Fig. 1: Castleroche viewed from the lowlands to the west.

Roesia de Verdun and the building of Castleroche, Co. Louth

Tadhg O'Keeffe

Were it visible from a main road, like the Rock of Cashel, the great thirteenth-century fortress of Castleroche, Co. Louth, would be one of Ireland's best known monuments (**Figs 1, 2**). Medievalists, particularly specialists in the study of castles, know it well and view it with renewed awe on every visit, but it is actually a relatively little-studied work of architecture, despite our possession of a very exact record of its construction. It is surely a measure of the lack of scholarly attention paid to it that it is less well known for its remarkable design than it is for the legend, reported most recently in print by Terry Barry (2008, 131-2), that Roesia de Verdun, whom history records as its builder, killed her master mason lest he design a similar castle for another patron.

Castleroche naturally attracts attention as a spectacular ruin, but what really makes it such a fascinating object of study is that it is a building-complex of apparent contradictions. First, its great cliff-skirting curtain wall creates an expectation of an interior containing *something* worth protecting, but there is nothing on the inside that one cannot see from the outside, other than the base of a small and featureless structure of unknown date and function, possibly the base of an early tower according to Roger Stalley (1971, 44), or a well-house according to Tom McNeill (1997, 87), or simply a "later building?" according to David Sweetman (1999, 56). Second, its very fine gate-building (**Fig. 3**) adds hugely to our sense that Castleroche was a genuine fortress, a monument to cite when arguing alongside Colin Platt (2007) against the revisionists who query the interpretation of castles as essentially military. Yet it obviously (despite the fact that

