Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

ON THE MEANING OF CITY WALLS IN LATE ROMAN SPAIN[1]

Abstract: During three or four decades of the late 3rd and early 4th century, a number of cities across the Empire were refortified in a pattern that cannot be explained in defensive terms alone. Regional and especially local authorities seem to have played a decisive role in the process, and Lusitania is a clear case of non-military initiative. About a dozen sites, a minority that is, did invest in these new structures, which were highly disruptive to daily life, private property, and public resources. These same cities would find a relevance in the post-Roman world, as bishoprics and as military structures, an argument probably absent in their original builders' purpose.

Keywords: *city defences, tetrarchy, annona, walls, Spain*

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1. A REGIONAL CONCERN

One of the more relevant features of Roman city layout is the encircling wall, as it encompasses so many different functions, from a strictly legal framework to the singular concerns of everyday local life. They are important from an archaeological standpoint, first and foremost because of the wall's articulation with private and public spaces, and because it was often maintained and heavily reused during later periods, which does not occur in similar terms with domestic buildings, temples, or open squares. Much has been written about the opposition between Spanish late republican or early imperial walls[2], on the one hand, and their counterparts built during or after the tetrarchy. The former are often referred to as essentially honorific structures, whereas the latter would have been purely defensive. This dualism does not function well in detail, as some of the earlier walls could of course serve as a perfectly defensible enclosure, and the later examples embody a multiplicity of symbolic values, in terms of fiscal power, political authority, and security.

The entire issue is to be understood in regional terms, as some arguments become less solid in different parts of the Roman world. Focusing on Spain, one of the widespread ideas is that of a sudden reaction against external aggression – of course the Germanic movements of the 5th century fit this narrative in various publications, but two points must be made to this regard. First, the Spanish provinces had known previous instability for a long time, not only during the initial conquest and the civil wars leading to the fall of the Republic, but also in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, when north African Mauri used to raid the southern shores of the Iberian Peninsula, seriously disturbing cities in the Guadalquivir valley; during the same period, a group

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[1]   A version of this paper was presented in a session about Lusitania, organized by Cristina Corsi and Victorino Mayoral, at the 2016 Roman Archaeology Conference held at the Sapienza University in Rome.

[2]   HOURCADE 2003, 301; HOURCADE 2004, 247.

of deserters created havoc in the North[3]. Second, between the large walls built under the tetrarchs and the substantive loss of Roman Spain one counts at least four generations, to whom a large Germanic incursion in this area would have seemed extremely unlikely. Hence no major investment would have been made to cope with this specific type of problem.

Another simplification is that of strict exclusivity between frontier and city fortification. That is, emperors such as Trajan and Hadrian[4] would have preferred to invest in the *limites*, a process intensified by much later rulers such as Aurelian[5] or Theodosius[6]. Again, there are several issues here. Apart from Hadrian's and the Antonine wall, or some defensive *clausura*-style border systems[7], the fact is that, from a legal standpoint, a *limes* is not a black line on a map, but rather a region, a sort of district, often comprising cities of considerable size, as was the case in Gaul, not to mention the East. But Diocletian is commonly credited with reinforcing both the forts on the Germanic frontier and the cities of the Empire, so there was probably never a strategic choice between one and the other. This leads to a second problem, that of in-depth versus linear defences, very much widespread among some modern authors, to which a network of fortified cities looks like the result of a well-organized military strategic thought.

The linear equation between city status and wall may be questioned too. The fact that some important cities received no (new) wall when other, smaller centres did invest in such a structure, more often than not means little in terms of privileges received. In spite of some isolated changes in city status still under Caracalla or Heliogabalus[8], basically since Hadrian there was no real advantage left in obtaining a colonial status instead of a municipal one[9], and in later times the substantial difference lays basically between *municipia* and *castra*, as easily inferred from the Theodosian Code. A large number of key cities, including several Augustan colonies, did not even build walls at all during the early Empire, for instance in Gaul[10] and in Italy[11].

