

# The Scottish medieval towerhouse as lordly residence in the light of recent excavation

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## SUMMARY

*For the past century, architectural historians have taken the lead in examining our castellated heritage and produced the models which form the basis of our present understanding. Only recently have archaeologists begun to broaden that appreciation. One area in particular where the picture may be changing is the medieval towerhouse, which we generally perceive as free-standing and self-contained. This short paper takes a select group of towerhouses in southern Scotland and seeks to show how archaeological investigation can substantially alter our perception of them as residences of lordship.*

## INTRODUCTION

The year 1987 marked the centenary of the publication of the first volume of David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross's five-volume epic, *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* (1887–92). No class of monument surviving from our medieval past has been better served or more intensely studied than the castle. Our fascination for ecclesiastical ruins has a longer history, but the Scottish castle has received the greater attention down the years. We owe an enormous debt to professional architects like MacGibbon and Ross, and to architectural historians of the calibre of Mackay MacKenzie (1927), Stewart Cruden (1960; reprinted 1981) and John Dunbar (1966), for picking over the bones of our castellated heritage and publishing the major seminal works.

Until quite recently, excavation scarcely played any part at all in this learning process. Where it was undertaken, it took the form of following walls, and clearing away with gay abandon all the obstructive rubble and soil to reveal yet more stone walls for architectural historians to peer at and puzzle over. But the advent of more sophisticated archaeological techniques after the Second World War, coupled with the emergence of an interest in medieval archaeology in its own right (see Hinton 1983), has opened up new opportunities in castle studies, as it is increasingly doing in other medieval areas, particularly in our burghs.

The amount of archaeological work carried out on medieval sites in Scotland is still far outweighed by that on monuments of a greater antiquity, but what has been done has already begun to contribute enormously to our present understanding. Archaeological excavation clearly plays the lead role at those timber castles where no masonry survives; witness Peter Yeoman's work at the Giffards' motte at Castlehill of Strachan in Grampian (Yeoman 1984). It also has a vital part to play at complex castle sites where a masonry phase, or phases, may be but one development in the evolution

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of the site as a whole; Gordon Ewart's work on the peninsula site of Cruggleton in the Machars of Galloway (Ewart 1985) has been the most significant such case to date. But archaeology also has an important part to play at those castles where all the principal phases are masonry and where the lead, to date, has been taken by the architectural historian.

Elsewhere in this volume is a report on an excavation which I carried out in partnership with George Good at Smailholm Tower, a prominent landmark in the Border country. Prior to excavation, it was widely assumed that the residence of the Pringle laird was confined within the towerhouse, with service offices – kitchen, bakehouse, brewhouse, stable, etc – grouped around it in the barmkin enclosure. That perception is now somewhat altered as a result of the excavation, which has brought to light a second residential unit, comprising probably an outer hall and chamber, standing alongside the towerhouse and very likely contemporary with it. We had previously excavated on Threave Island, in the Galloway Dee, and unearthed two substantial buildings, again contemporary with a towerhouse and again interpreted as having served in the main a residential use (Good & Tabraham 1981). These discoveries have prompted me to look again at the Scottish towerhouse, particularly our usual understanding of it as a residence of lordship.

#### THE MEDIEVAL TOWERHOUSE AS RESIDENCE: THE PRESENT VIEW

The Scottish medieval towerhouse has for a long while now been viewed as a free-standing, largely self-contained entity, lofty and forbidding, 'closed-up and inward-looking' as Cruden so tellingly puts it (1960, 108–9). He continues:

'... a simple rectangular tower achieving height but not extent is an inevitable result of conditions and requirements of impoverishment, the need for security and necessity of obtaining it cheaply. To these demands of security, economy and uncertain future a plain rectangular tower with exceedingly thick walls constructed all of stone was the obvious answer. It was also the reduction of the courtyard castle to a family dwelling and little more.'

This is the vein struck by MacGibbon and Ross a century earlier (1887, I, 144):

'... The mansions of the nobility, being constantly liable to be attacked and burnt, were necessarily built of stone; while from the impoverished conditions of the barons of the time, they were of the simplest form. All that was required was a stronghold sufficient to accommodate the owner's family and personal retainers, and to protect them from sudden attack. These castles consist of a square or oblong tower, with thick walls ...'

