

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12415-7 - City Walls: The Urban Enceinte in Global Perspective

Edited by James D. Tracy

Excerpt

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Introduction

JAMES D. TRACY

THIS book deals with the association between cities and perimeter walls, an association that is much older than written memory. The earliest settlements that archeological research commonly recognizes as cities are also the earliest cities known to have been walled. Around 8000 B.C. the population of Jericho jumped to approximately 2,000; some five hundred years later the town was girt by a wide ditch and a massive stone wall that is preserved in places to a height of four meters. At Catal Hüyük in Anatolia, a town that flourished between 6500 and 5650 B.C., the blank outer walls of houses presented an unbroken front towards the outside, obviating the need of additional walls.¹ Beginning around 2900 B.C. the cities of ancient Sumer came to be surrounded by massive brick walls, as at Uruk, where the enceinte was approximately 9.5 kilometers in length, and dotted by 900 or more semi-circular towers. The same appears to have been true for the cities of the Indus valley, of a like antiquity or nearly so. At Harappa the mud brick walls were ten to twenty feet high, and forty feet thick at the base.² In some later civilizations "wall" and "city" were so tightly linked that one term could stand for the other. In classical Chinese a single character (*cheng*) was used for both city and wall.³ In early medieval Europe, Gregory of Tours (d. 594) could not understand why the substantial walled community of Dijon was not considered a *civitas*. As the town secretary of Eisenach put it many centuries later (1399), "What has a wall around it, that we call a city." By the same logic, a fifteenth-century map of the proud city of Pisa shows a complete circuit wall that never in fact existed.⁴ Whether in China

¹ Horst de la Croix, *Military Considerations in City Planning: Fortifications* (New York, 1972), 12–14.

² Song Nai Rhee, "The Sumerian City States," in *The City-State in Five Cultures*, eds. Robert Griffith and Carol G. Thomas (Santa Barbara, 1981), 7–12; G.N. Pant, *Studies in Indian Weapons and Warfare* (New Delhi, 1970), 212–13.

³ See Chapter 15.

⁴ See Chapter 7; Heinz Stoob, "Die Stadtbefestigung. Vergleichende Überlegungen zur bürgerlichen Siedlungs- und Baugeschichte, besonders der frühen Neuzeit," in *Euro-*

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under the Shang dynasty (1511–1100 B.C.) or at Great Zimbabwe in southern Africa or under Egypt's Fatimid caliphs,⁵ rulers imposed on their towns the social discipline needed to sustain gigantic building projects that could take decades, even centuries to complete. In some cases, as in parts of medieval Europe or the Hausa city-states of West Africa,⁶ townfolk could impose the same kind of discipline on themselves.

A phenomenon that is global in scope cries out for comparative discussion. This volume is animated by the belief that comparison can enrich the separate histories that make up the history of the globe. Questions that have seemed fruitful in one part of the world may usefully be asked for others, and themes may take on a new importance when it is seen that they recur in many different regions. We leave to others the kind of comparison that seeks to use local or regional histories as foundation stones for a mega-history. It would be dubious in practice to make generalizations on the basis of a comparative scholarship that has been largely confined to European history,⁷ and it is arguably dubious in principle to assume that historical processes can be analyzed on quasi-Aristotelian premises, by envisioning a clear-cut distinction between local details or "accidents" and a common "substance" underlying all local manifestations of the process.

Of the nineteen essays presented here, eleven are devoted to Europe or to European settlements overseas, four to the Islamic world, two to China, one to sub-Saharan Africa, and one to North America. Our European focus reflects the fact that most of the work on walled cities is done by Europeanists, but it does not reflect the actual distribution of walled cities in the premodern world, when Europe's fortified towns were probably outnumbered by China's "thousands."⁸ We have been selective also in regard to topics, leaving out issues that in themselves are eminently worthy of comparative discussion.⁹ The essays

päische Städte im Zeitalter des Barock, ed. Kersten Krüger (Vienna and Cologne, 1988), 26, citing Johann Rother: "Was muren umb sich hat, da heist eyn burgk ader stat" ("burg" meant the settlement around a castle as well as the castle itself); Wolfgang Braunfels, *Die Mittelalterliche Stadtbaukunst in der Toskana* (Berlin, 1966), 53–4: Pisa, protected by its lagoon, never had more than a partial wall.