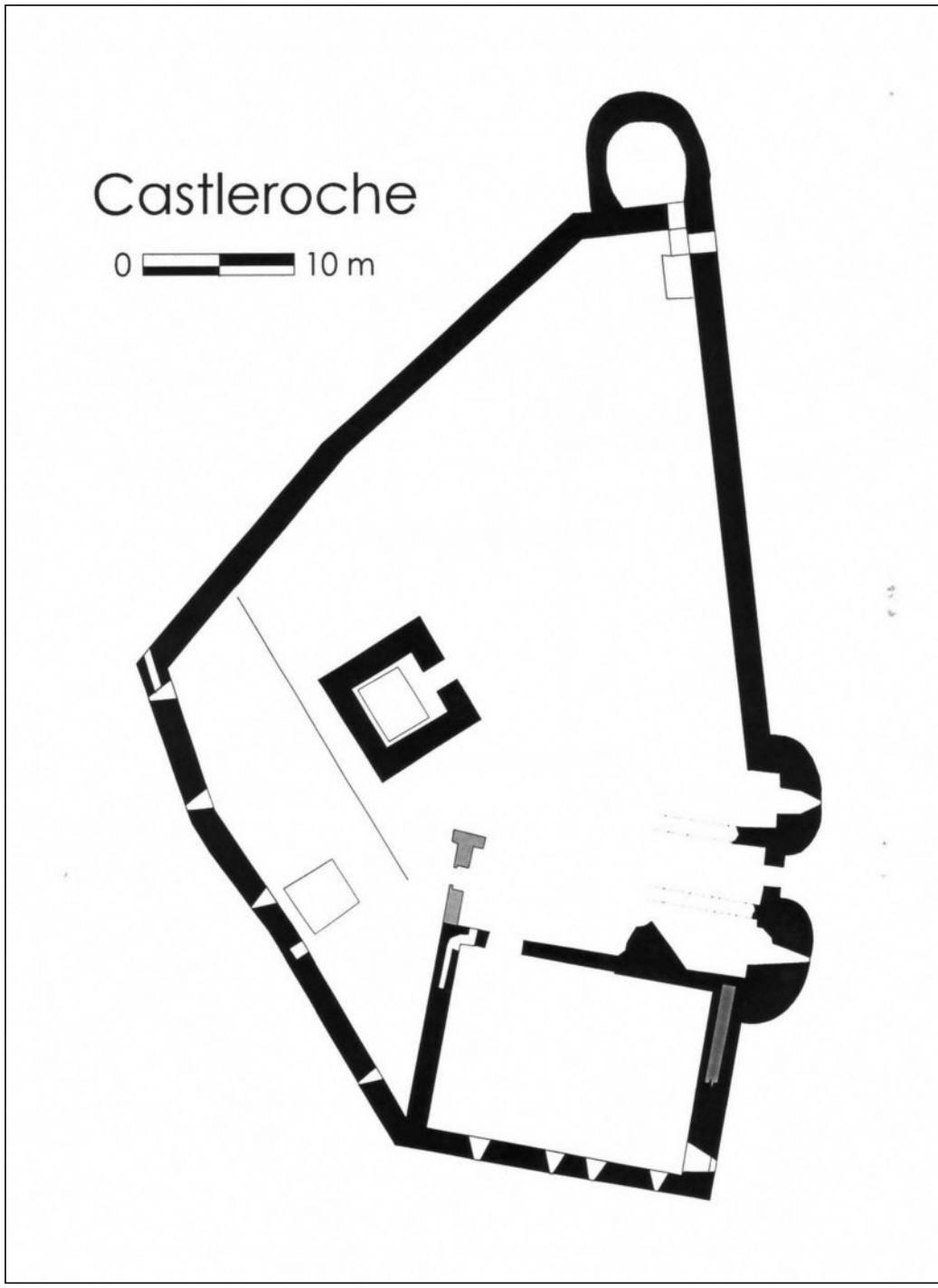


Fig. 2: Ground plan of Castleroche.

Fig. 3: Castleroche gate-building from the east.

most of it is now missing) offered fairly high-grade accommodation; it was, in other words, the castle's chamber. Third, castles are popularly if somewhat unconsciously gendered male, and no Irish castle would seem to be more masculine, more testosterone-fragranced, than Roche, and yet it is the only thirteenth-century castle in Ireland, and one of the few in Europe, of which construction (as distinct from erstwhile custody) can be attributed with confidence to a woman. Finally, having heard so many stories of secret passages and such things at castles, we are naturally reluctant to believe that Roche's particular legend of 'masonicide' has any truth, and yet it stands alone in the Irish canon.

Roesia de Verdun and the building of Roche

The de Verdun family has been exceptionally well served by historians of medieval Ireland (Otway-Ruthven 1968; Smith 1999; Hagger 2001). The *paterfamilias* of the Irish lineage was Bertram de Verdun, who might first have visited Ireland as a member of Henry II's entourage in 1171. Prince John, with whom he was certainly in Ireland in 1185, granted him land in Louth and south Armagh around 1189, which he entrusted to his sons Thomas and Nicholas. In 1231 Roesia, his granddaughter, and widow of Theobald II Walter (of Nenagh), inherited these and assorted lands in England on the death of her father, Nicholas. The Irish

estates appear not have come into her secure possession until 1233. In 1235 she and Hugh II de Lacy, the earl of Ulster, resolved a long-standing dispute between the two families. It is recorded the following year that she had "built a good castle strongly in her land against the Irish", something which "none of her predecessors was able to do", and that she planned on building "another castle to the great security of our land" (*Close Rolls of the Reign of Henry III, 1224-37*, p. 364). The completed castle is not actually named as Roche, but there is no doubt about the identification. The site itself may have been chosen by her father: he had intended fortifying his land but in 1229 the king retained him on royal service in England, instructing the justiciar to provide aid and assistance as soon as he was ready to proceed with a fortification (*Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland*, *1171-1251*, no. 1690).

There is no record of him building anything at Roche, and Roesia's boast seems to have been intended to make that very point. Yes, it is possible that she was a little economical with the truth of the history of the site's fortification, but, whereas other castle-builders might have wriggled through medieval history with slight deceptions about their achievements, the progress of incastellation of north Louth would perhaps have been too carefully monitored in Henry III's circle for her to make a false claim: the king knew Roesia's father well and had even agitated for her marriage – her second – to Theobald Butler.

How reliable is the record of the *completion* of Roche by 1236? There is no reason to doubt that a substantial work had indeed been completed by that date, but a certain caution must be exercised. First, although the source of the information is the royal record, Roesia herself must have provided it, and there is no evidence that she ever even set foot in Ireland. There is no independent verification of Roche's completion date, in other words. Second, three years – from 1233 to 1236 – is a very short span. Given the preparation needed for a castle of its size, not to mention winter-time delays, how much of what we see today could have been built so quickly? Third, there is no evidence that her other castle-project – presumably a re-incastellation of Dundalk, previously fortified by Bertram, rather than the building of a brand new castle (*contra* Otway-Ruthven 1968, 407) – progressed beyond an aspiration, despite the king's practical support for the venture. Was the other project stalled because building work was still going on at Roche after 1236, despite Roesia's claim to the king that the job was finished?

