

Castles at the “Steigerwald Mountains” – Between dynasty and territorial rule

by

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1. Geographical Position

The Steigerwald is a German low mountain range in the North of the state of Bavaria which is for 40 years now protected as a natural reserve. The Steigerwald comprises a surface of 1280 km², of which approximately one half is allocated as a landscape protection area. Two thirds of the area is woodland. Geologically, the Steigerwald mountain range consists for the most part out of lime marl, also commonly known as green sandstone. At its Western brim towards the valley of the river Main the Steigerwald shapes a high escarpment, which is already distinctly visible from afar. This escarpment reaches partly a height of more than 200 meters. Towards the East the landscape slowly shelves in direction of the river Regnitz.

Roughly said, the Steigerwald is situated between the four cities of Würzburg, Schweinfurt, Bamberg and Nürnberg. In the North the natural reserve is confined by the river Main, in the East by the river Regnitz. The limit in the South is established by the river Aisch, in the West its limit is again the river Main and in projection a line from Marktbreit over Uffenheim to Bad Windsheim.

The landscape is stamped by deciduous and coniferous forests, by ponds and viticulture. Prominent elevations of the Steigerwald are from North to South the following mountains:

- The Knetzberg, 487 m,
- the Zabelstein, 489 m,
- the Stollberg, 476 m,
- the Friedrichsberg, 473 m,
- the Schwanberg, 474 m,
- the Scheinberg, 499 m (which is the highest elevation of the Steigerwald),
- the Frankenberg, 463 m and

- the Hohenlandsberg, 498 m.

Several rivers are crossing the Steigerwald in Eastern direction. From North to South we have to mention the following rivers:

- The Aurach,
- the Rauhe Ebrach,
- the Mittlere Ebrach,
- the Reiche Ebrach,
- the Kleine Weisach,
- the Steinach and
- the Ehebach.

The four former rivers flow into the river Regnitz, the latter three flow into the Aisch. The courses of the rivers were the inroad gates for the colonisation as the places developed on the riversides from where uprootings were organised in the woodland.

2. Historical Characteristics

Not until the beginning of the 19th century the zone of the Steigerwald was integrated into the new and enlarged state of Bavaria. Previously it shaped a part of the so called “Franconian Imperial Circle”, an administrative unity of the old Holy Roman Empire of German Nation that had been founded in the year 1500 and consisted out of many different territories.

Within Franconia the Steigerwald possesses a central position. Today it is lying distributed within the three Franconian governmental districts that have been created by the Bavarian central government during the 19th century.

Historically seen, Franconia as a whole was a small-scale copy of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation. With its many different lordships like the ecclesiastical states or Prince-bishoprics of Würzburg and Bamberg, the territories of the Nürnberg Burgraves of the House of Zollern, the Free Imperial Cities and the Imperial Knights or Gentry it featured all types of political entities which the Old Empire knew. As territorial rule expressed itself also through castle building, many of these structures as well as their ruins are testifying up to now the multitude of political influences in the Franconian land.

Especially the Steigerwald is a very good example for this development within the large Franconian region since in its zone the important lordships

under secular and spiritual rule were mingling with the minor local noblemen, who just commanded over small territories. Thus, the West and North-East of the Steigerwald were in the hands of the Prince-Bishops of Würzburg respectively Bamberg. In contrast the South-East was dominated by the Zollern dynasty who after the assumption of the Mark Brandenburg and their splitting up into two Franconian lines called themselves “Margraves of Brandenburg-Ansbach” or “Margraves of Brandenburg-Kulmbach-Bayreuth”. Squeezed beneath these lordships, in the centre respectively in the South-West of the Steigerwald were lying areas which were governed by old nobility. This refers to the Lords and Counts (today Princes) of Castell and the Lords (Counts and Princes) of Seinsheim-Schwarzenberg. Moreover, numerous knights appeared in the area of the Steigerwald who operated locally as mounted servants (so called “*Ministri*”) for the princes, and as their tenants took over tasks in administration, court and defence.