⁵ See Chapters 15, 1, and 9.

⁶ See Chapters 3, 11, and 1.

⁷ Cesare de Seta and Jacques Le Goff, eds., *Le città e le mura* (Rome and Bari, 1989); Ivy A. Corfis and Michael Wolfe, eds., *The Medieval City under Siege* (Rochester, NY, 1995).

⁸ See Chapter 15.

⁹ For example, the question of the social impact that building a wall has on the urban community so enclosed. The very word "community" may suggest that having a wall fostered among town dwellers a distinctive feeling of urban solidarity: the 1959 *Cassell's New Latin Dictionary* suggests the Latin *communis* apparently derived from *cum*

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presented here focus on three issues: What are the circumstances under which towns or their rulers choose to undertake the labor of surrounding cities with enceintes? How are particular programs of wall building – the construction of many urban enceintes in the same area over a relatively short period – linked to particular forms of warfare? And what are the symbolic meanings, cultural and political, that town walls acquire once they are built?

The five essays of Part I, “To Wall or Not to Wall,” address the first question. No matter how “natural” it may have seemed for a town to have walls, the sheer labor and expense involved means that wall builders must have had compelling reasons. Most often, it was a matter of defense against anticipated attack. GRAHAM CONNAH’s survey of enclosed settlements in premodern tropical Africa finds that the main lines of development, including those leading to the massive mud walls of Benin and the stone towns of the Swahili coast, are indigenous. Full-blown sieges seem to have been rare, with walls and other enclosures intended more for protection against marauders (Chapter 1). GEORGE MILNER’s survey of palisaded settlements in eastern North America, from about 1000 A.D. to the seventeenth century, shows a clear distinction between the strongly built enclosures of the Mississippian culture zone, with its powerful chiefdoms, and the more lightly built palisades of northern settlements. The evidence points to scattered local warfare in both regions, albeit of a differing intensity (Chapter 2). These two essays show how a common human experience (warfare) leads to a common response (the enclosure of settlements). Some of these fortifications, like Benin’s massive mud walls, were no less demanding in terms of labor and social organiza-

= with, and either *moenia* = fortifications or *munus* = office. Discussion about the civic spirit engendered in walled towns is commonplace among Europeanists, and Graham Connah sees evidence of the same phenomenon in the Hausa cities of West Africa, where “the city or town wall, the surrounding ditch or bank . . . gave the contained community a discrete physical identity and strengthened its sense of solidarity” (Chapter 1). On the other hand, internal walls built to separate one population group from another might also be read from culture to culture as evidence of intramural hostility, whether in the Jewish ghettos of medieval Europe, or the thirty-four “twin cities” created by China’s Manchu dynasty for cohabitation by ethnically distinct populations; Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*, 92. Some urban neighborhoods did not require ethnic differences in order to build barriers against one another: In 1222 Pamplona’s dual rulers, the bishop and the king of Navarre, intervened to stop the further construction of internal walls by the city’s bitterly divided barrios; James F. Powers, “Life on the Cutting Edge: The Besieged Town on the Luso-Hispanic Frontier in the Twelfth Century,” in *The Medieval City under Siege*, 29. In a sense both themes come together in cities like Montpellier (see Chapter 4), where two adjacent walled communities agreed to form a single city and build a “common wall.” These are important questions, but they will receive only passing notice here.