The phases of construction

The most recent commentators on Irish castles have treated Castleroche as a relatively uncomplicated work of architecture, essentially presenting the stone fortress as the product of a single long episode in which building-work ended when each component reached almost simultaneously the height intended for it. McNeill attributed the castle's construction entirely to Roesia, asserting that its design "must" have been based on that of Beeston in Cheshire, another rock-top fortress of about the general date, although he also conceded that work at Roche could have started as early as 1225 (1997, 87-88). Sweetman simply noted that Roche was "thought to have been built in 1236" (1999, 57).

Evidence of a more complicated constructional history has long been recognised, however, even if its implications have never been fully teased out. Stalley observed more than forty years ago that the masonry abutting the gate-building indicated that the beginning of its construction, which he implied should be attributed to Nicholas's patronage, predated the raising of the walls adjoining it (1971, 43). The *Archaeological Survey of Ireland*, which followed Harold Leask in assigning the castle to John de Verdun, Roesia's son who died in 1274, noted more than twenty years ago that a thirteenth-century door-opening in the gate building was an insert (Buckley & Sweetman 1991, 335), though it stopped short of the obvious conclusion that there must have been some change of plan. Closer observation of the

Fig. 4: The interior south-west side of Castleroche looking north-westwards from the hall. The revetment is right-of-centre in this image. The small stone-lined hollow to the left is unexplained.

castle's fabric adds to the book of evidence that, small-scale alterations aside, Castleroche can indeed be attributed to a single period in the thirteenth century but that it was built in stages, the final product possibly a little different from what had been envisaged at the outset. Given that the structural history of the castle is not regarded in the most recent literature as problematic, (re-)establishing that there were stages of construction in the thirteenth century allows a new conversation about this major castle to start. Working out the stages, and working out what they mean, are much bigger challenges, and what follows below is speculative.

The stone castle that we see today is one of the few of thirteenth-century date in Ireland to retain a complete or unbroken circuit. That circuit traces a roughly triangular area, its exact shape determined by the site it that occupies. Although the courtyard seems open today, there is evidence of an internal division in the form of a revetment running parallel to the south-west curtain, separating the drier high ground in the centre of the courtyard from the rather damper ground inside and under the shadow of that curtain. The significance of this revetment is that it also effectively demarcates the part of the castle in which one finds fenestration and put-logs (scaffolding holes) in the curtain wall (**Fig. 4**). What is this telling us? It suggests that the curtain wall was not built in one episode. How does the 'later' phase of the curtain relate to the two key buildings – the gate-building and great hall – at the south corner of the castle? This is the central problem.

Fig. 5: The interior east end of the hall viewed from the west. The passage runs behind the putlogged wall, and part of it can be seen on the far left where the hall adjoins the gate-building.

Fig. 6: The hall and gate-building viewed from the south. The holes associated with what was presumably timber hoarding outside the hall are slightly irregular in rhythm and are only one stone-course below the battlement loops. Note again the use of putlogs at the level of the arrow-loops which line the passage from the hall into the gate-building.

Fig. 7: The curtain wall north of the gate-building. Although the arrow-loops are irregularly placed within the merlons, the hoarding slots are regular and are several courses lower than the crenels.

The key observation is to be made at the east end of the great hall. Here, the upper wall is putlogged internally (**Fig. 5**). It is obviously secondary to the wall below it. The argument does not rest solely on the putlogs. There are two other indicators. First, it protects a passage into the gate-building, and that passage enters the gate-building through the inserted door-opening mentioned above. It almost goes without saying that if the provision of a passage from the great hall into the gate-building was originally intended, it would not have been put so high up in the great hall that wooden stairs would have been needed to access it. Second, the crenellations associated with the secondary walling at the hall differ from those of the main curtain (**Figs 6, 7**).

If we attach significance to the putlogged walls, a constructional history of some complexity within a very narrow time-band can tentatively be suggested.

