CHAPTER TWO

THE PERFECT SIEGE OF ATH 1697

The epitome of Louisquatorzian siegecraft was the 1697 attack on Ath. As with many places in the cockpit of Europe, the town’s sovereignty changed several times over the course of the late seventeenth century. Long under Spanish control, its garrison abruptly abandoned the town upon the approach of a French force in June 1667, one of Louis’ many effortless victories during the unnaturally short War of Devolution. It would remain in French hands until it was returned, with substantial improvements, to the Spaniards at the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1678, along with several fortresses in the pré carré, a double barrier of fortresses defending France’s northern border from the Channel to the Meuse (see Map 2.1 at the end of the chapter). When the Nine Years’ War broke out in 1688, Ath witnessed the usual depredations of partisans and troops billeted in garrison, but it only became the focus of both belligerents in 1697.

Ath itself might never have been besieged in 1697 had the peace negotiations started in 1695 and convened more formally at Rijswijk (Ryswick) the next year taken hold. Waging war while discussing peace was common in an era of fluid coalition warfare, and the rarity of decisive military victories only reinforced both sides’ willingness to keep fighting. When one of Louis XIV’s enemies, Vittorio II Amadeo, Duke of Savoy abandoned his allies for neutrality in late 1696, Louis saw this as an opportunity to push the issue in the Spanish Netherlands the next year. He hoped, with the help of a reinforced army in the Low Countries, to give the Allies one more illustration of his military potency in order to force them to acknowledge his new-found pre-eminence. France’s numerical superiority gave them the hope that the siege of Ath would be the straw to break the proverbial camel’s back. Louis’ forces entered the field in mid-April, and preparations for the siege were made amid recurrent rumors of an impending suspension of arms.¹

¹ French archives relating to the siege are found in Service Historique de l’Armée
Rumors of peace dissipated as a force of 12,000 French cavalry arrived before Ath on the morning of 16 May from three directions—they quickly secured the main roads, river crossings, abbeys and buildings within a several-mile radius of the town. The main siege force left its camp at Helchin the same day, crossed the Scheldt River and camped about six miles from its intended target; two other armies moved to support the flanks of the besieging army. With all the troops assembled in their bivouacs, maréchal de France Nicolas Catinat commanded a besieging force of fifty battalions and as many squadrons, divided into three main camps around the town, with Vauban as the chief engineer. These two men, among the only low-ranking nobles to attain the elevated position of maréchal de France (Catinat in 1693 and Vauban in 1703), were particularly close and well disposed for the cooperation required of a successful siege. Vauban was seconded by his close companion Jean de Mesgrigny and further supported by more than sixty hand-picked engineers.²

² On Mesgrigny, see M. de Pinard, Chronologie historique militaire, (Paris, 1761–1764), vol. 4, pp. 396–398; and Michele Virol, Vauban: De la gloire du roi au service de l’État, (Seyssel, 2003), pp. 287ff. For lists of the engineers serving at the siege, see AG A¹ 1400 #155 and #156.