scotland. He wrote that the 'traitors' or *suikes* understood that Stephen was a mild man – was soft and good.

Þa the suikes undergæton ðæt he milde man was 7 softe 7 god.

Mild, *soft* and *good* are all Old English words. And it may seem a little odd that the scribe refers to Stephen as 'soft,' but the original Old English meaning of the word was 'gentle, calm or mild-natured.'

So, the scribe tells us that Stephen was a mild and gentle man. And he tells us that the traitors took advantage of that perceived weakness. He writes that 'no justice was done':

na iustise ne dide
/na yoo-sti-ce nay dee-deh/

The word *iustise* is an early form of our modern word *justice* and it's the first known use of the word *justice* in the English language. Now, when the scribe says that 'no justice was done', that may seem a little odd because today we associate 'justice' with fairness or rightness. But originally, the word had a more limited sense of 'power.' It was the exercise of power to maintain law and order. So, when the scribe says no justice was done, what he is really saying is that there was a failure to maintain law and order.

It is also interesting that he says that 'no justice was DONE.' That's the same construction we use today when we say that 'justice was done' or 'justice was not done.' We don't usually say things like 'justice was had', or 'justice was made', or 'justice happened', or 'justice occurred.' We tend to say 'justice was done.' So, this construction goes back to the earliest use of the word *justice* in the English language but it really goes back further than that – to French. The French construction is *faire justice,* which is literally 'to do justice.' So, the Peterborough scribe was really translating that French phrase into English when he wrote that 'justice was not done.'

So, the scribe has told us that Stephen was a kind and gentle man, and because of that law and order broke down. He then says that the barons – or traitors – did 'wonders': "*þa diden hi alle wunder.*"

Now again, this may seem like an odd statement because we tend to associate the word *wonder* with *wonderful* – something great and fantastic. But in Old English, the word *wunder* meant anything that was astonishing. So, it could refer to something astonishingly good or astonishingly bad. And in this case, it was used to refer to things that were astonishingly bad. It basically meant 'atrocities'. So, the scribe tells us that without the law and order necessary to maintain peace, the local barons became tyrants and committed *wunder* – or atrocities.

The scribe then says that the noblemen had sworn oaths of loyalty to Stephen, but then they broke their oaths and turned against him. That was what made then traitors.

He then tells us that the nobles built castles and used them against Stephen. He writes of the king:

Every rich man – or noble – made castles and held them against him.
æuric riceman his castles makede 7 agænes him heolden.

And filled the land full of castles
7 fylden þe land ful of castles.

They oppressed the wretched men of the land with castle-works;
Hi suencten suyðe þe uurecce men of þe land mid castel weorces

and when the castles were made, they filled them with devils and evil men.
þa þe castles uuaren maked þa fylden hi mid deoules 7 yvele men.

This passage is interesting because it focuses on the construction of castles and castle warfare. As we know, the word *castle* is a French word. And beginning with William the Conqueror, the Normans had built castles throughout England as a means of maintaining law and order. The garrisons stationed in those castles dominated the countryside around them. And those castles were almost impossible to penetrate.

One of the big differences between England and France had been the role of those castles in the countryside. In England, the castles had always been under the direct or indirect control of the king. So, the castles were occupied by his vassals who were loyal to him. That allowed the kings to maintain control over the country. But back in France, the castles were often controlled by local barons or counts who weren't loyal to the king. And when a disloyal noble built a castle, it was difficult to remove him. This was part of the reason why France was so fractured during the early feudal period. It was almost impossible for the King of France to extend his authority outside of Paris because all of the barons and counts were holding up in their castles. He couldn't dislodge them.

Well, now the breakdown of law and order in England meant that the nobles there started to do the same thing. They started building castles at a rapid rate. They soon replaced the Norman manors as the dominant structures in the countryside.

Castles were considered instruments of war. So, nobles weren't permitted to build them without first obtaining a license from the king. But as central authority broke down, no one bothered to consult with the king anymore. Castles began to pop up everywhere.