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tion than the stone or brick walls found in other parts of the world, and no easier to penetrate. Turning to Europe, JAMES TRACY asks which towns got walled and which did not. For medieval Germany there is a scholarly literature rich enough to provide answers for such questions. The towns most likely to build walls were those that had a strong merchant community, or served a territorial ruler's need to secure his borders (Chapter 3). KATHRYN REYERSON develops the perspective of burghers for whom the standing wall was more a present nuisance than a response to dimly remembered past dangers. Montpellier's officials turned a blind eye to the violation of laws aimed at preserving the wall's military function; stricter enforcement began only as war loomed on the horizon again (Chapter 4). Finally, RICHARD KAGAN illumines the phenomenon of wall building by considering its absence in seventeenth-century Spanish America. Here the houses of religious orders and the settlements of converted Indians that clustered round the great cities were described as "spiritual walls," warding off the dangers of idolatry more effectively than any material walls might do (Chapter 5).

Part II, "Walls of War," examines the reciprocal relationship between changes in the character of warfare and what may be called programs of wall building, in which many cities in a given region were fortified over a relatively short period. FREDERICK COOPER shows that massive city walls of ashlar masonry, described by Aristotle as "ornamental as well as useful for war," were an invention not of fifth-century Athens, but of Thebes under Epaminondas (d. 362 B.C.). These fortifications were intended not only to withstand new strategies for siege warfare, but also to secure the forward points of Theban hegemony (Chapter 6). BERNARD BACHRACH points to the enduring legacy of late imperial Rome's program of urban wall building. In the barbarian successor states, as under Roman rule, the capture of fortified cities was the principal objective of warfare. Roman siege techniques were still in use in the Carolingian era, as was the Roman practice of militarizing urban populations by having burghers take responsibility for the defense of their walls (Chapter 7). Turning to Islamdom, JONATHAN BLOOM argues for North Africa that "the notion of the unwalled early Islamic city is a myth." By examining three successive Fatimid capitals, of which Cairo (969) is the best known, he shows that Fatimid architects, sometimes thought to have imported the alien idea of urban wall building, actually drew on North African traditions (Chapter 8). CATHERINE ASHER offers a diachronic survey of the walling of cities built on the site of modern Delhi, from the Indra-prashtra of Aryan legend to the Red Fort of Shah Jahan (1639). In most

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cases, the walls seem intended to hold off marauders rather than to sustain a siege; under the Mughals and their predecessors, Delhi was to be defended at the realm's frontiers (Chapter 9). SIMON PEPPER seeks to dismantle the prejudice that any good work in Ottoman military architecture must have been the work of Christian craftsmen. Fortifications built along the main lines of Islamic-Christian conflict in the second half of the fifteenth century do not anticipate Italy's angled bastions, as has sometimes been argued, but they are designed in other ways both to absorb artillery fire and to provide gun platforms (Chapter 10). Against the view which sees urban fortifications of the costly bastioned trace type as imposed in France by an absolutist monarchy on recalcitrant towns, MICHAEL WOLFE argues that French towns were eager to cooperate with the crown, even during the Religious Wars of the sixteenth century; fortifications in the new style were often built and paid for by the burghers themselves, using customary work-site traditions (Chapter 11). Turning to the projection of European military power overseas in this era, MARTIN ELBL shows the Portuguese crown resisting as long as possible the expenses of new-style fortifications for its urban outposts in North Africa. Only after several towns had been lost to the Sa'dian dynasty were the three towns that remained under Portuguese rule refortified in the Italian style (Chapter 12). Finally, GEOFFREY PARKER presents a broader view of the significance of the artillery fortress, as part of a military explanation for the rise of the West. In Asia, even old-style fortifications were sufficient to make European outposts virtually impregnable to assault. Only with the advent of Portugal's European rivals, notably the Dutch, did key sites begin to be fortified *alla moderna*. The successful indigenous powers were those that either copied European fortifications, or, like Japanese architects of the Tokugawa era, came up with artillery-resistant designs of their own (Chapter 13).

