Introduction

What's in a wall? From 1961 until 1989, an ugly and otherwise unprepossessing ribbon of reinforced concrete was the embodiment of a divided planet; an "Iron Curtain" dividing two halves of a city that had once been whole, making two countries out of one, and two worlds where previously there had been many; a manmade terminator between two hemispheres that soon became known simply as "East" and "West." Another wall remains the only artificial feature ever claimed to be visible from the Moon, an assertion whose utter mythicality only increases its suggestiveness: the "Great Wall of China" is neither a single wall, nor is any of it visible to the unaided human eye from the Moon, yet its legend continues to grow in a technological age inclined more frequently to the systematic evisceration of myth and legend than to their proliferation.[1] In North America, proposals to build a continuous wall between Mexico and the United States to impede the passage of illegal immigrants into the latter have repeatedly driven the Mexican government to the brink of apoplexy.

At the beginning of the third millennium, another wall has come to make world headlines. A squat and utilitarian thing assembled from various prefabricated materials (concrete, chain-link fencing, barbed wire, and so on), this barrier has been erected on the initiative of the Israeli government for the stated purpose of curtailing the movements of militants living and operating within predominantly Palestinian areas of settlement, around and through which its several sections make their unsubtle way. It is a testament to the complex and often brutal dynamics of power relations, a model and a microcosm of the processes whereby racial, ethnic, religious, and national identities are defined, asserted, protected, and ultimately polarized, for nothing makes insiders and outsiders quite like a wall. Building one means choosing sides. It requires picking teams, or rather one team. Everyone not selected is left to compose the opposition, whether they want to play or not. And like many of its predecessors, this new wall has come to symbolize the political and ideological conflicts that literally

[1] Cf. Waldron 1990, 1–10 and *passim*.