Not that the towerhouse is seen in complete isolation. MacGibbon and Ross again (*ibid*, 145–6):

'... there can scarcely be a doubt that all these keeps had a courtyard connected with them, enclosed with a good wall. This court or barmkin was essential to contain the stables and other offices.'

Mackay MacKenzie coined the phrase 'farmyard attachments' (1927, 195) to describe these subsidiary elements, or service offices, thereby emphasizing their inferior status.

The 'self-contained' quality of the towerhouse, '... incorporating all the essential ingredients of the normal medieval house in a remarkably compact form ...' (Dunbar 1966, 37), is stressed throughout the published record. If there are residential units present, integral with or adjacent to the towerhouse, these are, almost without exception, seen as a secondary development, ranges erected at some later date in response to an upturn in the family's fortunes. The arrangement at Crichton Castle, in Lothian, is frequently given to illustrate this evolution from simple towerhouse to complex courtyard castle (Simpson 1957). The rare exceptions, like the towerhouse and great hall unit built by the Duke of Albany at Doune Castle about 1400 (Pringle 1988), seem not to caution against this empirical evolutionary view; and the complex late 14th- and early 15th-century establishments of the

likes of the Douglases at Bothwell Castle, on the Clyde, and Tantallon Castle, beside the Forth, where hall-blocks are central elements in the ensemble of buildings, are seen as lordly residences of a quite different nature. But the information coming out of the ground from both Threave Castle and Smailholm Tower strongly suggests that the traditional view of the medieval towerhouse as the full extent of a lord's residential needs may be seriously flawed.

### TOWERHOUSES OF THE DOUGLASES

In order to demonstrate this last point, I wish now to take a very select group of towerhouses belonging to one noble Scots family. Firstly, each will be examined solely in terms of its upstanding architecture to assess how it may have functioned as a residence of lordship. Thereafter, I will bring into focus evidence from excavation to see how this might alter our perception.

The towerhouses that I have selected were built for the earls of Douglas, undeniably the most significant aristocratic family in southern Scotland in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. In choosing residences pertaining to one family, I hope that I will be able to compare and contrast them more tellingly. I am conscious that my analyses can only be regarded as general and that there are factors which perforce compromise some of my conclusions. In particular, I am aware that the castles have changed over the years and that it is impossible from this distance in time to analyse each castle in its completed state when it was first built. Some elements no longer survive; others have been so altered that they defy untangling. Nevertheless, if one accepts what follows in broad terms, then I think that the comparisons are, broadly-speaking, valid.

The three towerhouses are all in southern Scotland, the powerbase of the Douglases. Threave (NGR NX 739 622), in the Lordship of Galloway, and Newark (NT 421 294), in the Forest of Ettrick, were residences of the senior line stemming from Black Archibald, or Archibald the Grim, who died at Threave in 1400. Hermitage (NY 496 960), in Liddesdale, was the residence of Archibald's cousin, William Douglas, the first earl of that House, whose estate passed in time to the junior line, or Red Douglas earls of Angus.

Now we can reasonably assume that each of these Douglas residences catered for a broadly similar accommodation need, for each was the chief seat in its respective lordship or estate. Each would have been expected to provide suitable lodgings for the earl and his household, that is his immediate family, officials and domestic staff. It is not possible to determine precisely how many folk we are talking of here for as yet we know very little about the details of any medieval nobleman's household let alone those of the Douglases (Wormald 1985, 94–5). What little research has been done – for example, Keith Stringer's analysis (1985, 149–76) of Earl David of Huntingdon's household and following in the late 12th century, and Margaret Sanderson's review (1974, 31–48) of Archbishop Beaton's 'kin, freindis and servandis' in the mid 16th century – points to substantial numbers being involved. Not all would require to be accommodated within their lord's castle(s) of course, but the figures serve to illustrate the size of a magnate's following and the potential accommodation requirements of the likes of the Douglases. Add to this permanent provision the need to set aside space for visiting guests with their travelling households (in 1591, for instance, earls attending the Justice court of King James VI were permitted a travelling household of 24 (Mitchison 1983, 8)), and we are clearly dealing with the requirement to provide substantial living space. These figures should be borne in mind as we look at the individual residences of the earls of Douglas.