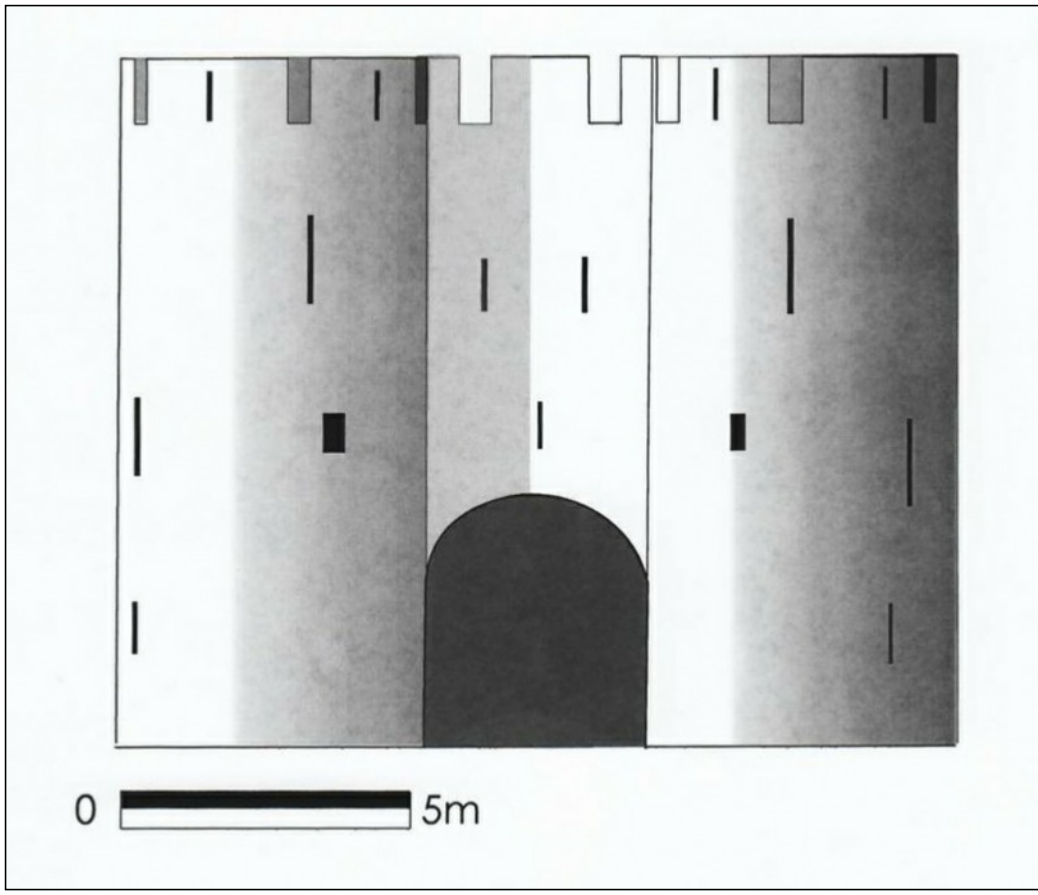
The gate-building, two storeys high above the now-destroyed passageway, was unquestionably the first structure to have been built (*Stage 1*). There are three reasons why we can draw this conclusion. First, the survival of its base-battered south-west corner (**Fig. 8**) indicates that there was no hall or other building on its south side. Second, there is no doorway onto the wall-walk of the curtain wall to its north. Third, as noted, the doorway which connects the first-floor room with the east end of the great hall was inserted; there was no doorway here originally.

What date can we assign to this gate-building? Given that its parapet was crenellated in a manner similar to the adjoining curtain wall, there can be no doubt that Roesia was responsible for its completion, and little doubt then that she also initiated its construction. It might be relevant to note in this context the similarity between Roche's gate-building and the barbi-

Fig. 8: The base-batter in section at the corner of the gate-building; to the left is the wall of the hall.

can towers that constitute St Laurence's Gate in Drogheda (**Fig. 9**). This is generally attributed to a mid- or late thirteenth-century date, but a 1234 murage grant to that town (Thomas 1992, ii, 74) might be the context of its construction, making it and Roche near-contemporaries. Might they have been built when peace broke out between the de Verduns and de Lacys in 1235? One interesting (and presumably significant) feature of the Roche and Drogheda structures is the difference in size between their towers: in both cases one tower – that on the left as one faces each building from the outside – is slightly larger than the other.

