

Review article

Fortifications in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East

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SILKE MUTH, PETER SCHNEIDER, MIKE SCHNELLE & PETER DE STAEBLER (ed.). *Ancient fortifications: a compendium of theory and practice* (Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens 18.1). 2016. xv+420 pages, several b&w illustrations, tables. Oxford & Havertown (PA): Oxbow; 978-1-78570-139-9 hardback \$88.

RUNE FREDERIKSEN, SILKE MUTH, PETER SCHNEIDER & MIKE SCHNELLE (ed.). *Focus on fortifications: new research on fortifications in the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East* (Monographs of the Danish Institute at Athens 18.2). 2016. viii+732 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. Oxford & Havertown (PA): Oxbow, 978-1-78570-131-3 hardback \$110.



The two volumes under review are the outcome of the ‘Focus on Fortifications Project’, or ‘FoFo’ as its many participants refer to it here. In their insightful introduction, the edi-

tors explain that this project is best characterised as a scholarly network intended to foster new knowledge of ancient fortifications in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East (Asia Minor, Syria and Jordan). The resulting two volumes, published in the monograph series of the Danish Institute at Athens, encompass theoretical and methodological considerations (Volume 1), and the results of new studies of specific fortifications (Volume 2).

These are diverse and lengthy collections of papers, but they are nonetheless structured clearly around the principal project research themes and objectives. These are: 1) the need for new tools or methodologies for the study of fortifications; 2) the ‘building experience’ or socio-economic context of construction; 3) the defensive and

non-defensive functions of fortifications; 4) the historical contexts of fortifications, drawing on literary, documentary and epigraphic sources; and 5) the role of fortifications within broader regional systems. This final theme is, in my opinion, one of the strongest contributions of the volumes and is an issue that could be profitably explored in other contexts in the Central and Western Mediterranean regions, which—apart from a few contributions on Italy—are otherwise absent here.

The first volume, *Ancient fortifications: a compendium of theory and practice*, documents the project’s principal research themes; all the papers are authored either by project members or by associated researchers. Following the editors’ introduction, 11 chapters provide thorough discussion of methodological issues including typology and terminology, dating techniques (based on excavation, architectural survey, epigraphy and stonecutters’ marks), the socio-cultural and economic aspects of building fortifications (including the organisation of labour, sourcing of materials and methods of transportation), and the non-defensive, symbolic functions of fortifications. It is perhaps these last two issues that are of the broadest significance and capable of making a real impact on wider research on fortifications.

All of the above-mentioned research themes share a crucial requirement—the need to refine chronologies in order to situate fortifications, their construction and ‘biographies’, at specific moments in historical time. Dating has therefore been one of the key aims of the FoFo project, but it is certainly not the only concern of these two volumes. The contributors offer many other critical observations on, and methodological improvements for, the comprehensive study of ancient fortification systems. Aspects of existing approaches come in for critique; archaeological

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survey, for example, provides poor evidence for the date or function of fortifications, and is better suited to characterising the type of settlement enclosed, its functions and its role within wider regional contexts. Likewise, the use of construction styles to establish fortification chronology is now seen by many scholars as old-fashioned. Current opinion holds that building techniques and masonry types are only indirect indicators of chronology, and that differences may reflect a variety of other socio-political or economic factors. The need for excavation, alongside architectural survey, is defended in several chapters in Volume 1. Not least, stratigraphic investigation is required to elucidate the most basic aspect of any fortification—its foundations. The contributors argue for a comprehensive approach starting with systematic documentation, analysis of phasing based on architectural stratigraphy and excavation of the foundations of key features, such as gates, towers and curtain walls.

The second part of Volume 1 is a catalogue that summarises the research of the project's members. It is structured so as to accommodate the diversity of themes and approaches: 'Region' (1 case study), 'Sites' (13), 'Architectural elements' (13) and 'Details of architectural elements' (19). This section will be helpful for integrating future research as it offers a standardised way to present and share diverse datasets from projects with different approaches to fortifications. Some of the sites featured here, such as Sirwah in Yemen, are easily and precisely identifiable on the maps, but others such as Pednelissos in Turkey are less easily located.

As the authors explain, the heterogeneous composition of the research network and their multiple native tongues made the work of standardising vocabulary difficult but not impossible. The results should be understood as a valuable attempt to accommodate national languages and traditions in a monolingual academic world. Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge the significance of English as a common language for the data entries in the catalogues and for the description of individual fortification features. These linguistic issues are reflected across the two volumes, with 41 papers in English, 12 in German and 5 in French.

The second volume, *Focus on fortifications: new research on fortifications in the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East*, presents the proceedings of the project's closing conference, a meeting to which scholars outside of the core FoFo network were

invited to contribute. This volume is structured into seven sections, broadly mapping onto the research topics introduced in the first volume, with the addition of two further themes. The first of the latter (Section 1) concerns the origins of fortifications, chiefly in Mesopotamia and the Near East. Particularly worthy of note are the contributions on Crete and on the historical relevance of the urban walls in Archaic Rome. Although the Central and Western Mediterranean regions are not the main focus of FoFo, these chapters should serve as a starting point for new collaborations between scholars of the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. The second additional theme, addressed in Section 7 at the end of the volume, concerns the fortifications of Athens and other sites in Greece. The inclusion of this theme reflects the venue of the conference, in Greece, and the active involvement of scholars working in the host country. The remaining sections (2–6) map onto the FoFo research themes, with each one introduced with a concise paper by a member of the network synthesising the main issues and points of discussion.

The chapters in Section 2 discuss the physical settings of fortifications and the construction techniques employed, here referred to as the 'building experience'. Section 3 concerns the functions and semantics of fortifications, including refreshing contributions using phenomenological interpretations to explain how past people—citizens or visitors alike—might have reacted to the massive and conspicuous presence of fortifications. Here the religious aspects of some fortifications, such as when used as walls for *temenoi* (temple enclosures), are highlighted as examples of a non-defensive function; there is similar debate about the significance of Hellenistic *prunktore*, or palatial gates.

Section 4 reflects on the historical context of fortifications, drawing on not only visual representations and written sources such as Livy, but also on other innovative methods including GIS-based spatial analysis. This combination of approaches will be beneficial for future studies of, for example, the Samnite fortifications of central Italy, where classic works such as that by Oakley (1995) are attracting renewed interest and opportunities for fresh approaches. The chapters in Section 5 turn to an important but previously understudied topic: regional fortification systems using walls, towers and other features to defend extensive tracts of land. Finally, Section 6 discusses region-specific

phenomena such as massive polygonal walling in Italy, brick architecture in Bactria and the often exposed positioning of hillforts in Gaul, which suggest that defence was not always the primary concern in the selection of site location, at least for that latter area. Both Sections 5 and 6 focus on individual fortifications as well their regional contexts, moving from specific case studies to wider interpretative frameworks.

These two volumes reflect the way in which FoFo has maintained a very clear strategy from the beginning of the project through to the final conference and publications. The network's members have successfully transformed their research themes and

approaches, documented in Volume 1, into a broader discussion to which a wider group of scholars has been able to contribute with their own experiences and results (Volume 2). Together these volumes will serve as a reference point for future research, offering a comprehensive review of the diverse functions of fortifications and providing a model for the study of fortification systems in other parts of the world.

References

- OAKLEY, S.P. 1995. *The hill-forts of the Samnites* (Archaeological Monograph 10). London: British School at Rome.