CHAPTER SIX

FORTIFICATIONS AND SIEGES

The role of fortifications

The endemic warfare between small states which lacked the resources and manpower to control large territories increased the importance of static defences. The defence of the principalities which were established in the Balkans in the late medieval period relied on the possession of heavily fortified cities and fortresses in strategic locations. This system of defence necessitated the repair and maintenance of existing walls and fortresses and favoured the construction of new, heavily fortified citadels and fortifications.¹ Much of the military activity during the later medieval period in the Balkans and Asia Minor revolved around fortifications which were used to observe the enemy, to hold back fugitives, to assemble for raids against enemy territories and to protect the population and soldiers in case of war or enemy raids.

Since warfare in Byzantium was a state issue, the building and repair of fortifications was an imperial prerogative through which the throne displayed its sovereignty.² The ideological importance of the maintaining and building fortifications and walls is reflected in imperial panegyrics. In his first imperial oration Metochites praises Andronikos II for repairing the existing fortifications and building new ones during his stay in Asia Minor between 1290 and 1293. He remarks that the reinforcement of the empire’s defences proves the emperor’s generosity (genaiopsychia).³ Metochites adds that Andronikos II constructed towns (polismata) and fortresses (phouria) close to the frontier and close to each other and points out that the emperor exploited the geographical features of Asia Minor, such as rivers, inaccessible places

³ Metochites, Orations, 198–200.
and mountains. The emperor, as Metochites continues, fortified the Byzantine frontier from the Black Sea to Sangarios and to Bithynia, as well as the Byzantine possessions in Lydia and around the Meander. Relying on Hellenistic literary models Metochites concludes that, due to the emperor’s acts of wisdom and bravery, the Byzantine frontier in Bithynia looks like a very large city. Sangarios is its body and backbone, while the newly built towns between the rivers (Sangarios and Meander) are its towers (pyrgomata). Metochites’ description of the building project of Andronikos II in Asia Minor recalls the advice provided by a sixth-century military manual, the anonymous author of which comments that rivers and inaccessible places are suitable points for the building of forts which should not be located too much out in the open. This coincidence does not prove that Metochites had read the sixth-century text. Nonetheless, it shows the familiarity of the later Byzantines with the basic principles of building and organising static defences and their awareness that the systematic use of natural features provides an advantage for defensive fortifications. Moreover, archaeological evidence indicates that Metochites’ remarks about the activities of Andronikos II are not a fabrication aimed at enhancing the role of the emperor in the defence of Asia Minor. In their survey of Byzantine fortifications, Foss and Winfield have identified sites which date from the Palaiologan period. For instance, they conclude that sections of the fortresses around Nikomedia were rebuilt or repaired by Palaiologan emperors and a number of the fortresses in Bithynia and along the Sangarios have been dated to the reign of Andronikos II’s father, Michael VIII.

Assessing Andronikos III’s reign, Kantakouzenos points out the importance of the former’s rebuilding projects in Thrace and Macedonia. More specifically, Kantakouzenos relates that Andronikos III built the walls of the fortress of Gynaikokastro and added a high tower to the structure in order to reinforce its defence against siege engines. He reinforced the walls of Siderokastron, rebuilt the walls

---

4 Metochites, *Orations*, 364–370. For the influence of Hellenistic authors on Metochites’ description of the frontier see the comments of Polemis, 60–65.
5 Dennis, *Treatises*, 29–33.