Part III, "Signifying Walls," examines what standing walls meant to contemporaries in terms of the city's place in the body politic, and in the larger cosmic order. A city wall is almost of necessity a symbol of sovereign power, because no government of more than nominal authority will permit the massive mobilization of labor and capital that wall building requires to proceed without its approval. At the same time, the well-ordered city is in many cultures the symbol of a larger cosmic order, and perfectly constructed walls can be the token of this earthly perfection that has meaning beyond itself. NANCY STEINHARDT shows that the earliest extant images of Chinese cities, indicating perfectly rectangular outer walls and a separately walled government city within, bear a striking resemblance to modern

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illustrations, and even to conventional Western ideas about Chinese cities. Through the ages in China, every city must have walls, and walls that are known to have been irregular are represented as rectilinear, in keeping with an unchanging ideal (Chapter 14). EDWARD FARMER examines hierarchical relationships among the perfectly modeled cities in printed gazetteers of the Ming period. Cities of higher administrative rank are invariably shown as larger than their subordinates, with larger gates and straighter walls, regardless of whether these conventions conformed to reality (Chapter 15). SHEILA BLAIR shows how the massive Roman walls of the city known in the Islamic era as Diyarbekir were treated as a canvas on which successive rulers registered their claims to authority in ornate relief inscriptions. Of particular interest are inscriptions of the Saljuq era (1085–1093), in which Diyarbekir's ruler used the conventions of language and calligraphy to counter the spiritual claims of the rival Fatimid dynasty in Cairo (Chapter 16). WOLFGANG VAN EMDEN explores images of the city in French verse of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The distinction between a castle and a fortified city is not always clear, but both are represented as girt by impregnable walls reaching to the sky, often crystal white or brilliantly colored; the model for these dream cities is the New Jerusalem (Chapter 17). SIMON PEPPER considers the implications of certain customs of siege warfare in Renaissance Europe: Unsuccessful defenders of fortified places were treated honorably in some cases, hanged in others. The telling point is that sieges were considered a test of sovereignty, so that he who exceeded the conventions of "reasonable defense" was deemed to have given offense to the victorious ruler, and was treated accordingly (Chapter 18). Finally, MARTHA POLLAK examines graphic representations of the sieges of fortified cities in Europe from the early sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. Over this period, artists adopted mapmaking techniques for better depiction to scale, and learned to combine a bird's-eye or ichnographic plan with a curving perspective to display the wider horizon. Regardless of the techniques involved, the siege view was both a work of art and a trophy of war, showing forth the glory of the conquering prince, often portrayed at a central point of the design (Chapter 19).

Perhaps the most striking common theme to emerge from these essays is the association between royal power or sovereignty and the enclosure of towns. In North America it was the towns of the great Mississippian chiefdoms that had stouter palisades, reflecting a more organized and sustained pattern of warfare (Chapter 2). The siege and capture of walled cities was the strategic objective of warfare in the

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barbarian successor kingdoms of Europe, as it had been in the late Roman world, and monarchs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries used artistic representations of successful urban sieges as a way of publishing their glory to all (Chapters 7 and 19). Even in the Islamic world, often thought to be characterized by open cities, the capitals of great rulers like the Fatimid caliphs were walled as a matter of course (Chapter 8), as was each successive capital built by Delhi's sultans (Chapter 9); rulers also used town walls as a canvas for calligraphic proclamations of their titles and their accomplishments (Chapter 16). In Renaissance Europe, a commander who defended his city more doggedly than the conventions of war prescribed was deemed to have offended the majesty of the town's would-be ruler (Chapter 18). By contrast, the notion that Europe's independent-minded burghers built and maintained their own walls, while not without foundation, has to be deemphasized in light of more recent studies of the relations between townfolk, their rulers, and their walls (Chapters 3, 4, and 11).

Another important connection among many of the essays is the way programs of wall building are calibrated to perceived dangers represented by the military technology of possible foes. The ashlar masonry of Epaminondas' wall-building campaign represents a response to the torsion catapult (Chapter 6). Late Roman town walls had to be maintained or rebuilt in the early Middle Ages because the contending parties had mastered the techniques of Roman siege warfare (Chapter 7). Ottoman military architects found their own ways of responding to the new threat posed by siege artillery (Chapter 8). And in Europe's overseas expansion, the imperial powers looked at the kind of opposition they might face before deciding whether to build enceintes in the new Italian fashion, to remain content with older-style curtain walls, or not to wall their cities at all (Chapters 12, 13, and 5). Readers will no doubt find other points of contact among the essays, or (perhaps more interesting) omissions that may call for further efforts in the same direction. This collection is meant not as the last word, but as the beginning of a comparative discussion.