Through this process, power gradually shifted from the king to the local barons and their castles. The barons acted as local warlords because the local sheriff no longer had any authority over them, at least none that could be enforced. Without any central authority, the legal system broke down and traditional laws were ignored. The barons could basically do as they pleased. Might made right.

We'll look more closely at how the barons used those castles to exploit the countryside in the next episode. But for now, I want to focus on why those castles contributed to the prolonged civil war. Simply put, once these barons had built their castles, it was almost impossible to remove them. Some were loyal to Stephen. And some were loyal to Matilda. Each side's forces tried to capture the castles of the barons supporting the other side.

Some of the barons didn't really have much of a loyalty to either side. They were only loyal to themselves. They were essentially petty kings ruling the lands around them without having to answer to anyone else. But sometimes, barons tried to expand their power by taking control of the castles around them and this led to warfare between the barons. And those conflicts didn't necessarily have anything to do with the larger conflict between Stephen and Matilda.

In order to bring an end to all the chaos, someone had to reassert centralized control and authority. And that meant that some central authority had to bring all of those castles under control. As I said, that was almost impossible, because most of those castles were virtually impenetrable. So, despite all of the conflict, very little progress was ever made. This was the era of siege warfare.

One side would lay siege to a castle with hopes of taking control of it, but more often than not the siege failed. As you might expect, the word *siege* is a French word ultimately derived from Latin. It isn't used in the Peterborough Chronicle, but it does appear in English documents a short time later in the early 1200s. So, it was a very early borrowing from French.

A lot of people think that the word *siege* is related to the word *sieze,* since the object of a *siege* was to 'seize' the castle, but the two words are actually unrelated. To 'seize' something is to grab it or take possession of it. So, that implies a specific action. But *siege* actually had the opposite meaning. The word *siege* come from the Latin word *sedere* meaning 'to sit.' It's the same root that gave us the word *sedentary*. So, a *siege* literally meant 'to sit down'. So, in the case of 'siege warfare,' it meant to sit down or camp out. The idea was that an army took a position outside of the castle walls and they wouldn't leave until the garrison in the castle surrendered.

The word became so ingrained in English that it was eventually given the Old English prefix *be* and created the word *besiege*. It is one of the few words in Modern English that combines that Old English prefix *be* with a 'French root.'

Now, siege warfare was so common in the Middle Ages that it gave the English language a lot of words. In many cases, the original association with warfare has been lost over time. Consider the word *obsess*. You might be 'obsessed' with something. And that thing might become your 'obsession.' Well, believe it or not, the word *obsess* originated with castle warfare. A big clue is the *sess* part of *obsess*. It comes from the same Latin root that gave us the word *siege*. The word *obsess* began as a combination of the Latin prefix *ob* meaning "against" and that same word *sedere* meaning "to sit." The word was *obsidere* and it literally meant 'to sit against something' or 'sit next to something'. The past participle of the word was *obsessus* and it was specifically used to refer to a siege of a castle or town. During a siege, the besiegers would watch the castle or town very closely. They would take note of the slightest movements. They became focused on the object that they sieged. And that is how the word *obsess* became associated with the general act of focusing on something to the exclusion of everything else.

Now, the siege often turned into a waiting game with each side trying to wait out the other. The plan of the siege was usually to implement a type of blockade. Over time, the inhabitants of the castle would run out of food and supplies and they would eventually give up and surrender. Well, that made sense in theory, but it rarely worked in actual practice.

Food wasn't usually a problem for the garrison stationed inside the castle. They typically had enough food to survive for several months. So, they could wait out a protracted siege. A slightly bigger problem was water. If the occupants ran out of water, they were in big trouble. But most of the castles had wells, so they usually had plenty of water.

However, sometimes those wells ran dry. And when that happened, the castle occupants had no choice but to surrender. In the last episode, I mentioned that Stephen faced off against a rebellious noble in the west named Baldwin shortly after he became king. I noted that Stephen besieged Baldwin's castle in Exeter and Baldwin eventually 'accorded' or surrendered. Well, according to some of the accounts, Baldwin gave up because his wells ran dry. When that happened, his garrison drank wine as long as they could, but eventually they ran out of wine as well. Then they had to surrender. So sometimes, those sieges worked.