Some prudency in linking wall building initiatives to statutory promotions is thus in order, and the Lusitanian walls are furthermore neither linked to Germanic invasions, nor to strictly military aspects at all. During most of the Empire, one legion stationed in modern León had some regional detachments but Spain had not been a combat area since Augustus, hence the extremely low amount of regular troops; for the later periods, the *Notitia Dignitatum* (*Occ.* 17.25-31) illustrates two militarized provinces, namely *Gallaecia* and *Tarraconensis*[12], in a transformed organization based on five legions of *comitatenses* and eleven units of *auxilia palatina*. This picture is in all likelihood post-tetrachic, though, and the very nature of the *Notitia* must be seen as a collection of snapshots from successive moments[13]. In any case, the point

to be made is that the creation of city walls in a province such as Lusitania is hardly related to a military strategy by the tetrarchs, or indeed by any of their predecessors. On the other hand, a vast number of sources indicates internal unrest as a widespread concern in the Western provinces, not merely during the tetrarchy and the often invoked *bagaudae* that would become an endemic problem[14], but actually much sooner as well. Septimius Severus ordered provincial garrisons to capture bandits, and references from the Early Empire make clear that certain groups operated as organized outlaws well within some of the Western territories[15]. I have argued elsewhere[16] that the apparent inexistence of regular troops in Spain during the usurpation of Constantine III, and immediately after, throughout the Germanic incursions of 409, could be linked to the promotion of local militias loyal to the House of Theodosius, and by extension to the inexistence of operational combat units in the region after the major operations of Stilicho between 402 and 405. Some arguments in this direction are: the absence of references of any kind to such units (in sharp contrast to North Africa, Gaul, Britannia, and Italy), the letter of Honorius to the garrison of Pamplona (which includes all the ingredients of a pseudo-comitatensis promotion of a local militia), and especially the fact that official resistance in the name of Honorius, during the first decade of the 5th century, was carried out by landowners and family members of the Imperial family, who recruited a largely ineffective army of their own *servuli*, to face usurpations and invasions[17].

In any case, already in 410, several Hispanic units rebelled against Constans, son of the usurper Constantine III, proclaiming another emperor[18], and during the following years, quite a few imperial armies stationed in Tarraconensis would pressure the western provinces, in an attempt to control or at least influence the actions of Sueves and Vandals (cf. Hydatius, *Chron.* 74-77[19] and Isidore of Seville, *Hist. Wand.* 73[20]). This means a considerable number of combat troops were engaged in Spain, but also that their bases were no longer located in the Northwest. They instead were using the only province that remained in Roman hands, close to the Mediterranean and the strategically important via Augusta, the key road that would be central to Ravenna's last attempt to secure Spain in 460[21]. At the same time, the vast majority of fortified cities did not offer any resistance, which indicates that most of this conflict was probably based on the management of local rivalries, and on the promotion of certain families that might be more liable to either Suevic or Imperial power[22]. Contrariwise, the Visigothic conquests of the later 5th century did face heavy resistance of provincial cities and Roman local forces (see Isidore again: *Hist. Goth.* 34[23], and the *Chronica Gallica* 16[24]).

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[3]   KEAY 1988, 173.
[4]   JOHNSON 1983, 20.
[5]   HAUSCHILD 1993, 229.
[6]   ERRINGTON, 2006, 43-44.
[7]   For Spain, see NOLLA 2007, 644-646.
[8]   ISAAC 1990, 361.
[9]   CANTO 1995, 171.
[10]   GROS 1994, 255-256.
[11]   ELTON 1997, 168.
[12]   NEIRA FALEIRO 2005.
[13]   SEECK 1876, 71-78; BALIL 1970, 613.

[14]   VOGT 1993.
[15]   BIRLEY 1999.
[16]   DE MAN 2010, 353-367.
[17]   BLÁZQUEZ MARTÍNEZ 1989, 211-246.
[18]   A. FERRILL 1986, 118.
[19]   TRANOY 1974.
[20]   RODRÍGUEZ ALONSO 1975.
[21]   GARCÍA MORENO 1996, 16.
[22]   KULIKOWSKI 2004, 200.
23   RODRÍGUEZ ALONSO 1975.
24   GROSSE 1947.

2. REASONS FOR LATE ROMAN CITY WALL BUILDING

Refocusing on the city wall in this context of military transformation, it is important to recall that fully Constantinian-style mobile armies and Germanic operations become a reality only several decades after the Roman wall construction efforts in Lusitania, as was the case elsewhere. On the other hand, whether the units of comitatenses effectively saw these new walls as a more suitable place than any other for their temporary barracks remains to be proven, since not the smallest piece of evidence supports this idea, at least not in the Spanish provinces. Detachments of Republican and early Imperial legions had often used cities when in transit (a burden many city councils tried to avoid, sometimes even through the bribery of military commanders), and in the end this has very little to do with the construction or even the actual condition of urban defences. Furthermore, the non-militarized situation of Lusitania brings to light other types of local security forces, such as the probable *burgarii* mentioned in the province by Zozimus (6.4.4), and what might be called paramilitary or urban police forces that are sometimes brought up (night guard, forum guards, *iuvenes* or regional guard). This is why regional security efforts alone, or even low-density warfare inside the Spanish provinces more than a century after the tetrarchy, do not offer a convenient explanation for what would have been a very costly and long-term endeavour in terms of city development. The very meagre amount of legislation concerning city walls in particular contrasts sharply with other dimensions, which are very much detailed in a variety of legal evidence.

