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Book Review

Focus on Fortifications: New Research on Fortifications in the Ancient Mediterranean and the Near East (Fokus Fortifikation Studies 2, Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens 18).

Edited by Rune Frederiksen, Silke MÜth, Peter I. Schneider, and Mike Schnelle. Pp. ix + 732. Oxbow Books, Oxford 2016. £70.00. ISBN 978-1-78570-131-3 (cloth).

Reviewed by

[Marshall Joseph Becker](#)

This collection of 57 papers, the second volume from an impressive 2012 conference at the Acropolis Museum in Athens, augments a substantial companion work that focuses on theory and practice (S. MÜth, P.I. Schneider, M. Schnelle, and P.D. De Staebler, eds., *Ancient Fortifications: A Compendium of Theory and Practice*. Fokus Fortifikation Studies 1 [Oxford 2015]). These two volumes boldly place in high profile the archaeological research now concerned with this once ancillary area. Leriche's introductory overview points out that study of massive and ubiquitous city walls, the principal goal here, had long been subordinated to research centered on "inscriptions and masterpieces of art" (11). There have been many significant previous studies of fortifications (e.g., A.W. Lawrence, *Fortified Trade-Posts: The English in West Africa, 1645–1822* [London 1969]; F. Winter, *Greek Fortifications* [London 1971]), but growing attention to these defensive constructions has now reached new heights. Fortifications to defend urban populations and resources are known from as early as the Uruk period of the third millennium B.C.E. This volume represents a major collaborative effort by scholars working with a wide range of approaches that reveal the extent of recent developments in fortification studies.

The general introduction, written by all four editors, provides an excellent summary of each of the 2012 conference's presentations, one of which has been published elsewhere. The seven areas that formed the framework for organizing the papers presented in 2012 are retained in this volume, although some papers have been reassigned to a different area for publication. Discussion of some of the many useful contributions has been omitted from this review because of space limitations.

Leriche's overview, derived from his "evening lecture" at the 2012 conference, summarizes the long history of fortification studies and deftly traces significant developments. The general focus is divided between stone constructions and the substantial mudbrick and rammed-earth walls

used in the Near East. Mudbrick building techniques were “common in the Bronze Age Mediterranean” and in Greece lasted until the end of the fifth century B.C.E. (13). Mudbrick techniques lasted much longer in areas of the world not included here, such as parts of Africa, which is just one of the important regions beyond the geographic focus of this volume (see A.W. Lawrence, *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* [London 1963]; Lawrence [1969]). Leriche poses several questions that remain to be addressed, but he cautions scholars to avoid mistakes in research design and to beware of the dangers of using ancient texts as the foundation for studies. He points out the problems that are engendered by those historians and classicists who use archaeology “only to illustrate history” (15).

The nine papers in the first unit, “Origins of Fortifications,” are preceded by a section-specific introduction. This set of studies assumes that fortification walls are an urban or urban-related phenomenon. Butterlin and Rey’s opening paper suffers from efforts to compress too much information on early Mesopotamian defensive systems into very few pages. Problems of compression also can be found elsewhere in this work, reflecting space constraints in extensive compilations such as this. Rey offers an informative essay centered on the Darwinian “dance” between evolving Mesopotamian fortification systems and the weaponry developed to lay siege to them. Morello extracts information from the ancient literature to examine different types of frontiers, their political constructions, and various types of fortified settlements employed to “build” these frontiers. Alusik examines “defensive architecture” on Crete during the Neolithic and Minoan periods. Cifani discusses the social and political significance of the fortifications of Rome in the sixth century B.C.E., the same period covered by Vergnaud’s summary of the limited evidence for fortifications in central Anatolia. Schnelle’s precise review of the complex Sabaeen examples in Yemen places them as contemporary with those in the two preceding contributions. The diversity among the areas and chronologies covered by these nine papers is evident.

The five papers in “Physical Surroundings and Technique: The Building Experience,” the second section of this volume, point out that, as communal works, fortification walls usually are the largest constructions created by the members of any polity. Bessac surveys the methods used to organize labor and the economics of these huge group efforts. Helms and Meyer examine techniques used to erect a large Early Bronze Age example in northern Syria.