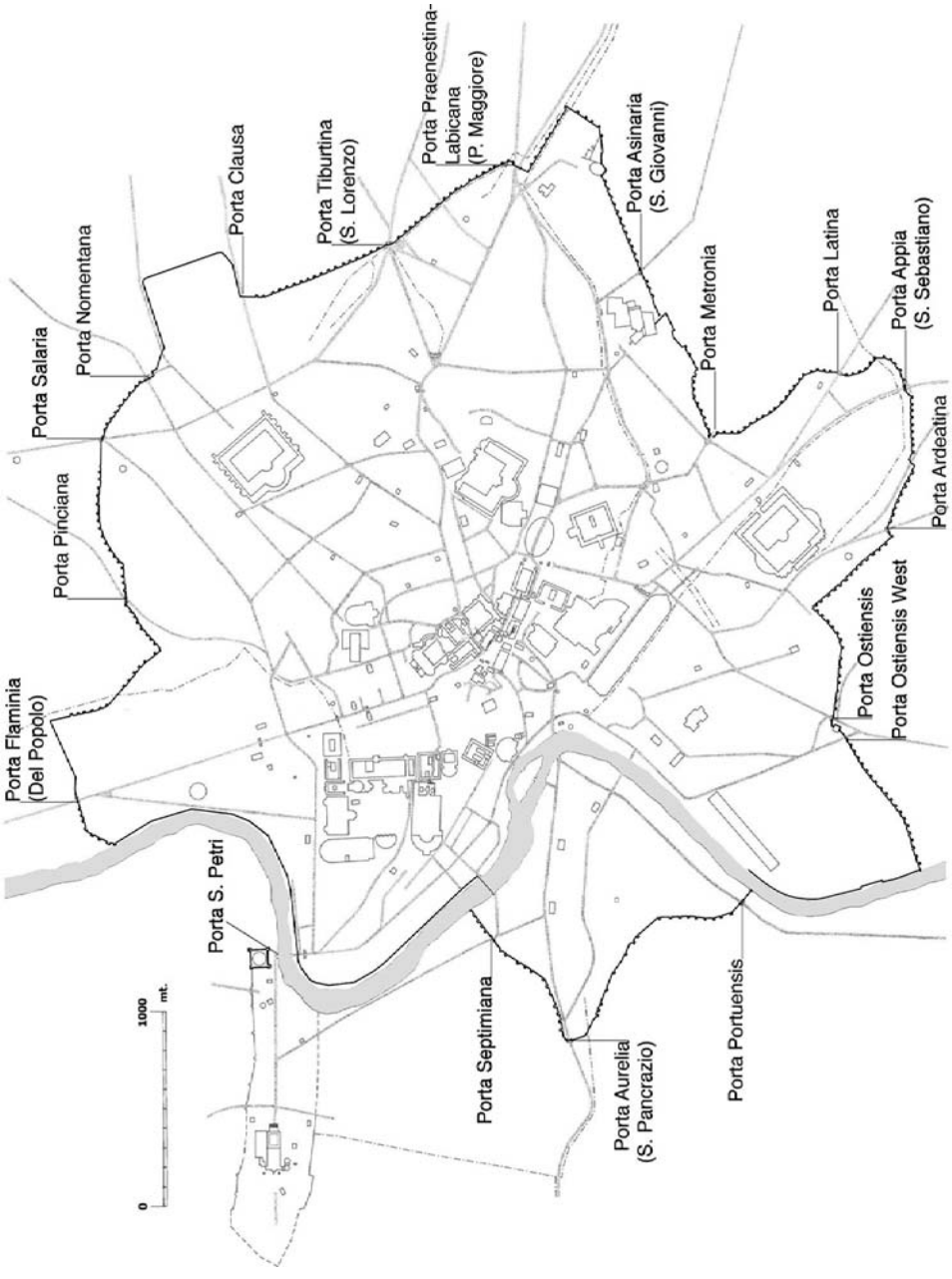

Figure 0.1 The Aurelian Wall and the city. (Adapted from plan by R. Santangeli Valenzani and R. Meneghini.)