For most of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the increasing importance of the civic annona-based tax system represents a further element for interpreting urban defences. The *Historia Augusta* refers a complete distinction with the old military provision system that bears the same name[25]. This economic system of collection and redistribution in kind was necessarily regional and therefore required major logistic hubs. Fortified cities are the most obvious candidates, especially taking into account that they might have served as a deterrent for trafficking and other illegalities related to the tax collection[26]. The observation that most Lusitanian walls after the Julio-Claudian period are in fact built in medium-sized cities, and that a capital such as Mérida would be refortified only much later, in technically different terms, may support the idea of important *horreum* functions among the former, connected with the progressively obsessive and regionalized *annona* taxation (e.g. *C. Th.* 11.1.21). Individuals called *erogatores annonae*, *dispensatores annonae*, or simply *annonarii* were still active in relatively minor sites, such as *castella* and small cities, under the Visigothic kingdom[27], which indicates a validation of the pre-existing tax system.

It is therefore worth noticing that, although they may have served a vague common purpose, these walls were effectively autarkic initiatives, and that the fragmentary information on their building demonstrates precisely that there was no overlapping strategy involved. The endorsement

was necessarily official, in the sense that any alterations to the boundaries of a city required imperial validation. Yet it seems to have been a local matter, specific funding not being detailed in any law, beside some exceptions regarding unusual situations. Private evergetism was a matter of the past under tetrarchic rule, even prohibited by law (e.g. *C. Th.* 15.1.28 and 31), and perhaps had never been an issue in the particular case of earlier Spanish walls. In any case, funds had to come from a combination of fiscal solutions and extraordinary measures. As stated above, many taxes were paid in goods or services, such as the *munera sordida* or physical obligations[28], which in some cases were illegal and the State insisted on coinage[29]. Copious legal evidence nonetheless shows cities imposing manual labour upon its inhabitants, which was one straightforward way of deploying a workforce[30]. On the other hand, the Severans had already arranged certain taxes to be used for restoring public buildings (*Hist. Aug.* 24.3)[31], and the Theodosian Code does include two very late laws (*C. Th.* 4.13.7 and 15.1.18)[32] on the retaining by municipalities of a third part of public revenue, for their "justified expenses". This retention has been often used to explain a supposed imperial wall building plan, but in fact not the slightest reference to defensive construction is made, and only in other, albeit sporadic cases, such as a letter to a governor in Africa, a different proportion of one-fourth is given, with an effective reference to the restoration of city walls (*C. Th.* 4.13.5)[33].

A correlated issue is the maintenance of a symbolic and ritual perimeter, which has to be considered when dealing with the retraction of a city wall. In reality, the defensive structure and the *pomerium* are to be seen as legally separate but often coinciding. When Tactitus describes the Roman pomerial extension[34], he insists on waterlines and topography, not specifically on the ramparts. Although a general tendency of perimeter retraction is a broadly raised model, several Lusitanian sites maintained their early Imperial walled area well into Late Antiquity, which perhaps is to be partially understood in terms of ostentation. Large regional cities might have enhanced their administrative prominence not by rebuilding but instead through the successive conservation of their old urban limits.

3. THREE SPANISH EXAMPLES (PROVINCE OF LUSITANIA)

In practical terms and with few exceptions, these city walls took advantage of the terrain, in a certain sense returning to pre-Roman criteria with a propensity to value above all a defensive setting, in close connection with contour lines. In fact, the most useful criterion to distinguish the early Roman walls from both their previous and later counterparts might be their positioning, more than their actual construction technology[35]. Each new perimeter was

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[25] VAN BERCHEM 2002, 29.
[26] WATSON 1999, 151.
[27] CONTAMINE 1984, 19.

[28] VOGT 1993, 27.
[29] REES 2004, 39.
[30] DE MAN 2011.
[31] POLLITT 1983, 199.
[32] PHARR 1952.
[33] PHARR 1952.
[34] ANDERSON 2002, 205.
[35] TRILLMICH/HAUSCHILD/BLECH 1993.

conditioned by particular geographical factors[36], and the occasional superposition of walls on existing sections has to do with technical decisions, as at times there is a complete separation between Late Roman and previous circuits. The primary principle for building urban defences can be found in Vitruvius (*De Arch.* 1.4.1, 1.5.2)[37], and then in Vegetius as well (*Epit.* 4.1)[38], and has basically to do with the elevation of a site.