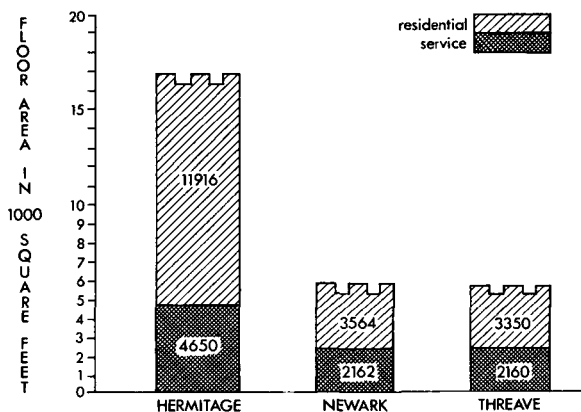
#### HERMITAGE CASTLE

Let us first consider Hermitage. This castle has a complicated development (RCAMS 1956, I, 75–85, no 63) and there are a number of puzzles still awaiting explanation. What seems clear enough

is that William Douglas, the first earl, when he came into possession of the lordship in the late 1360s, took occupation of an existing and recently completed masonry building, more like a fortified manorhouse, built by the Dacre lord of Cumberland, who had held the lands of the English king. William Douglas put into effect a major rebuilding programme which, by the end of that century, resulted in the creation of a mighty towerhouse. This comprised a large rectangular block, most probably four storeys high, to each corner of which was added a smaller tower of similar height.

The arrangement of the accommodation is not entirely clear, but it appears to have been as follows: in the main block, at ground level three storage cellars; at the first floor level what may have been a large hall with a smaller chamber perhaps at the east end; on the second floor another hall and chamber each with a high ceiling, suggesting that this was the principal suite; and at the top, directly beneath the roof with its wall-walks and battlements, another hall which may have been intended to serve as temporary quarters for the defending garrison in times of siege. In the adjacent corner towers we have a mixture of chambers and service offices, the latter confined to the ground and first floors, the former occupying the upper storeys.

The total floor area, assuming a four-storey main block, amounts to some 16566 ft<sup>2</sup> (1539 m<sup>2</sup>), which can broadly be broken down into 11916 ft<sup>2</sup> (1106 m<sup>2</sup>) of residential accommodation (halls and chambers) and 4650 ft<sup>2</sup> (431 m<sup>2</sup>) of service (kitchen, bakehouse, prison, storage and so forth). This space is expressed in table form in illus 1.



ILLUS 1 Table comparing the floor area (in ft<sup>2</sup>) available within the towerhouses of Hermitage, Newark and Threave

#### NEWARK CASTLE

Now how does Newark compare? This towerhouse is considered to have been built for Archibald, fourth earl of Douglas and son of Archibald the Grim, very early in the 15th century (RCAMS 1957, 61–5, no 44). It is a more conventional towerhouse than Hermitage, a simple rectangular block probably five storeys high beneath the battlements. Despite the subsequent alterations (there is good reason to suppose that the existing attic storey is a later addition), the original arrangement seems clear enough – storage at ground level; a kitchen area on the floor above; the hall on the third storey and, above that, two further floors. In all there are some 5726 ft<sup>2</sup> (531 m<sup>2</sup>) of floor area, roughly 3:2 in favour of residential accommodation (3564 ft<sup>2</sup> (331 m<sup>2</sup>) to 2162 ft<sup>2</sup> (201 m<sup>2</sup>) (illus 1).

Immediately, the contrast between the provision at Newark and Hermitage is striking – Newark is a third of the size of Hermitage in terms of available floor space. Yet both were the residences of wealthy and important earls who were closely related. Both were the chief seats in their respective estates and it is not immediately apparent why there should be such a wide discrepancy.

#### THREAVE CASTLE

Let us, for the moment then, pass on to our third Douglas towerhouse and see how this compares. Threave is one of the most evocative of all our medieval castles, built by Archibald the Grim as his base in Galloway following his elevation to that lordship in 1369. At the time of his death there in 1400, his mighty rectangular towerhouse consisted of five storeys – at ground level a storage provision, including a prison; on the floor above a kitchen area; on the third storey a hall; on the fourth storey two private chambers and at the top, beneath the roof, an upper hall which, as at Hermitage, may have been intended to serve as temporary siege quarters for the earl's household (Tabraham 1988).