Since many (though not all) of the walled cities discussed in this volume may be seen as related to a single grand tradition tracing back to the ancient Near East, it may be useful by way of an introduction to sketch the military-architectural inheritance that finds echoes in the later Christian and Islamic worlds.

Even before the rise of Sumer, the earliest town walls that have left an archeological trace were fitted out with special features that would be copied or reinvented again and again in later civilizations. Jericho's

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walls – surrounded by a dry moat and overtopped by a tower from which defenders could fire on their assailants – already serve to illustrate the important distinction John Keegan makes between a stronghold and a refuge. Refuges are sanctuaries against periodic raids, strongholds are meant to withstand a sustained siege by a foe capable of supplying his army in the field; hence in Keegan’s definition a stronghold must enclose a supply of water, and must provide its garrison the means to wage an active defense. At Babylon, early in the second millennium B.C., active defense was made easier by battlements atop the wall to shield defenders from the missiles of besiegers; by galleries projecting outward that permitted them to cover the base of the wall; and by towers all along the curtain at bowshot intervals that enabled them to rake attackers with flanking fire.¹⁰

The town walls of the ancient Near East were not only surprisingly “modern” in a military sense, they were often more imposing than anything built subsequently. To my knowledge, no standing wall anywhere in the world can match the sheer opulence of the glazed brick surface of Babylon’s Ishtar Gate, with its bright colors and bas reliefs.¹¹ The city girded by multiple rings of walls, a fantasy suggested to “Utopian” writers of the Renaissance era by Plato’s description of Atlantis, apparently existed in reality some centuries before Plato.¹² A Hittite relief from ca. 1280 B.C. shows defenders fighting from battlements on three walls of a besieged city – two curtain walls and an interior citadel. Around 1100 B.C. the Assyrian conqueror Tilgath Pileser boasted of having laid waste “the three great walls” of the city of Hunusa “built with burnt brick.” According to Herodotus, Ectabana, once the capital of the Medes, had had as many as seven concentric rings of walls, each overtopping the other; an Assyrian relief of the eighth century B.C., showing the Median city of Kishesim, conforms to this description. Farther to the east, in a document of the second or third century B.C. describing Buddha’s birth, the great city of Vaisali is said to have been girt by three walls, each one league distant from the other.¹³

¹⁰ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, 1993), 140–1; De la Croix, *Military Considerations in City Planning*, 15.

¹¹ Dating from the sixth century B.C., the front section of the Ishtar Gate is on view in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum. For the brightly colored walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem as described by medieval authors, see Chapter 17.

¹² See especially Johann Valentin Andreae, *Christianopolis* (1616; rpt. Stuttgart, 1975).

¹³ Sidney Toy, *A History of Fortification from 3000 B.C. to 1700 A.D.* (London, 1955), 9; Victor Davis Hanson, “Genesis of the Infantry, 600–350 B.C.,” in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare. The Triumph of the West*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (Cambridge,

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But no structure of brick and mortar was proof against attack, especially as besiegers developed new ways of striking at the walls. Though the battering ram was known in Egypt as early as 1900 B.C., it was the Assyrians, ambitious conquerors, who put the ram on wheels and protected it from defenders' arrows by surmounting it with a turret to accommodate archers. The mobile siege tower was another Assyrian invention. The catapult, first developed by Sicilian Greeks (399 B.C.), was mainly an anti-personnel weapon for use by defenders as well as besiegers. The one-armed onager, better able to fling heavy stones against a wall, came somewhat later in the fourth century A.D.¹⁴ All the known elements of ancient siegecraft came together in the Greek world: Persian invaders brought sappers to undermine the walls, and the earliest recorded use of the battering ram in Greece was in 440 B.C.