Among the fourteen reasonably well identified cases in the province of Lusitania[39], three may illustrate a clear difference between what could be considered early and later wall construction. Viseu and Conimbriga are relatively small towns with two separate circuits, one partially annulling the previous one, while Mérida is a provincial capital with no major shifts to its rampart during the later Empire, and was refortified already in the later 5th century. Comparing all three leads to some assumptions about geography and status. The possibility of a connection between northern Lusitania and the neighbouring north-western province of Gallaecia (roughly modern Galicia in Spain and the Portuguese territory above the Douro river) had been put forward some time ago[40], for the simple reason that the only semi-circular Late Roman towers in Lusitania are located precisely in Viseu and Idanha-a-Velha (Lat. *Vissaium* and *Egitania*), with a sporadic exception in a section of Lisbon's Roman wall[41], when round towers are basically the norm in the militarized cities of León, Lugo or Astorga, the traditional bases of the VII Gemina legion and its *vexillationes*. But not the slightest trace of a military garrison is present in Viseu, which is why geographic proximity and subsequent emulation are most likely an argument. This does not mean regional groups are perfectly traceable, yet regarding this particular feature direct influence seems acceptable, given the contrast with the rest of the Lusitanian group. Medieval references to a by then already *murus vetus* in Viseu during the 11th and 12th centuries[42] were archaeologically confirmed at two close by locations, namely Largo de Santa Cristina and Rua Formosa, the latter showing twenty meters of a very clear articulation between the early Roman circuit and its subsequent reduction/reconstruction during the late 3rd century[43].

A similar reality becomes well observably at Conimbriga (mod. Condeixa-a-Velha), at some 10km from Aeminium (mod. Coimbra). Independently from the later regional dynamics that determined a transference of bishopric, and in the long run the medieval abandonment of Conimbriga[44], both cities were walled during the tetrarchy – an excellent inscription from Aeminium (CIL II, 5259) even very strongly hints at some sort of intervention by Constantius Chlorus. Excavations at both city walls were carried out during the last decade in the light of a project on late Roman defences[45] but in the modern city of Coimbra a reduction of perimeter can only be supposed as a topographic

exercise. Conimbriga, on the other hand, has undergone fieldwork at multiple locations along the two wall circuits, and it is quite clear, from a stratigraphic perspective, how the original structure was affected by the disarticulation of the amphitheatre and of a number of domestic buildings, in order to build a second rampart in the very late 3rd century, possibly finished in the early 4th, which was wider and higher, but only enclosed about half of the original area. A significant section used the earlier rampart simply as a core, whereas the entire eastern part was built on both semi-demolished urban structures and open spaces.

Viseu and Conimbriga are fairly small towns, with similar paths from *oppida stipendiaria* to *municipia*, whereas Mérida (Emerita Augusta) is not only a *conventus* centre, yet also simultaneously provincial and *diocesis* capital, and above all an old veteran colony, which determined an internal regularity absent in the previous two examples. Its urban features are of a different dimension, quality and symmetry, the primitive Augustan wall serving the city until the end of the Empire. One of the striking elements is the juxtaposition of a second wall, no longer in *opus incertum* but instead made of large reused granite blocks, and occasional architectonical elements randomly inserted into what can only be interpreted as a major reinforcement. The entire structure was enlarged, from a width of some 2,80 metres to one of more than five. A number of authors did successively interpret this as a late Roman investment, yet especially after the excavations at the Morería and the definition of some 200 metres of the wall[46] a Visigothic origin became undeniable. The better preserved section is however found inside the Alcazaba, the early Islamic fort built in the mid-9th century that ended up covering the rampart and protecting it from the vicissitudes of medieval and modern city development. A lost but often quoted inscription dates from 483, and actually mentions the repair of the bridge crossing the Anas, together with the city walls[47]. It further indicates that these public works were executed by bishop Zeno and dux Salla[48], in other words, by a joint effort of a technically post-Imperial municipality and a Visigothic commander (who in fact is also known for having restored the Alcantara bridge, by order of king Ervigius).

