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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: Guédelon - Building a French Castle the 13th Century Way

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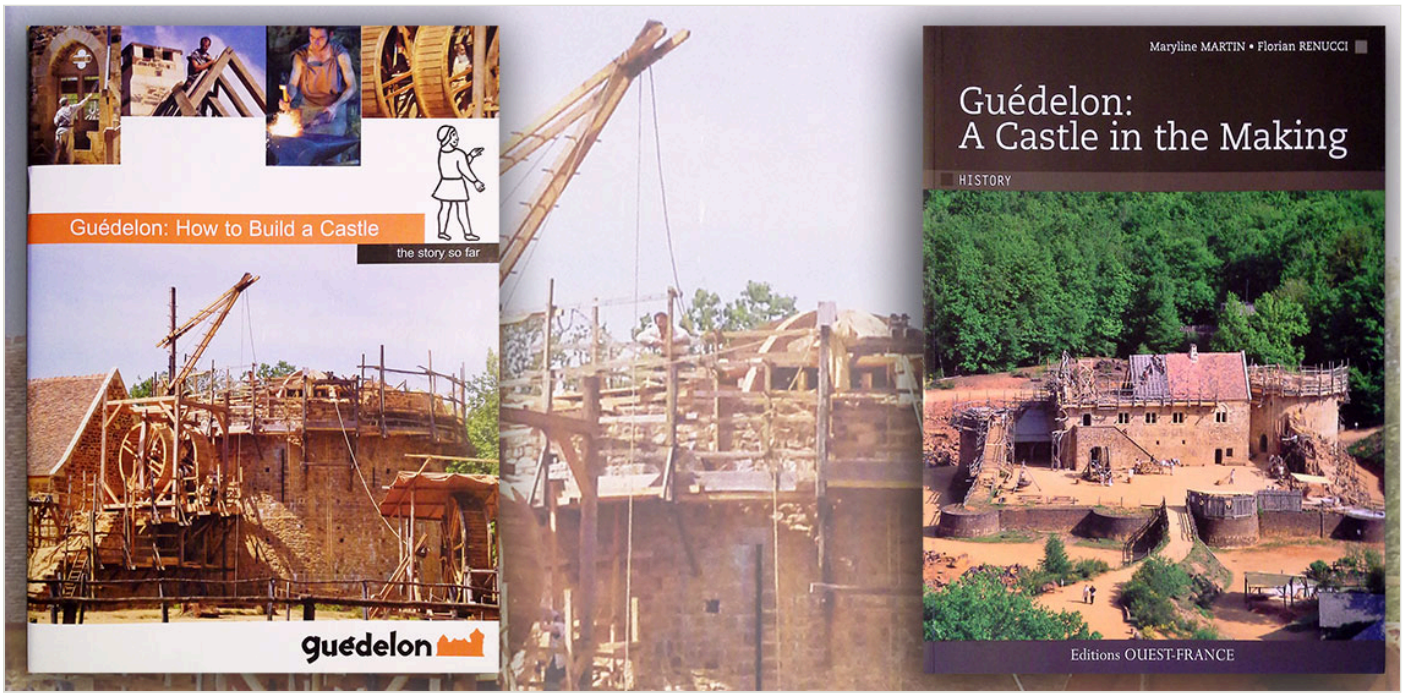

Guédelon: How to Build a Castle by Darques is by no means a DIY book or a guided tour on paper of the Guédelon site.
Guédelon: a Castle in the Making by Martin & Renucci is subtitled The Guédelon Adventure and although it carries a lot of information about the construction site and its sources, this book still reads much like an adventure book.

> Seeing is believing: this project definitely deserves a visit. But if you cannot go to France, check out the website, Youtube, and yes, these books are worth buying.

Guédelon: How to Build a Castle

How to Build a Castle is by no means a DIY book or a guided tour on paper of the Guédelon site. It contains 40 pages with almost 100 illustrations, telling the story of Guédelon in a nutshell. They sure have a few good photographers on the set. Every two pages cover one year, starting with 1997 all the way up to 2012. It describes in a few paragraphs that year's theme or problem to solve and how the crew solved it.

The introduction sets the tone: "...deep in secluded woodland, an abandoned quarry reveals a landscape seemingly untouched for a thousand years. Out of this wood and stone, using 13th-century building techniques, a castle is being created" (Darques 2012, outside cover). It sounds a bit similar to: "The year is 50 BC. Gaul is entirely occupied by the Romans. Well, not entirely..." (Goscinny & Uderzo, Asterix & Obelix series).

Guédelon is a unique chance to lay our hands on some old-fashioned experience. However, this booklet could have benefitted from also mentioning a few failures and how unexpected problems were solved. They must have learned a wealth of details about 13th century construction work that one cannot see in the written sources. Unfortunately, this booklet reads very much like 'the best bits of each year' report. It also does not offer references for further reading, even though Guédelon itself has published several books, such as *Guédelon: a Castle in the Making*, reviewed below.