3. The Nobility in the Steigerwald

Hence the Steigerwald – like other densely-wooded regions of Franconia – was a country strongly stamped by the gentry. The origin of many of these families as “*Ministri*” is revealed by some components of their family names like “Truchseß”, “Küchenmeister”, “Schenk”, “Kammermeister”, “Marschalk”, or “Forstmeister”, that is “sewer” or “seneschal”, “dapifer” (spit-keeper) or “kitchener”, “butler” or “cup-bearer”, “chamberlain”, “marshall”, and “forester”. Alongside with these there were the barons of elder order, too, the Counts and eventually the Princes. Some of the former little by little succeeded to ascend to the princely rank. Besides in the Late Middle Ages the Patricians of the Imperial Cities emerged also as landed gentry. Even later families of “patented nobility” arose from the propertied middle class and the magistrates. In the Steigerwald for all these cases are existing fitting examples.

According to their rank or their power all these noblemen were either owners of their proper estate or vassals of the territorial lord as their liege. However, it is an exceptional phenomenon that over the centuries most of the Steigerwald Houses witnessed during the Middle Ages died out. Therewith they gave way to the afflux of numerous noble families originating from other areas of the Holy Roman Empire that finally since the 16th century became part of the newly organising “Reichs-Frey unmittelbaren Ritterschaft Landes zu

Franken”, that is “Imperial Free Immediate Knightage of Franconia”. The Steigerwald was the heartland of the six Franconian cantons of the Imperial Knightage (Rhön-Werra, Baunach, Gebirg, Altmühl, Odenwald and Steigerwald).

Noble families out of the other five Franconian cantons but also from others farther away were attracted by the Steigerwald and moved into the region. Beneath those were very well-known Houses like the Bibra, the Heßberg, the Münster, the Hutten, the Schaumberg, the Egloffstein, the Guttenberg, the Pölnitz or the Franckenstein families, just to mention a few of them. The name of the latter dynasty did even inspire the British literature.

Only three original dynasties of the Steigerwald survived the times. In a most impressive way did it the House of Castell possibly existing meanwhile for a millennium in that area. Until 1806 they ruled over a definitely considerably big county which in the olden days divided into the four bailiwicks of Castell, Rüdénhausen, Burghaslach-Breitenlohe and Remlingen. As the County was restrained by the Prince-Bishopric of Würzburg on one side and the territories of the Zollern dynasty with whom the Castell had agreed to matrimonial bonds, on the other side, many difficulties and disputes arose to the Counts of Castell. A certain manoeuvring policy between the two greater powers was therefore very often the necessary consequence for the Castell dynasty.

The second native House of the Steigerwald is the Schwarzenberg family who, as a stirps of the original Seinsheim dynasty, partly took over the inheritance of the Hohenlohe-Brauneck who are another famous Franconian dynasty (For example Queen Elizabeth II is an aunt of the Hohenlohe-Langenburg House). To date, they own the Schwarzenberg Castle at Scheinfeld. Their county extended from Marktbreit as far as the area of Schlüsselfeld and Marktbibart. It was subdivided into the six bailiwicks of Scheinfeld-Unterlaimbach, Marktbreit-Erlach, Seehaus, Wässerndorf with Hüttenheim and Gnötzheim, Geiselwind as well as Michelbach a. d. Lücke (situated in Franconian Württemberg).

The last House originating in the Steigerwald is the stirps of Fuchs (Fox) von Bimbach und Dornheim, a family that is still flourishing. Formerly they sat – mostly as tenants – at Wiesentheid, on Wallburg Castle, on Mount Schwanberg and at Dornheim. Their bailiwick Bimbach reached to a certain extent into the woodland of the Steigerwald. Currently the last Vixen of Bimbach is living at Burgpreppach Hall in the Haßberge Mountains.