Müth’s impressive introduction to section three, “Functions and Semantics,” elaborates on the volume’s multiauthored general introduction. The 10 papers that follow, however, do not uniformly answer questions relating to functions, aside from defense, or “semantics.” Included is Stevens’ study of symbolism of Roman city walls, plus papers that deal with fortified sanctuaries, palaces, and residences, as well as defensive works associated with secondary settlements in Late Roman Gaul (Jonasch). Von Bülow’s excellent summary of her excavations, “Two Defensive Systems of the Late Roman Imperial Palace of Romuliana-Gamzigrad (Dacia Ripensis),” reflects the superior scholarly control that can be directed toward study of a site measuring only 215 x 175 m and built in a few score years. The six decades of research carried out there and its able presentation contribute to the quality of von Bülow’s study.

“Historical Context,” the fourth section, addresses Leriche’s concerns about scholars who put historical accounts before the archaeological record. Included is Ducrey’s brief commentary on

the fates of victims of sieges and references to various related studies. The reconstructed events and historical records documenting besieged cities reveal only a glimpse of the common horrors of life in the past. Sieges were temporary events while preparations for them were ongoing. Kerschner uses recent excavation data to review the written sources and suggests that early Ephesus was not at the center of the fortified Hellenistic city. Similarly, de Haas and Attema use their study of Norba to question the traditional histories of the Roman colonies in the Pontine region. Parigi focuses on the Athenian defensive walls of the first century B.C.E. and reviews the process by which they “gradually lost their defensive function” following the siege of 48 B.C.E. (384). Parigi sees this sequence as replicated throughout Greece during this era and suggests that walls came to serve more as boundaries between city and suburb (but see Eisenberg’s interpretation in section 6: “Regionally Confirmed Phenomena”). Parigi’s incorporation of cemetery data into his understanding of the history of these walls is very useful. Hof’s review of the rectangular wall of Resafa, only 1.8 km long in total, is joined with related data from other Greek defensive systems of the Late Roman period.

Fachard’s introduction to “The Fortification of Regions,” the fifth section in this volume, is distilled from a chapter offered in volume 1 of this series (Müth et al. [2015]). Much of this summary is devoted to the many variant terms used for “territorial fortifications” (413), and the association of these fortifications with particular types of landscapes. Balandier offers an excellent overview of the evolution and organization of regional defensive strategies in Greece and to the east. Guintrand’s overview examines the fortification system used in classical Laconia. Nakas does not find the more than 100 isolated tower buildings in Molossia in Greece, together with at least as many on the Albanian side of the border, to be parts of a regional defensive system. He suggests that these served as guard posts, as in the Inca state system. Explanations relating to the use of long walls to fortify entire regions, such as Hadrian’s Wall, would contribute to the understanding of both the politics and the evolution of defensive works. One of the many isolated towers of Roman Iberia studied by Moret (460, fig. 3a) looks very much like a Sardinian nuraghe, but he does not consider how Nakas’ examples relate to Sardinian nuraghi or other tower structures in the western Mediterranean. The remarkable differences among the Late Antique urban walls of Narbonne, Carcassonne, and Toulouse in southern Gaul lead Underwood to infer the development of a new, but decentralized, approach to defense. Underwood’s brief mention of pre-Roman Iron Age fortifications (478) is a welcome suggestion of continuity, although he might say discontinuity since circuit walls “had been absent from most of the West throughout much of the early Empire” (477). Višnjić’s survey of what is known about Late Antique defensive works in the eastern Alps offers a glimpse of regional efforts to control traffic or trade in an extremely mountainous region.