Guédelon: a Castle in the Making

The book *A Castle in the Making* is subtitled *The Guédelon Adventure* and although it carries a lot of information about the construction site and its sources, this book still reads much like an adventure book. The authors strike the same key as in other books and any official communication from Guédelon's side. All in all, a strong story is presented.

The introduction includes several boasting quotes like: "all architectural heritage springs from a construction site, from a distant "Big Bang", a concentration of energy..." (Martin & Renucci 2011, 9). They sound pretty pompous comparing Guédelon's effect on its visitors with sites like Mont Saint Michel and Carcassonne, but this book needs to sell the project.

The introduction consists of four half-page sections that have no relation with each other. Instead of being pulled into the story, one starts mixed-up. There are too many French names for a non-initiated (which each foreigner is) and therefore the book does not have a smooth start. They should have better used the preface as introduction.

In the first chapter, the general function of a castle is explained. Also we see here the reasons for building Guédelon speficially. The aims were to mirror how it could have been built in the

13th century, to create a tourist attraction and a place for learning crafts.

We then get into a bit of explanation about the French King Philip August (late 12th and early 13th century) and how his reigning style influenced the architectural style of castles in those days. This chapter would have benefitted from a short introduction describing 13th century France and Europe. Obviously that is not the scope of the book, we are talking castles here, but one cannot expect all readers of this English edition to have this background knowledge.

The introduction to the 13th century castle-building boom is then turned in to a section on 'how to build such a castle - today' explaining why the team decided not to simply copy an existing castle, but try to be inspired by several nearby castles, so it would fit into the genre. Explanation is given on how the building of a castle would be organized: a master of works financed, the architect designed and the master-mason built. At present-day Guédelon, the master-mason discusses the upcoming work with his craftspeople on a weekly basis.

As the title of the book suggests, the information on constructing the castle covers 54 pages - the core of the book. This chapter highlights the most important crafts in general, followed by an explanation of how it is done 'the Guédelon way'. This chapter features tools used, mentions how things are organised and what are the main achievements of each of the groups of craftspeople. The craftspeople mentioned are, for example, the stone cutters, mortar makers, wood cutters, carpenters and tillers. It is remarkable however, that all of the workers, from master-mason to blacksmith, from labourer to quarryman remain anonymous.

Seeing the craftspeople at work leaves a big impression on the Guédelon visitors. The strength of Guédelon is 13th century building techniques set in an authentic frame of reference. People do wear glasses and safety shoes and true, and the costumes are somewhat between 'now' and 'then', but the main goal is not to do living history in full glory or experimental archaeology the hard-core scientific way. Nobody imagines they will burn down the castle just for the sake of experimentation, but there are no torch-lit evenings with knights on horses either.

The project is frequently referred to as archaeological experimentation, but so far it is mainly about (re)construction using historical and iconographic sources - hardly a word is mentioned about any archaeology. The project is fascinating in its own right, but experimental archaeology requires the possibility of comparing the results of an experiment to the original source data and there is no evidence presented for that here. One should follow proper scientific procedure for that and a publication about exactly this aspect of Guédelon would be very interesting.

The section with important moments in Guédelon's construction is comparable to the booklet *How to Build a Castle*,although with more background detail about the most important steps.

It remains amazing how the project received and keeps permission to build in an old fashioned tradition within modern French and European Health & Safety rules. It would be interesting to hear more about this. Making the first vaults was one of the most impressive stages of the construction so far.

In the final chapter, a few details of the Guédelon Concept are explained. This chapter is only four pages long, so unveils just a tip of what is behind this all. The site is visited by 300,000 people every year, of which 20% are school children. Guédelon started out as an association but is now a company.

Several other projects in the USA, Austria and Germany refer to the Guédelon concept but have not proven similarly successful yet. Do outsiders really understand the concept of Guédelon, its strengths and weaknesses? To really understand why this concept works, one needs to be part of it.

Book review: Conclusions

There is no page without a picture or two, mostly from the construction work at Guédelon itself, but many paintings, manuscripts and other pictorial sources are reproduced as well. This adds to the credibility of the story. However, there are no in-text literature references (although the images have references to avoid copyright issues). For further reading, the authors recommend 30 publications of which 10 are in English, none of which are dedicated volumes, specifically about Guédelon. That is a real pity for a project with scientific ambitions that is already 15 years old. They could have done well with a reference to their website, which is a great resource of information about the project.

It is very much hoped that the project will not just publish ‘nice’ books such as these two, but will also satisfy science with more academic papers as well as the crafts world with detailed reports of what was learned. They may be organising dedicated seminars and conferences for fellow professionals, but this is hard to find out for a non-French speaking outsider.

Seeing is believing: this project definitely deserves a visit. But if you cannot go to France, check out the website, Youtube, and yes, these books are worth buying. They show the status quo of a famous project and do so in excellent words and images.

Book information:

MARTIN, M., and F. RENUCCI, 2011. Guédelon: a castle in the making, Rennes: Éditions Ouest-France, Édilarge SA, 127 pp.
ISBN 978-2-7373-5359-8. € 18.50

DARQUES, T., 2011, Guédelon: how to build a castle, the story so far, Treigny: SAS Guédelon, 40 pp.

€ 5.00

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