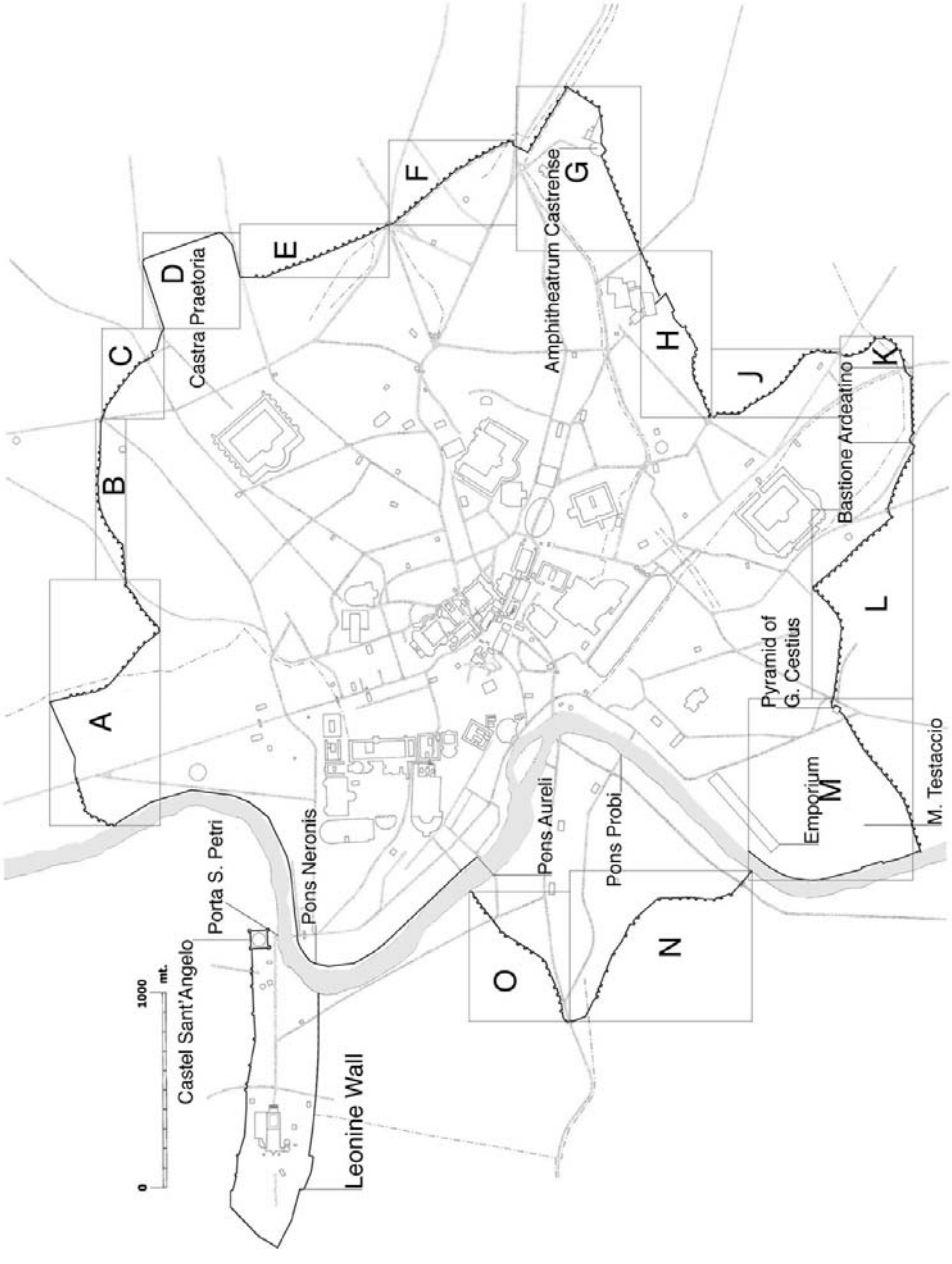

Figure 0.2 The Aurelian Wall, sectors and features. (Adapted from plan by R. Santangeli Valenzani and R. Meneghini.)

surround it, and to embody the pathos and the often profound suffering of the people whose lives it bisects. Hence, its impact routinely transcends its immediate surroundings. As the anxious and often charged debate simmering around the globe demonstrates, its divisive power reaches many thousands of miles beyond its physical confines.

Walls, in other words, tend to "speak" with a degree of power and immediacy which few other buildings can rival. They can be simultaneously eminently pragmatic and symbolically polyvalent, a complex blend of practicality and bluster, an ostentatious demonstration of might, and an acknowledgement of debility. It is hence peculiarly appropriate that the city of Rome came to have, from the age of the emperor Aurelian (AD 270–5), the monumental enceinte which it has largely retained up to the present (Figures 0.1–0.2). Ancient Rome was itself a potent blend of legend and reality, a physical presence and a concept, a place and a culture, as we still implicitly suggest when using "Rome" to recall a Mediterranean-wide empire as readily as its eponymous founding city. It was both a living city and an enduring figment of the popular consciousness of the West, a creation of a collective cultural imagination that continued to evolve and ramify long after the place had changed and contracted, along with its territorial dominions, almost beyond recognition.[2]

Like a high-profile wall, that is, Rome has long been greater than the sum of its parts, which makes it particularly fitting that its own high-profile wall was distilled over the centuries into the essence of the city. Indeed, from the third century into the Middle Ages, no other topographical feature mirrored the fortunes of the city so closely, nor influenced them so immediately, as the Aurelian Wall. At the same time, the vast defensive circuit came to represent the city to all – friends and foes, locals and foreigners alike – who cared to look, and to reify the idea and the ideal of Rome in an age when its aura of invincibility was no longer assured by the exploits of legions spread throughout the Mediterranean world, as the city metamorphosed from imperial powerhouse into Christian capital, from *caput mundi* into *sedes Petri*. At some point, the Aurelian Wall became a symbol of a symbol, in addition to being the bricks and mortar that framed and increasingly shaped the physical reality of Rome for many centuries. How and why this came to be so is one of the central preoccupations of what follows.