But more often than not, the besiegers outside of the castle ran out of food and supplies first. There were usually more men camped outside of the castle than there were inside the castle. So, the besiegers consumed food much more quickly. And on top of that, disease was quite common in those camps. So, very often the siege simply ended over time. The camp was disbanded and the besiegers returned home.

So, the men stationed inside the castle had an advantage in a siege. They could wait out the forces gathered outside. And that meant the besiegers had to look for other options. And the other main option was a direct attack on the castle itself. Again, the castle occupants usually had the advantage because castles were specifically built to withstand those kinds of attacks.

Castles were typically built on high ground. And they had massive walls. And they often had moats surrounding them which made it difficult for attackers to even get close to the walls. The castle also had towers, from which the occupants could shoot arrows or fling other objects at the attackers.

Because the castle was so well defended, the attackers would sometimes try to find another way in. One option was to dig a tunnel under the castle's walls. Of course, the men inside the castle were prepared for that and they would slaughter any attackers that tried to enter that way. So, the attackers developed another strategy. They would dig a tunnel under the castle's walls to try to destabilize or weaken the walls. If the walls were made of wood, the attackers would light a fire underneath the wall.

In order to carry out this plan of attack, the besiegers had to dig a tunnel or 'mine' underneath the walls. The word *mine* was a French word. And this process was called 'undermining.' It literally meant to render something unstable by digging at its foundation. Of course, we still have the word *undermine*. Today it has a more general sense of making something weak or unstable, often by subversive means. But the word *undermine* has its origins in castle warfare. It literally meant to dig a mine under a castle's walls.

As always, the castle defenders found a way to deal with this new strategy of undermining. They simply placed bowls of water around the castle. If attackers tried to dig a mine under the castle walls, it would cause the ground to shake a little bit and that would produce ripples in the water in those bowls. It was like an alert that someone was digging under the castle. The occupants would then dig counter-mines which were designed to collapse the mines being dug by the attackers. The other way to avoid undermining was to simply build the castle on a rock foundation. That ensured that no one could dig underneath it.

So, that left the attackers with no choice but a full-fledged frontal assault on the castles' walls. Sometimes the attackers would use a battering ram. This was a heavy log attached by chains to a wooden trestle. It was pulled back and forth by ropes, and the repeated blows would damage the castle walls. But battering rams had a limited impact because moats made it difficult if not impossible to use them. And even when a battering ram could be used, the castle walls were designed to be thick enough to withstand it.

So, if you couldn't go under the walls or through the walls, you might try to go over the walls. One way to do that was to scale the walls with a ladder. This process was called *escalade* in French. And that word eventually passed into English. Today, we probably know that word *escalade* or /es-ca-laid/ as a type of Cadillac. But before it became associated with cars, it produced the word *escalator*. Modern English already had the word *elevator*. So, when moveable stairs were invented, the word *escalade* was combined with the word *elevator* to create the new word *escalator*. The word *escalator* then produced the verb *escalate* – meaning to 'rise' or 'enhance'. So, the words *escalate* and *escalator* can both be traced back to a word meaning the process of scaling a castle's walls.

The problem with the escalade is that the castle defenders would shoot arrows at the attacker as he tried to climb the ladder over the walls. So, that led to a new invention – the moveable tower. Now, this was an extreme option. The besiegers would construct a moveable tower and roll it up next to the castle's walls. The besiegers would take position at the top of the tower, and when it was rolled into place, the besiegers would extend a bridge and try to cross over the wall.

This type of moveable tower was called a *beffroi* in French, and it passed into English as *belfry*. These structures took a long time to construct, and they didn't always work. Again, they were also limited by moats. And even where there wasn't a moat, the belfry still had problems. For example, the castle defenders would usually try to set it on fire.