Adding up Threave's available floor space, we find that it almost exactly corresponds with that at Newark – 5510 ft<sup>2</sup> (511 m<sup>2</sup>) – with a remarkably similar ratio of residential to service (illus 1). Again, we puzzle at this apparent discrepancy at Hermitage and Threave in the amount of accommodation provided. Both residences were built by men of equal rank and wealth in areas of comparable insecurity and instability. Why Archibald the Grim should be content, seemingly, with a towerhouse residence a third of the size of his cousin's is not immediately explained.

#### EXCAVATION AT THREAVE CASTLE

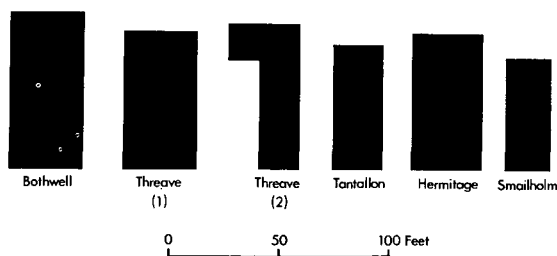
Up to this point we have been considering these castles solely from their surviving architectural remains. As regards Hermitage and Newark, we have no alternative for neither has been archaeologically investigated; but Threave has (Good & Tabraham 1981, 90–140).

I freely admit that when we began excavating on Threave Island in 1974, we regarded Archibald the Grim's castle much as our predecessors had done. 'This lofty grey stronghold', MacGibbon and Ross described it (1887, I, 157), reinforcing our perception of it as an isolated and fully self-contained residence surrounded only by the fast-flowing waters of the River Dee and the flat marshy haughs. In our ignorance, we assumed that the foundations of two buildings encountered by the Office of Works in 1923, whilst the enormous programme of consolidating the upstanding masonry was drawing to a close, probably belonged to an earlier castle of the celtic lords of Galloway which is reputed to have stood on the island and been burnt by The Bruce in 1308 (Skene 1871, 345). Excavation showed this assumption to be mistaken.

The two buildings had both been erected late in the 14th century, probably on or near completion of the adjacent towerhouse. Clearly then, the towerhouse was never intended to stand alone as the full extent of Archibald's Gallovidian residence. Quite how these buildings functioned it was impossible to determine because of the paucity of the surviving remains – mere wall-footings and no superstructure to speak of – for both were dismantled about 1450 to make room for the new artillery work. From the surviving evidence, however, it would seem that both structures were at least two-storeyed, apparently with service accommodation on the ground floor and plausibly residential space over.

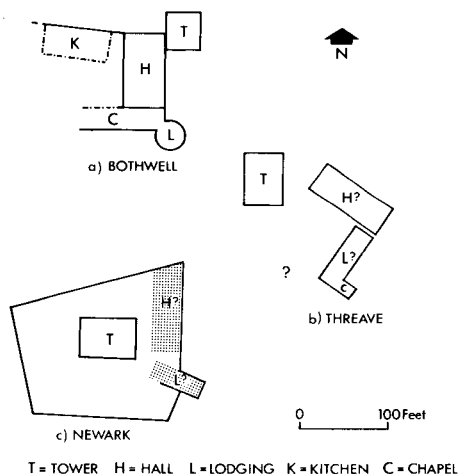
Both structures may be compared to a building surviving within another of Archibald's castles, Bothwell, on the Clyde. Here Archibald and his son, also named Archibald, the fourth earl, remodelled the castle which had been drastically damaged during the Wars of Independence in the first half of the 14th century (Simpson 1925, 165–93). Adjacent to the now-vanished but once enormous square tower at the north-east corner, which most probably served as the earl's principal

lodging, we find a two-storeyed building, similar to Threave's Building 1 in floor area, and almost identical to Threave's Building 2 in ground-floor layout, though substantially bigger. At Bothwell the function is perfectly clear – an outer or great hall on the first floor above an undercroft for storage. Perhaps Building 1 at Threave is the more closely comparable, considering the floor area – 2178 ft<sup>2</sup> (202 m<sup>2</sup>) at Bothwell compared with 1800 ft<sup>2</sup> (167 m<sup>2</sup>) at Threave (illus 2).



