CHAPTER 2

The Defence of France

The Enceintes of Late Antiquity

The enceintes of Late Antiquity in Gaul had characteristics well-known to 19th-century scholars, and often described in detail. They were also familiar with the general features of late antique collapse. A few believed that religious structures were placed carefully in the late walls in order to protect them, but most were clear that they were simply intended to protect a civilian population, erected with whatever blocks came conveniently to hand. But were some enceintes just military garrisons? We have no firm information on this matter, save for the inference from the enormous effort (manpower and machinery) required to set in place such defences with foundations of large stone blocks. But if such construction capabilities were in place, they were evidently not employed to erect new civic buildings, let alone new villas out of re-used blocks, for there is no evidence whatever of this. Some earlier villas survived, degrading gently (indeed, as was the whole environment), and some were eventually turned into cemeteries. As for the period of such decline, and shrinkage within new walls, dating tends naturally to be associated with finds from within such walls when they were demolished. Many inscriptions were recovered, and the great majority of these were dated or dateable; however, the Achilles’ heel of such an apparently cut-and-dried result is that the output of inscriptions declines steeply from the 3rdC, questioning if not exactly invalidating the common dating of such enceintes to the 3rdC itself, “proved” by the recovered inscriptions. Another spanner in the works is Halsall’s suggestion

1 Liebeschuetz 1992.
3 Frye 2003, 186: In many ways, Ausonius and Sidonius represented an aristocracy vainly attempting to emulate the perceived lifestyle of the past, while at the same time struggling to deal with a contemporary urban environment that differed both physically and culturally from classical models.
4 Esmonde Cleary 2013, 107: “Further south, into Provence, a similar pattern can be detected with a certain amount of evidence that shrinkage was already under way from the early third century, well before the construction of wall circuits. The best evidence comes from a series of cities in southern Gaul, in particular Aix-en-Provence, Arles, Nîmes and Vienne.”
that such enceintes were small because of a disinclination to spend money on such public building,\(^5\) this, if accepted, throws out any idea of even crudely measurable population shrinkage.

Other structures could also become forts, such as La Turbie, near Monte Carlo. This victory monument (the Tropaeae – hence Turbie – Augusti) to the Roman conquest of local tribes in an area not yet a Mediterranean playground, was fortified in the 16th or 17th century, and by the 20th century the location was almost a suburb of Monaco. Some of its sculptural elements were to be found in surrounding walls in 1800\(^5\) and also in the adjacent fortress,\(^6\) to which the monument was “utilisé comme motte d’un donjon.”\(^7\) By 1866 some pieces apparently decorated the palace of the Governor General at Monaco,\(^8\) although by that date it was classified as a monument historique.\(^9\) In the early 20th century excavation produced some more fragments of sculpture and inscriptions.\(^10\)

If given the known decline of long-distance trade some towns shrank in extent to become fortresses, who and what might they have been protecting in addition to their inhabitants? In other words, how was the countryside of Late Antiquity farmed, and the population fed?\(^6\) If the population declined, where is the evidence, apart from shrunken town walls? Were forts constructed to protect farmers, or perhaps as military way-stations, as they were in North Africa? We simply know that several towns, such as Arles, Nîmes, Béziers, Narbonne and Carcassonne, and then Avignon, Die, and Grenoble, had late antique fortifications. Whereas at other likely sites (Valence, Orange, Vienne) there are no remaining signs of them above ground.\(^7\) At certain sites, such as

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5 Halsall 2007, 84: “The shortness of the walled circuits, adduced to suggest hasty construction and the decline in the cities’ size, needs further consideration. It is perhaps not unlikely that the scale of their construction reflected the general late antique unwillingness to spend money on public building.”

6 Buffat 2010 for the explosion of archaeology in the countryside in the past 25 years, mostly from rescue archaeology.

7 Esmonde Cleary 2013, 134–135: 68–69 for Bavai (Belgium), “with one of the more remarkable wall circuits of the Late Empire.” Forum and antiquities were known to 19th century, including inscriptions which presumably came from the enceinte; 62 for enceintes between Rhine and Loire; Trier and Cologne had their walls extended; 125: “walls in Gaul which could be 5m and more in thickness and more than 10 m in height, requiring a considerably greater volume of material and of labour than the monuments of the High Empire. So the central and northern Gaulish defences fit into the discussion on urban monumentality in the Late Empire, showing that whoever commissioned them, civic authorities, the army or the state acting through either of these, still appreciated the need to present the site in the approved monumental vocabulary.”