As I noted, the word *belfry* came from French, but it was originally a Germanic word combining the Germanic roots of *burg* meaning a 'tower' or 'hill' and *frith* meaning 'peace.' So, it meant the tower of security or peace. As castle warfare waned over the centuries, the word came to be associated with a bell tower. And that probably contributed to the evolution of the word over time. As *beffroi* came to mean a 'bell tower', people associated the tower with bells. And it is believed that people began to alter the pronunciation of the word to reflect that association with bells, so it went from *beffroi* to *belfry*.

So, as we've seen, there was no easy way for attackers to penetrate a castle's walls. Those walls were usually well fortified and defended. But the attackers didn't necessarily have to penetrate those walls. They could just launch something over the walls – like stones or other projectiles. And that led to the use of catapults. They could be used to launch large objects over the castle walls. They could also be used to launch fire balls called 'Greek fire' inside the castle court. Those fire balls couldn't be extinguished with water. They had to be put out with sand.

The word *catapult* comes from French, but it didn't enter English until the 1500s. Another French word for a catapult was a *bombard*. That word entered English in the early 1400s. And it later produced the verb *to bombard* meaning to launch an attack – usually by air. The root that gave us *bombard* also gave us the word *bomb* a few centuries later after gunpowder became more common. After gunpowder started to be used in siege warfare in the 1500s, a new type of explosive device was created. This device was shaped like a bucket, and it was crammed full of gunpowder. The besieger would approach the castle walls, and he would hang the device on the wall. If there was nowhere to hang it, he would lean it against the wall. He would then light the fuse and run away. So, it was an early type of bomb. And it was called a *petard* – again from French. The French root actually meant to 'break wind' or 'have flatulence'.

The petard could be effective, but it was also dangerous for the besieger who tried to place it next to the wall. Sometimes the besieger was killed when the petard prematurely exploded. And even if he was able to put it in place next to the wall, he still had a problem. And that problem was the basic laws of physics.

Since the petard was placed next to a wall, the explosion sent shrapnel flying away from the wall in the direction of the besieger who placed it there. So, it was very common for a besieger to light the fuse and then be killed by the exploding petard as he tried to run away.

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It was Shakespeare who picked up on this idea in Hamlet when he coined the phrase to 'hoist with his own petard.' He used it to refer to a besieger who is hoisted – or blown high in the air – by his own bomb. In fact, the entire passage relates to castle warfare. In the passage, Shakespeare called the besieger the 'engineer.' And he made an analogy to the defense of a castle. He wrote:

> *For 'tis the sport to have the engineer*
> *Hoist with his own petard. And 't shall go hard,*
> *But I will delve one yard below their mines,*
> *And blow them at the moon. Oh, 'tis most sweet*
> *When in one line two crafts directly meet.*

So basically, he's saying that its fun to watch the besieger get blown up by his own bomb. He says that – with a little luck – he will defeat the attackers by digging a few feet below their bombs and then he'll blow up both the attackers and their bombs. That way he can kill two birds with one stone. So, even Shakespeare enjoyed a little violent imagery from time to time. But anyway, that passage gave us the phrase 'hoist with his own petard' to mean that someone was injured by their own plot or device.

Now, this discussion of gunpowder is actually quite important. It was really the invention and use of gunpowder that brought an end to walled castles in the late 1400s and 1500s. It also brought an end to armored knights. Guns could fire bullets right through a knight's armor. And canons could fire cannonballs right through the walls of a castle.

But at the current point in our story, we're still several centuries away from the gunpowder revolution. So for now, during the period of the English Anarchy, the combatants engaged in traditional siege warfare. And as we've seen, that type of warfare favored the castle defenders. And that meant that it very difficult to defeat the rebellious barons and reimpose law and order throughout the country.

The civil war between Stephen and Matilda and the Anarchy that flowed from that civil war lasted for almost 20 years. Next time, we'll look at the remainder of that period. The battle between Stephen and Matilda unfolded like a gripping novel and at times like a Hollywood movie. There's lots of drama and fascinating details. And as always, much of that drama was recorded in the Peterborough Chronicle. So next time, we'll conclude our look at the Anarchy.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.