ILLUS 2 Block plans of great halls at Bothwell, Threave (1 & 2), Tantallon, Hermitage and Smailholm

The arrangement of the accommodation at Bothwell during the Black Douglases' period of occupation, insofar as we can make it out from the somewhat patchy remains, is perhaps a good deal closer to that at Threave than might appear to be the case at first sight (illus 3a). We can see the mighty north-east tower serving as the earl's principal lodging, containing a modestly-sized hall on the first floor, where he could entertain more intimately, sandwiched between basement storage and upper private chambers. Handily placed adjacent to this was his great hall, a more capacious banqueting and reception room, complementing the somewhat cramped provision within the tower. The kitchen block serving the great hall, now largely disappeared, stood immediately to the north-west of the



ILLUS 3 The physical relationship between towerhouse, great hall and other accommodation at Bothwell, Threave and Newark

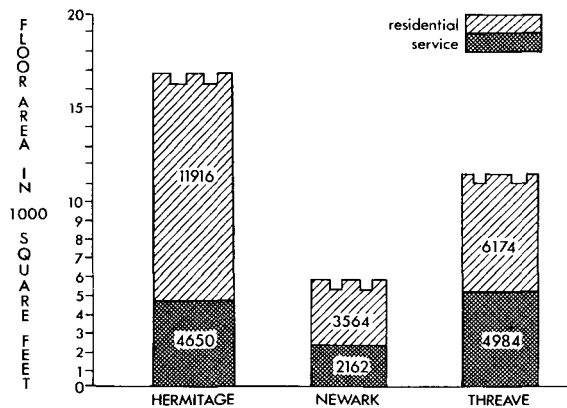
great hall. Beyond the great hall to the south was the chapel with ancillary residential accommodation within the round tower at the south-east corner and elsewhere in the enclosure, for use by others in the household and visiting guests.

Now we look again at Threave. Upon first inspection, an entirely different castle, but in the light of the excavated material not so dissimilar. We continue to see the lofty towerhouse serving as the earl's principal lodging, incorporating a reasonably-sized hall in the middle, with private chambers above and kitchen and storage beneath – not unlike that in the north-east tower at Bothwell. But grouped around the main east front of his towerhouse, within 50 ft (15 m) of the front door, are two large and doubtless imposing structures (illus 3b). (There are other building foundations to the south awaiting further excavation.) The nearer one, Building 1, quite probably housed the outer or great hall on its first floor; Building 2 conceivably housed ancillary residential quarters on its first floor, perhaps with a chapel in the east-west orientated projection at the south-east corner. In essence, the arrangement is not all that different from Bothwell; but without Bothwell's great curtain wall, which was in any case substantially a legacy from the 13th century. At Threave, in its naturally defensive island setting, it could be argued that a stone curtain was not so essential.

The requirement for a great hall, independent of but complementary to the provision of a smaller, more intimate hall within the lord's private lodging, is demonstrated not only at Bothwell but elsewhere in Scotland. Tantallon Castle, for example, was built in the 1350s most probably by William Douglas, the first earl and creator of Hermitage (Tabraham 1986, 5). Here, adjacent to his own lodging in the colossal Douglas Tower, he placed a two-storeyed hall block, a far less substantial building than the tower but providing a further 2200 ft<sup>2</sup> (204 m<sup>2</sup>) of accommodation (illus 2). And there is no good reason to suppose that the earl's residential needs were any different, whether he was in residence at Tantallon or Hermitage.

### THE DOUGLASES' TOWERHOUSES RECONSIDERED IN THE LIGHT OF EXCAVATION

Let us now return to the three towerhouses and see how excavation has altered the picture. In terms of available floor area, Threave can now be demonstrated to be a good deal larger than at first supposed. In fact, it has slightly more than doubled in size and there are still more structures awaiting



ILLUS 4 Table comparing the floor area (in ft<sup>2</sup>) available at Hermitage, Newark and Threave in the light of recent excavation

excavation (illus 4). Perhaps when the full extent of Threave's accommodation around the year 1400 is known, it will turn out to be little different to Hermitage.

There still remains the puzzle as to why the two cousins, William and Archibald, should have built two quite different towerhouses to meet their similar residential needs. At Threave, Archibald appears to have been developing the tradition established in the preceding centuries, that of a main keep, or donjon, with a high degree of defensive capability, surrounded by lesser residential and service units – precisely what he acquired at Bothwell in the 1360s following his marriage to Joanna Moray. At Hermitage, cousin William contrived to produce a more fully self-contained residence. These quite separate approaches resulted in a difference in the manner in which the various components of the lordly residence were arranged. Hermitage was the more radical for the great hall was placed at the heart of the ensemble (on the third storey of the main block) with the lord's own hall sited elsewhere, most probably in the largest of the attached towers and at the same level. But these are differences at the margin; they do not affect the central fact to emerge from excavation – that, generally speaking, a similar amount of accommodation, and in roughly the same proportion of residence to service, was being provided at both.