Other Lusitanian examples, such as Idanha (Egitania), Faro (Ossonoba), Coria (Caurium), Cáceres (Norba), Évora (Ebora), or Mértola (Myrtilis) are less clear in terms of chronology, as they have been either heavily rebuilt, demolished, or integrated, yet they are still broadly datable from the same period. These are ordinary cities that, having invested in tetrarchic walls with a reduction of perimeter, ultimately were reinvented as bishoprics, a function that had certainly not been a concern to the 3rd century local and provincial administration. On the other hand, there are a few exceptional administrative centres, originally colonies and judicial capitals, and they seem to have kept their original circuits functional, which is perfectly clear in Mérida, and reasonably inferable in Beja (Pax Iulia), while the Roman wall of Santarém (Scallabis) has not been identified at present. In the end, it is very disputable if there ever existed an abstract strategic thought regarding provincial urban defence, in this

36   OWENS 1995, 18.
37   ROWLAND & HOWE 2002.
38   DE MAN 2006.
39   DE MAN 2011.
40   DE MAN 2008, 427-430.
41   SEPÚLVEDA/AMARO 2007, 2.
42   ALARCÃO 1992, 84.
43   CARVALHO/CHENEY 2007, 727- 745.
44   DE MAN 2008, 99-103.
45   DE MAN 2009, 741-748.

46   ALBA CALZADO 1997, 285-316; MATEOS CRUZ 2004, 27-39.
47   WEISS 1997, 29.
48   RICHARDSON 1998, 304.

case with an architectonical outcome.

The extent of imperial orders to renew monuments, many of which patent in the Theodosian Code, contrasts sharply with the rather sporadic and vague references to walls in the same source. Had there really been a true strategic concern towards urban fortification, this contrast would be hard to understand. Keeping this in mind, the simple fact that the walls exist reinforces the theory of local initiatives, framed within the non-specified public works the later laws did favour. Analyses that support a single and widespread strategic solution, put into practice during the late 3rd century, take for granted that the entire Empire reacted in identical terms against one type of external danger. The very idea of an in-depth defensive system[49] that would have failed during the only moment it should have functioned, makes one consider that this sort of interpretation is indeed a modern abstraction, and that the reality of these urban defensive walls is to be looked at in a regional, fiscal context. Geographically close to a truly militarized province, where the late Roman army did fortify its municipal bases, the determinant factor in neighbouring Lusitania would have been an individual choice of each city. There is no apparent reason for Conimbriga and Aeminium to be fortified, and not Tomar (Sellium), Collipo (S. Sebastião do Freixo), Eburobrittium (Óbidos), or a multiplicity of equivalent civitates. Municipalities willing to invest in new walls would benefit from fiscal incentives, and possibly from some sort of minor technical support. The final result would be useful to the city, promoted in terms of practical status and of regional security, and also to the central power, which had sponsored that same promotion (relevant but not necessary in the framework of *annona* collection) with little direct investment. The fact that, one hundred years later, these cities ended up assuming occasional militarized functions, cannot be inverted and used as an argument for their pre-Constantinian construction. Fiscal and, in a wider sense, economic reasons seem more convincing a justification.

4. CONCLUSION

It is important to acknowledge that the militarized northern Spanish provinces developed a fairly precocious programme of urban defence: the late walls of Lugo, Gijón, León, Astorga (prov. Gallaecia) or Veleia and Zaragoza (prov. Tarraconensis) seem all to have been built in the mid- to late 3rd century. Some decades later, a different type of city wall became standard not only in Lusitania, but also in other Hispanic provinces, such as Baetica and Carthaginensis[50], with little apparent connection with the Northeast, and as a local and civilian enterprise. This latter reality can be connected to a decentralization policy and to a regional redistribution system that had more to gain in immediately reinjecting public revenue. Third century tax collection usually came either in the form of heavily depreciated coinage, or of perishable goods and temporary services. In any of these cases, rapid (i.e. local) reinvestment was the rational option.

In administrative terms, Lusitania maintained an imperial rank during most of the 3rd century, but

neighbouring Baetica was a consular province and the same type of selective wall construction can be observed there, which is why there is most likely no connection with the status of its governor. Only in the mid-4th century Lusitania became consular[51], which is significant because it previously had a governor of equestrian category, with no troops under his command, something the legal reforms of Diocletian would not have immediately altered, and which therefore represents an extra argument against military initiative in these walls. Only the early 4th century would witness the practical irrelevance of a governors' rank[52]; by then they would all have been equestian *praesides* anyway. What really did matter was the creation of the Spanish *diocesis* in 297, and by extension of its *vicarius*, who would be the official authorizing the (re)building of city walls.

In short, I see three dimensions of late Roman fortification in Lusitania: first, wide-ranging regional safety issues; then fiscality and the need for controllable annona platforms; finally, the perception of regional authority emanating from these newly walled cities, to inhabitants, neighbours and authorities alike.

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[49] LUTTWAK 1979.
[50] FERNÁNDEZ OCHOA/MORILLO CERDÁN 1992, 319-360.

[51] For argumentation, See ALBERTINI 1923; LE ROUX 2004, 171-178; ARCE 2005, 341-368.
[52] LEPELLEY 1996, 218.

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