Also it might not be forgotten to mention the great and wealthy Cistercian Monastery of Ebrach which possessed in the Steigerwald's midlands and in its Western foreland numerous and rich properties. Despite all unsuccessful efforts to reach the position of an Immediate Abbey of the Empire it nevertheless owned such a massive territory that the abbot of Ebrach easily equalled some other Imperial prelate which made him to an important political factor in Franconia.

4. Castles in the Steigerwald

All these powers – the mighty princes as well as the small landed gentry – protected their lordship in the Middle Ages by the help of castles or solid tower-houses. Thus, it is very comprehensible that we can find in the Steigerwald area a great number of mottes, castles or the ruins of these. However, even in the period of Early Modern History it was still on the agenda to erect specific buildings for administrative or lodging purposes of the lordship – buildings that from now on had no longer to fulfil defence functions. According to this, in the Steigerwald numerous Manor Houses, Mansions, Halls, or whatsoever you may call them – or the ruins of such – might be discovered by the visitors.

A first, for sure still fragmentary survey over the region offers remarkable numbers. If you comb through the Steigerwald localities on former mottes, you will find all in all from the Early to the Late Middle Ages probably about 120 of such former castles or mottes.

At least ten ruins of big castles can be discovered, among those for example the former Würzburg Stollburg Castle above the village Handthal, where local researches meanwhile assume the birth place of the famous minstrel Walther von der Vogelweide, or the ruins of Speckfeld Castle near Markteinersheim where another well-known Franconian family originated. However, just a single fortification is still preserved in its more or less medieval condition, namely Lisberg Castle located between the towns of Eltmann and Bamberg.

Likewise astonishingly high for such a little region is also the rate of preserved Manor Houses. From the 15th and 16th centuries onwards – with a distinct emphasis in the 18th century – more than 74 Manor Houses and Lord's administrative domiciles came into existence in the Steigerwald area.

Among these are to be found that important houses like the Schwarzenberg Castle above Scheinfeld or the administrative see and priory of the Cistercian Monastery Ebrach at Burgwindheim.

Art-historically seen, the most outstanding Manor House of the Steigerwald region is without any doubt Weißenstein Palace at Pommersfelden, which was erected at the beginning of the 18th century for the Mayence Prince Elector Archbishop Lothar Franz von Schönborn by the architect Johannes Dientzenhofer as his summer residence. Of these numerous early modern structures today three are reduced to ruins.

Above all deplorable is the destruction of Wässerndorf Castle, in whose walls large bulks of the Würzburg State Archive’s documents were brought in assumed security during the Second World War. But on the 5th of April 1945 American troops set the castle on fire.

Many castles in the Steigerwald were the immediate property of the great territorial powers of the landscape which tried with their help to protect and strengthen their sphere of domination. In order to preserve their property they often granted their “*Ministri*” such castles as fiefs.

In turn other castles came to existence as the see of the local serving nobility who used them as central functional building of their small lordships. In order to provide their family with more backing within the framework of greater policy such castles were oftentimes subsequently offered to greater lords as a fiefdom. A rather marginal number of castles – mostly owned by the more important dynasties – remained mere family property without displaying a feudal dependence.

A glance at the castles’ period of origin shows clearly that – except some domiciles that reach back to the early medieval time – most constructions were built from the 11th century onward. Most heavily represented are those castles that were erected from the 12th through the 14th centuries. In the investigation area nearly each of these three centuries created about 40 castles; in the 13th even 50 came to existence. During the 15th century the wave of constructing castles definitely died away. Hence a climax of the development may be asserted towards the end of the High Middle Ages and in the first late-medieval century.

5. Selected Examples of Castles and Manor Houses

In the last part of the presentation some selected examples of Steigerwald castles and manor houses were portrayed to the audience like Lisberg Castle, Castell (Herrenberg Castle, Schloßberg Castle, New Mansion), Schwarzenberg Castle, the ruins of Stollburg Castle, Frankenberg (ruins of Hinterfrankenber Castle, Vorderfrankenber Castle) and the ruins of Wässerndorf Castle.

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