[2] Recent additions to a large and venerable body of relevant literature include: Edwards and Woolf 2003, esp. Chapter 1, "Cosmopolis: Rome as World City"; Giardina and Vauchez 2000. Dated but still powerful is Graf 1882–3, esp. vol. 1, 1–43.

Like so many others, it is a question long overdue in the asking for, given the physical prominence of the Wall and the quantity of its extant remains, it has received remarkably little scholarly attention. The modern scholarly tradition on the Wall was born in 1820 with the publication of *Le Mura di Roma*, written by the Italian archaeologist Antonio Nibby and illustrated by the British engraver Sir William Gell. After several chapters on the earlier walls of the city (among which he included the one attributed to Aurelian by the ancient sources), and a chapter of historical background on the extant circuit (which he thought the work of Honorius), Nibby closed his account with a detailed description of the Wall as it looked in his day, describing a clockwise circuit beginning from the vicinity of the Piazza del Popolo. While erroneous in some of its most fundamental premises, Nibby's study was the first to attempt an identification of all construction phases of the Wall, including the post-classical interventions, and the first to plumb the literary and epigraphic tradition in depth.

Though the intervening century was not devoid of important contributions,[3] the next great leap forward came in 1930 with the appearance of Ian Richmond's *The City Wall of Imperial Rome*, an authoritative critical

[3] Several figures may be singled out for mention. The British archaeologist John Henry Parker produced an enormous collection of photographs which includes many views of the Aurelian Wall and its gates, the most valuable among them documenting excavations since covered over, and parts of the Wall sacrificed in the course of Rome's post-unification urban expansion. A number of important examples are included among the plates illustrating the first volume of his *The Archaeology of Rome* (Parker 1874, vol. 1, Part 2). The German topographer Heinrich Jordan included a careful discussion of the Wall's standing remains in the first volume of his great topographical survey, which he prefaced with a brief history of its construction – correctly attributed to Aurelian – and subsequent restorations; see Jordan 1878, 340–92. In many respects, Jordan's work represents the culmination of the scholarly tradition as it stood until Richmond (who indeed felt that Jordan's work "must…form the basis of any critical study of the Wall"; Richmond 1930, 3). The general study of Léon Homo on the reign of Aurelian contains a lengthy section on the Wall that seems to me still useful, though it was never much cited, even when less dated than it appears today (Homo 1904, 214–306). Finally, Rodolfo Lanciani stands out for the volume and quality of his archaeological and topographical observations on the Wall. In addition to his rendering of the Wall in the *Forma Urbis Romae*, which remains the standard more than a century after its appearance, he made notes on sections of the circuit that, in the process of demolition, rather ironically provided unique insights into their structural composition, and published in addition several important articles on the Wall and various subsections thereof. Lanciani's large and scattered corpus of notes, sketches, and archaeological observations on the Wall has been rendered vastly more accessible with the publication of the five volumes of the *Appunti di topografia romana nei codici Lanciani della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (Lanciani 1997); a section devoted to the Wall appears at vol. 4, 31–60. The publication of his prodigious research on the history of archaeological excavations in Rome (from the year 1000 to 1878) has also reached completion, with the appearance of the seventh and final volume of the *Storia degli scavi di Roma* (Lanciani 1989–2002); the bulk of the indications relevant to the Wall appear in accounts of excavations conducted in the mid

study that immediately superseded all previous accounts, and remains the *sine qua non* for continuing study of the "ancient" phases of the Wall. Richmond integrated copious literary, documentary, and artistic sources with the archaeological evidence available at the time, and with the records of his own extensive autopsy of the Wall's extant sections. The result was, as Richmond put it in the subtitle of his book, "an account of its architectural development from Aurelian to Narses." The "account" itself chiefly seeks to identify and date the major building phases of the Wall, and then to associate the various phases with individuals and notable historical events: to summarize, that is, who put what where in the Wall, when they did so, and why.