A construction date for the Castleroche gate-building of 1235, plus or minus a year, is of interest beyond Irish medieval architectural history. Tom McNeill and Mark Hagger have, from different angles, drawn our attention to links between Roche and Beeston, but the architectural similarities are not especially strong, and are certainly not strong enough to justify McNeill's assertion that the design of the former "must" have been based on the latter (1997, 87). It might be significant that Roche predates by a few years Henry III's building campaign at the Tower of London, one element of which was the designing of a great twin towered gate-building, now lost but understood to have inspired a series of other comparable structures, of which that at Tonbridge in Kent (from the 1250s) is itself believed to have inspired additional copies (Goodall 2011, 191). In both the Castleroche and Tonbridge buildings the towers projecting to the front do not contain separate rooms – they are so much towers, in other words, as boldly curving façade bays – while the first- and second-floor spaces above the passages in both structures provided high-status accommodation. Earlier than Tonbridge and earlier even than Henry's work at London, Castleroche emerges as a very significant pit-stop in the development of twin-towered gate-buildings in these islands. Interestingly (and suggestively), Roesia was known personally to Henry III and it was to him that she reported her success in completing Roche's construction in 1236.



.Fig. 9: Reconstruction of the exterior of the barbican towers of St Laurence's Gate, Drogheda.

The main curtain wall to the north of the gate-building was added briskly afterwards (*Stage 2*), and a common type of crenellation on that curtain and on the gate-building suggests that they were finished at the same time, by the same team of masons. The *Stage 2* curtain wall is distinguished by a sub-battlement row of holes into which wooden hoarding would have been inserted if and when it was needed, blocking (as such hoarding usually did) the arrow-loops in the battlements. The circular tower at the northern apex of the triangular castle plan was built in this phase, and it may have been open-backed originally (**Fig. 10**).

The first major change to the castle's design was, I suggest, the addition of the great hall (**Fig. 11**) to the south of the gate-building (*Stage 3*). This is the point in the castle's history in which the putlog holes appear. Building work may have begun while the main curtain was still being erected, because the lower part of the eastern wall of the hall (see Fig. 6 above) has no putlogs. The original intention may even have been to build another stretch of curtain wall and to provide the castle with a timber hall. Indeed, Roche's hall is unusual in being at first-floor level, and this may be a consequence of a change-of-plan quite early in the castle's constructional history. It is not inconceivable that the square building in the courtyard to the west of the great hall was a kitchen (**Fig. 12**), built in *Stage 3* to service the hall.

Fig. 10: Most of the tower at the north end of Castleroche has collapsed, leaving only its back-wall intact; the phasing is unclear but the use of putlogs in that back-wall suggests it is later than the adjoining curtain wall and tower.

Fig. 11: The interior south wall of Castleroche's hall.

Fig. 12: View into the small square building in the courtyard, suggested here as a kitchen, in part because of its proximity to the lower end of the hall and in part because medieval kitchens are, for whatever reason, commonly square in plan.

Although now an empty shell, the hall itself must have been three-aisled. There is no known source for this scheme in Ireland. It predates the best-known (though no longer extant) three-aisled hall in Ireland, that of Dublin Castle, built under royal instruction in 1243 and modelled on the hall of Canterbury (*Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland*, *1171-1251*, nos 2612, 2793). It also pre-dates the aisled hall built (in emulation of the Dublin hall?) in Trim Castle by Geoffrey de Geneville who inherited Trim through marriage in 1254. The date of the three-aisled hall in Adare Castle is not known but the geographical distance between it and Roche is probably too great for us to suggest any connection anyway.

Finally, the southern curtain was then added, a square tower (of which one putlogged wall remains) was added to the interior of the circular tower at the apex of the enclosure, and the hall was connected to the gate-building by mural passage – the windows of which are visible in Fig. **6** – in order to create a hall-and-chamber block (*Stage 4*). The porch into the north-western corner of the hall may have been built around this time.

Finally, did Roesia de Verdun kill her mason?

Noble women rarely built castles in thirteenth-century Europe, but early widowhood – knights who survived military service did not always survive the tournament field – left many of them in possession of castles, and they protected these possessions with gusto. Roesia's claim to have built Roche can certainly be upheld, thus placing her in the very exclusive club of castle-building women, although her claim may have been made a little prematurely, as 1235-40 is marginally a more reasonable date-range for the castle than 1233-36. Roesia's portrayal in local folklore as a

murderess, whatever its origin or time-depth, may well reflect a deep-rooted social belief – a sexist belief, in today's thinking – than any woman capable of building a castle, an instrument of social violence, was in touch with her masculine side and was capable of violence herself. Given that she might never have set foot in Ireland, it is possible that the source of the legend is the re-telling in Roche itself of the story, recorded by Orderic Vitalis (see Chibnall 1968-80, iv, 290), of the wife of the count of Bayeux having her master mason Lanfred beheaded after he built the tower of Ivry-la-Bataille, lest it be reproduced?

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