As Müth points out in her concise introduction to section 6 (“Regionally Confirmed Phenomena”), “there do not seem to be that many regionally confined phenomena found with fortifications after all” (517). As with almost every research project involving human behavior where the intent is to focus on commonalities, the closer we look the more diversity we find. Thus Schmid et al., in their review of dry stone Gallic walls defending the oppida in southern Drôme, France, actually found that “mixed techniques” were used (519). Regional variations in city wall construction in northern Greece are explored by Ouellet. Özen-Kleine’s efforts to find regional traits in a fortification system on the Halikarnassos Peninsula, like Pedersen and Ruppe’s research in Caria and Ionia, provide useful information but not necessarily identifiers of

local variations. The use of polygonal masonry in the fortifications of Latium (central Italy) is defined by Helas as a regional marker, suggesting to me a cross-cultural use with deep origins. Eisenberg, whose work is based on a deep understanding of the literature, builds on a significant range of studies to demonstrate that some cities of the Decapolis maintained the use of Hellenistic types of defense into the Roman period. He uses excavation data from Hippos to evaluate suggestions made by Philo of Byzantium, and he implies that the ideas of this third-century B.C.E. polymath were used by military planners to build the city fortifications of the Early Roman period (see also E. Dündar and N. Rauh, “The North Bastion on the Tepecik Acropolis at Patara: Dating ‘Early Hellenistic’ Fortification Walls in Southwestern Anatolia,” *Hesperia* 86 [2017] 509–81). Leriche and de Pontbriand summarize data from many fortified Kushan cities in Bactria to reveal how this region, at the eastern edge of the “Near East,” was a worthy target of Alexander’s efforts to subjugate the region.

Frederiksen’s introduction to the final section, “The Fortifications of Athens and New Field Research,” demonstrates the value of offering a series of papers on the most recent findings in fortification research. The papers are all on Greece except for one on northwestern Sicily, in which de Vincenzo studies the city wall and topography of Erice. The Greek studies include Middle Bronze Age fortifications at Argos (Philippa-Touchais), the Archaic-period city wall at Corinth (Kissas and Tasinos), the ancient walls and city of Palaiomanina along the Acheloos River in west central Greece (Lambrinouidakis and Kazolias), the later walls of Athens as they relate to fortifications in Late Antique cities (Baldini and Bazzechi), and a brief note on recent additions to our knowledge of the Athenian “post-Herulian fortification wall,” or those constructions built after the invasion of 267 C.E. (Tsoniotis).

Eisenberg’s research incorporates data from translations of Philo’s *Poliorketika* that have long been available (e.g., in H. Diels and E. Schramm, *Philons Belopoiika* [Berlin 1919]; Y. Garlan, *Recherches de poliorcétique grecque* [Athens 1974]; A.W. Lawrence, *Greek Aims in Fortification* [Oxford 1979]). Comparisons with aspects of Philo’s classic work would enhance many of the contributions to this collection.

Müth (2015), in the first volume from this conference, delineates the goals of the contributors and the reasons for organizing the papers into the specific groupings used in both volumes. While I understand the logic in their approach, the editors may be overthinking the subject in their search for organizational themes. The many facets of this subject reveal a complexity in architecture and armaments that renders the grouping of papers within these seven particular sections problematic. Most of these papers fit well under the heading to which they have been assigned, but not all do. I believe that Lawrence’s (1979) framework for the analysis of fortifications, focusing on Greek forms (cf. Winter [1971]), might have worked better in this case. Lawrence’s framework for describing examples could be applied in general. Papers relating to sites in peripheral areas, such as those regarding Crete, ancient Bactria, and perhaps Sicily and Yemen, might better have been placed together as unique contributions.

Almost all these papers would benefit from the inclusion of a line or two precisely describing where in time and space the subject of the study is located. A map locating each site within the country of excavation, or a single regions map locating all the sites, would be helpful. The more than 500 illustrations, many in color, offer impressive visual documentation and valuable

information important to any archaeological publication. Several papers would have benefited from the inclusion of section drawings as well as plans. Information on specific variations in wall forms used to enclose areas larger than cities or different parts of the same city would place many of these papers into a wider context. The editorial decision to present papers in several languages is efficient, but abstracts in at least two languages would provide better access to the content of each. A glossary and the inclusion of contributor contact addresses would enhance the communications process.

The impressive scope of *Focus on Fortifications*, together with its companion volume, provides archaeologists and scholars in related fields with information regarding much of the recent work on this aspect of ancient cities in their target area. Future volumes in this series could provide a wealth of valuable information with the inclusion of less substantial defensive works such as pales or plant walls. This reasonably priced volume is essential for all those concerned with ancient cities, their evolution, and urbanism in general.

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