More recently, there has been a minor surge of interest in the fortifications of Rome in general, and the Aurelian Wall in particular.[4] Starting in the 1980s, Lucos Cozza began producing a series of articles devoted to various segments of the Wall, which he has followed in a clockwise circuit beginning on the right bank of the Tiber in southern Trastevere.[5] At present, approximately half of the standing remains of the Wall have been covered. Cozza has primarily served to update and expand on Richmond, with the benefit of several decades' worth of new archaeological data, as well as a more refined typological framework for the study of late-antique and medieval masonry.[6] In essence, his remains an architectural history concerned principally with the chronology and the physical characteristics of the various parts of the Wall, which unlike Richmond he covers over the full seventeen centuries of its existence.

eighteenth century (vol. 4, 129–140). His historical and architectural observations on the Wall are most cogently outlined in Lanciani 1892, 87–111.

[4] This is not to say that the middle years of the twentieth century were entirely devoid of Wall-related scholarship. Lugli's summary of the Wall is useful, though it rarely improves on Richmond: see Lugli 1930–8, vol. II, 139–261. A. M. Colini deserves special mention, particularly for being the first to (correctly) place the post-Aurelianic heightening of the Wall in the reign of the emperor Honorius, *contra* Richmond, who thought it occurred under Maxentius; see Colini 1944, 107ff.; Richmond 1930, esp. 251ff. Relatively recent books on Rome's fortifications, all (naturally) prominently featuring the Aurelianic circuit, include Cassanelli, Delfini and Fonti 1974; Todd 1978; Quercioli 1993; and Cardilli *et al.* 1995. None of these, however, improve significantly on Richmond's treatment of the ancient phases of the Wall, though all of them, save Todd, do extend their lower chronological limit well past Richmond's sixth-century terminus.

[5] The most recent in the series is Cozza 2008; his previous contributions all appear below, in the bibliography.

[6] Much of the credit for recent advances in knowledge of post-classical masonry belongs to Theodora Heres, whose monograph on late-antique structures at Rome and Ostia (Heres 1982) has since helped to inspire a new generation of studies, e.g. Cecchelli 2001.

Two other current scholars deserve special mention. Robert Coates-Stephens has made a number of important observations over the past decade, among which the identification of the Wall's previously unrecognized early-medieval phases is perhaps the greatest material contribution.[7] Finally, the appearance of Rossana Mancini's historical "atlas" of the Aurelian Wall (in 2001) should mark something of a watershed. An architect by trade, Mancini has produced color-coded diagrams of the entirety of the circuit, indicating to the best of her ability, in light of the current state of knowledge, the absolute chronology of all its visible sections. While by no means the final word on the standing stratigraphy of the Wall, the "atlas" is already a valuable resource in its current form; it should, moreover, provide a literally graphic stepping-off point for further work, if only by indicating how much presently remains to be known.[8]

On the whole, then, past analyses of the Wall have been mostly confined to architectural histories, focused primarily on the physical fabric of the structure and the chronology of its various building (and rebuilding) phases.

Remarkably, nobody has yet been much inclined to consider how the Aurelian Wall fits in with its surroundings, or to see it as an integrated and integral component of a larger whole encompassing all of Rome and its geographical and conceptual hinterlands.[9] Hence, it is my intent to explore Rome's relationship with its Wall (and vice versa) during the centuries between its construction in the 270s and its lengthy "abandonment" following the pontificate of Leo IV (847–55). While such a study will inevitably incorporate analyses of specific points of architecture, topography, and archaeology, the overall scope of the project is considerably broader. The appearance of the Wall had an immediate and lasting impact on the infrastructure of the city and the rhythms of its daily life; and its subsequent history has profound implications for any understanding of the ways in which the image and the reality of Rome were defined, propagated, and redefined, at home and throughout western Christendom and beyond, before, and after the dissolution of the western empire.