So where does this leave Newark? A towerhouse whose total floor area is so similar to Threave's that one might justifiably raise more than an eyebrow at its present dating, 50 years after Threave. Unlike Threave, Newark is not built upon a naturally defensive island but on a bluff overlooking the Yarrow Water. It is surrounded by a stone barmkin wall that is generally considered to be of 16th-century date, largely on account of the oval gunholes that puncture it at intervals. Be that as it may, what is clear even from a cursory examination through the jungle that now envelopes it is that the wall is certainly not of one build.

The Royal Commission's plan in the *Inventory* hints at this (RCAMS 1957). Straight joints, particularly in the projection along the east side, strongly suggest a work of more than one period, whilst the latrine chute in the north-east corner points to the existence of residential accommodation here at some date. If we hold to the evolutionary theory laid down by our predecessors, then we would view these outbuildings as much later additions. 'As the country improved, buildings providing enlarged accommodation were extended around the inside of the walls of the courtyard' (MacGibbon & Ross, 1887, I, 146). I have my doubts. Taking the average ground area of the hall-blocks that we have seen at the other Douglas castles, one of them would fit perfectly into the north-east part of the barmkin wall, interestingly in a similar position to those at Threave, a short distance from the entrance into the towerhouse (illus 3c). Excavation at Newark Castle might well radically alter our perception of the earl of Douglas's chief seat in his wealthy holding of the Forest of Ettrick.

#### EXCAVATION AT SMAILHOLM TOWER

If we now accept the view that the standard form of towerhouse by itself was incapable of meeting all the residential demands laid upon individual members of the higher nobility, with their large households and their onerous courtly, ceremonial and hospitable obligations to maintain and fulfil, can we sustain this argument as we move down the social scale to the lesser nobility and landed gentry?

Smailholm Tower, near Kelso, was built in the 15th century by a head of the Pringle surname – which one is not clear (see the preceding paper in this volume). The Pringles happen to have been closely associated with the earls of Douglas for they had served as squires of Black Douglas, were tenants in the Douglasses' holding of the Forest of Ettrick and held important administrative posts within one of the Wards of that Forest. Pringle of Smailholm was also in possession of a sizeable landholding scattered throughout the Border country and, although he was clearly nowhere near the



league and stature of his master, the earl of Douglas, he was a well-to-do member of the landed gentry, not without standing in the Border community.

The archaeological investigation at his Smailholm residence shows that the accommodation within the simple towerhouse (1394 ft<sup>2</sup> (130 m<sup>2</sup>) of residential accommodation; 850 ft<sup>2</sup> (79 m<sup>2</sup>) of service), was augmented by a further 1345 ft<sup>2</sup> (125 m<sup>2</sup>) elsewhere within the barmkin. Of the latter, only some 396 ft<sup>2</sup> (37 m<sup>2</sup>) was service (in the kitchen block on the south side of the west court); the remaining 949 ft<sup>2</sup> (88 m<sup>2</sup>) was an outer hall and chamber placed along the north side of the west court (illus 2). The presence of such a building considerably alters our appreciation of Smailholm as a lordly residence. Certainly, the towerhouse still stands at the heart of the complex, the chief residential unit and the most secure in troubled times. But it can no longer be viewed as an isolated dwelling house, surrounded by mere 'farmyard attachments'. As at Threave, the home of his master the earl of Douglas, so at Smailholm the Pringle laird, albeit in a more humble manner, had a residence somewhat more elaborate than we had hitherto imagined.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly then, there is more to the medieval towerhouse than immediately meets the eye. What were formerly thought of as quite straightforward towerhouse residences at Threave and Smailholm are now demonstrated to be a good deal more complex. It is important, however, at this early stage of archaeological research not to overwork the excavated evidence. The precise nature of the additional buildings at Threave cannot be determined; and though the presence of a ground-floor hall at Smailholm is more easily demonstrated, its exact date of construction must remain in some doubt. However, what cannot be denied is the fact that the archaeological evidence is changing our overall understanding of the form and function of the medieval castle in general and of the medieval towerhouse in particular.

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