Of necessity, Greek wall builders devised countermeasures. For example, the city of Rhodes (ca. 400 B.C.) pioneered a new principle of construction: Instead of having a brick (or stone) outer and inner wall encasing debris between them, the Rhodians built an outer curtain backed by a continuous arcade of deep arches along the inner side; this technique demanded less building material, provided better support for men and machines on the battlements, and also permitted breaches in the curtain to be repaired more quickly. Other Greek cities laid out curtain walls in zigzag segments to facilitate flanking fire from the towers and battlements. Still others (like their Mycenaean forebears) built gate-approaches at an angle to the main wall, forcing would-be attackers to expose their right sides (not protected by shields) as they pressed forward. Some time during the fourth century B.C., the casemate or tower chamber fitted with slits for projectiles was developed as a means of protecting defenders' catapults from the effects of rain. In the next century Archimedes (b. 287 B.C.) is thought to have invented the cutting of archer-loopholes into the wall during the siege of his native Syracuse. He also anticipated an element of the bastioned trace system by placing projectile weapons, defended by outworks, in front of the main walls to keep the foe at bay.¹⁵

1995), 12; Spiro Kostof, *The City Assembled*, (New York, 1988), 29; Pant, *Studies in Indian Weapons and Warfare*, 219.

¹⁴ Keegan, *History of Warfare*, 150; Quentin Hughes, *Military Architecture* (London, 1974), 9–10.

¹⁵ Pierre Ducrey, *Warfare in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 1985), 168; Toy, *A History of Fortification*, 14–15, 26; De la Croix, *Military Considerations in City Planning*, 22, 30; Hughes, *Military Architecture*, 10, 17, 21.

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The final achievement of Greek wall building came centuries later, in the new eastern capital of the Roman Empire. The land and sea walls of Constantinople, completed during the first half of the fifth century A.D.,¹⁶ have been called “the most formidable development of fortifications systems in the ancient world.” The main, battlemented land wall was of solid stone, nearly five meters thick and eleven meters high. Beyond it lay an outer wall fitted along its entire length (5,700 meters) with chambers for catapults, and beyond that a broad ditch supported on both sides by masonry. With suitable repair and improvement over time, the fabled walls of Constantinople withstood seven sieges between 626 and 941, and survived to inspire a later generation of travelers from the West.¹⁷

The surge of new urban wall building in medieval Europe incorporated some refinements on walls dating from the Roman era, especially after about 1200. The trebuchet, invented between 1180 and 1220, was a siege device that employed torsion and counterweights to achieve several times the throwing power of an ancient onager, but whether it was effective in breaching solid walls is disputed.¹⁸ More likely, changes in the West resulted from what Crusaders saw in the East, especially the mighty double ring of walls that protected Constantinople on the landward side. The principle of concentric fortification was of course more easily applied to castles than to cities. In the Crusader states, the military orders were the first to recognize that a shortage of manpower required unusual attention to fortification. Completed in 1202, Krak des Chevaliers, with a fortified keep and double curtain walls providing three levels from which defenders could fire, stood off twelve attacks by the Saracens before succumbing to a ruse in 1271. Krak and other Crusader fortresses provided the models for England’s Edward I (1237–1302), sometimes considered the greatest castle builder of the Middle Ages, whose chef-d’oeuvre was the line of castles built to consolidate his conquest of Wales, as at Harlech and Conway. With sufficient resources, cities too could be protected in the same way, as at Carcassone, where France’s Louis IX (1227–1270) surrounded a still-standing Roman enceinte with a formidable outer wall. Even if they could not afford a double wall, towns

¹⁶ This project was contemporary with the building of walls at Amida or Diyarbekir: see Chapter 16.

¹⁷ Richard Tomlinson, *From Mycenae to Constantinople. The Evolution of the Ancient City* (London, 1992), 213–22; Jim Bradbury, *The Medieval Siege* (Suffolk, 1992), 7.

¹⁸ See the conflicting views of Philippe Contamine, *La Guerre au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1994), 210, and Michael Toch, “The Medieval German City under Siege,” in *The Medieval City under Siege*, 45.