On the subject of Rome in its international context, I will further contend that the Wall became a milestone in the long process whereby circuit-walls developed into the defining topographical constituent of the

[7] See Coates-Stephens 2001; 1999; 1998; 1995; Coates-Stephens and Parisi 1999.

[8] Mancini 2001. Also useful are the summary descriptions of the Wall and its gates at *LTUR* 3, 290ff.

[9] A void recently noted by Coates-Stephens (2001, 232).

late-antique city; and that its appearance partially inspired both the construction and the ideological posture of other walls, particularly those around cities with pretensions to political and/or religious pre-eminence. In this sense, the present work takes its place generally within an exponentially proliferating corpus of studies on urbanism in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Since the 1980s, the combination of new archaeological evidence with new historical and interpretive paradigms has revolutionized approaches to the late- and post-Roman city, and substantially modified – without universally overturning – the picture of "Dark Age" urban collapse that previously dominated scholarly and popular perspectives, particularly for the western Mediterranean.[10] Change is often now recognized as a better model than unmitigated catastrophe and disintegration; and one of the most dramatic changes to the cityscapes of late antiquity was unquestionably the new visibility and ubiquity of circuit-walls, features that often represented permanence and continued vitality more than collapse, as they continued to do for centuries.[11]

But although the Aurelian Wall is inevitably linked to wider discussions about walls and urbanism in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, I will repeatedly stress the extent to which Rome is exceptional, an extraordinary place where the effort to build an enceinte of unparalleled size, and then to maintain and even privilege it after the city imploded, is best explained by a range of local factors related to the unique position Rome occupied in the political, cultural, and religious matrix of the Latin West. In topographical terms alone, Rome's exalted status tended to render monumental architecture unusually independent of demographic realities, this in an age broadly characterized by declining urban populations: People disappeared at Rome, too, but important or representative buildings were kept up to fill – or in the case of the Wall to

[10] Noteworthy contributions to the study of urban transformation in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages include: Henning 2007; Saradi 2006; Krause and Witschel 2006; Augenti 2006; Ghilardi, Goddard and Porena (eds.) 2006; Christie 2006; Wickham 2005, 591–692; Kulikowski 2004; La Rocca 2003; Gelichi 2002; Lavan 2001; Speiser 2001; Liebeschuetz 2001; Brogiolo, Christie and Gauthier 2000; Brogiolo and Ward-Perkins 1999; Ward-Perkins 1998; 1997; 1984; Bauer 1996; Lepelley 1996; Loseby 1996; Rich 1992. Late-antique urban transformations are assessed in more detail below in Section 3.3; for the literature directly pertinent to Rome, see esp. Chapter 5.

[11] On circuit-walls and their transformative impact on late-antique cities, see Section 3.3, below. Key studies include Christie 2006, esp. 281–399; 2001; Fernández-Ochoa and Morillo 2005; Bachrach 2000; Pani-Ermini 1993–4; older but still useful syntheses include Foss and Winfield 1986; Hobley and Maloney 1983; Johnson 1983a.

surround – the void they left behind. Beginning in the fifth century, the Wall grew so vastly – and anomalously – out of scale with remaining settlement that its use as a case-study for the influence of walls on the configuration of urban life more generally is frequently problematic. Hence, while I have introduced comparative evidence where possible to help contextualize the Wall and situate it with respect to wider currents in the study of late-antique urbanism, I have mostly concentrated on Rome, leaving it for specialists in other areas to tease out additional implications of the Roman exemplar for the places they know best. For this to be done effectively, however, much ground must first be covered in Rome itself.

As I believe that the Aurelian Wall both shaped and reflected the priorities, perceptions, and activities of those living within it, and of those located (often far) without, I think there remain multiple histories of the Wall to be written, which jointly have much to reveal about the city of Rome during the tumultuous centuries spanning the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. In addition to more traditional architectural studies, there is the history of responses to the Wall, the story of how people more or less actively engaged with both its contemporary reality and its ever-growing legacy in ways that informed thoughts and actions alike. There is also the history of the Wall as agent: as an imposing presence that came to mould its surroundings in increasingly pronounced ways, and as an instrument used to further the political, military, and ideological agendas of the city's ruling elite. The amalgam of these several histories should point the way to a new appreciation of the crucial role the Wall came to play in the evolution of the city around and within it.

It has seemed best to approach these issues within a conceptual scaffolding divided into two principal parts. The first deals with the Wall as what I would call a cultural artifact or "object," a thing acted upon and shaped by human forces. Under this rubric I include first architectural history (who put what where, and when…); then administration and logistics; and finally political history, by which I intend the use of the Wall as an instrument of policy on the part of the leaders of the late-Roman state who brought it into existence. The second part treats the Wall as "subject," a thing with a bodily presence akin to that of a geographical feature, which informed the parameters of the human activity that unfolded around it. Beginning with its impact on urban infrastructure and the evolving mechanisms of trade, communications, and settlement reflected therein, I proceed to its role in the delineation of the

legal, administrative, and (especially) religious frontiers of the urban center, before finally turning back to political history at a later moment, when Rome's newly empowered papal authorities were confronted with the unavoidable fact of the Wall, a legacy of their imperial forebears that could be neither ignored nor fully controlled.

Though the Wall assuredly functioned in diverse ways and meant many different things to different people at different points during its history, if there is a unifying narrative thread running through the centuries of my purview, it is that the Wall increased in prominence, physical and mental, in inverse proportion to Rome's contracting topographical, economic, and imperial horizons. I have concluded my account in the ninth century because it seems to have been only then that the trend was arrested. For nearly three centuries, from the later ninth to the middle of the twelfth, the Wall largely disappeared from both the popular memory of the Romans and the civic agendas of their rulers. The popes, long responsible for its maintenance, either stopped spending money on its restoration, or otherwise ceased to advertise their expenditures, while the Roman people considered it less frequently in their reckoning of local geography and topography.[12] Only following the *renovatio senatus* of the 1140s does the Wall again regularly appear in the calculations of the powerful and the collective consciousness of the rest.[13] Its subsequent history is a worthy subject for another study entirely.

I close with a hedge against an anticipated critique. I view the Aurelian Wall as a leading protagonist on the Roman stage between the third and ninth centuries, an approach perhaps susceptible to objections about putting – forgive me – the Wall before the horse. Biographers everywhere face a temptation to overestimate the importance of their subjects, as have I in attempting what amounts to a biography of the Aurelian Wall.[14] Have I overstated the role of "my" Wall? Perhaps, though naturally I think not. I can say only that the more I learn from the ensemble of

[12] The relative absence of the Wall in the surviving property documents of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and its subsequent resurgence in the twelfth, has been masterfully demonstrated by Étienne Hubert (Hubert 1990, 64ff.)

[13] An inscription of 1157, placed at the rear of the Porta Metronia, commemorates a restoration of the Wall undertaken by the senate of Rome, the first such recorded intervention since the pontificate of Leo IV (847–55; see *LP* 2, 115). On the *renovatio senatus* and the twelfth-century and later restorations of the Wall, see Mancini 2001, 59ff.; cf. Nibby 1820, 278–9.

[14] I use the term biography – in retrospect – to describe what I seem to have done with the Aurelian Wall, though the project in its formative stages was never consciously envisioned as a cultural biography of a "thing"; my results might nonetheless be usefully viewed in light of, or in comparison with, the premises outlined in Kopytoff 1986, esp. 66–8.