



Greek City Walls of the Archaic Period, 900–480 BC

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Book Review

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Greek City Walls of the Archaic Period, 900–480 BC

By Rune Frederiksen (Oxford Monographs on Classical Archaeology). Pp. xxx + 238, figs. 114, tables 15, maps 4. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011. \$170. ISBN 978-0-19-957812-2 (cloth).

Reviewed by [117.1](#)

[Claire Balandier](#)

This book, based on a Ph.D. thesis defended at the University of Copenhagen in 2004, is a most welcome addition to the archaeological studies of city walls. Frederiksen tries to fill a gap in the studies on fortifications of the Archaic period, since almost nothing has been published on this topic. However, this elegant volume only partly fills the lacuna.

In fact, the material covered in the book is broader than its title. In the first half of the book, the author not only treats different aspects of fortification and city wall studies from the Iron Age to the Early Hellenistic period, he also devotes parts of the discussion to the relationship between poleis and city walls. The second half of the book is devoted to a catalogue of the fortified sites. After an introductory chapter (1–7) that summarizes the history of research on archaic walls, the second chapter inventories the different types of fortifications and raises the fundamental question of the relationship between polis and fortification. I prefer to use the Greek word “polis” instead of “city,” since the latter’s meaning is not the same in all languages. The English expression “city wall” itself raises a problem, and we should rather speak of “town walls” or “urban fortification” because these walls protected mainly the *astu* or urban center of a polis, or sometimes a secondary built-up area and even *perioikoi* agglomerations.

Although the author refers to Hansen’s studies on the Greek polis, he makes some questionable statements. For example, it is difficult to conclude that “the polis emerges at the same time as these early walls” (e.g., Asine, Eretria, Megara Hyblaea, Old Smyrna) (9). Asking if the building of the first city walls is contemporaneous with the emergence of the polis (the institution) is not the same thing as asking if these first city walls were contemporaneous with the first urban agglomerations. Although recent studies in Sicily (H. Tréziny in M. Gras et al., *Mégara Hyblaea*. Vol. 5, *La ville archaïque: L’espace urbain d’une cité grecque de Sicile orientale* [Rome 2004] 237–301) have shown that some ancient towns were fortified probably already at the time of their foundation, this was not the case in all western Greek cities or in continental Greece, despite very rare examples. Moreover, in the Classical period, not all fortified inhabited areas were poleis: for example, Laconian or Thessalian *perioikoi* towns, which belonged to the polis of Sparta or Pharsale, were fortified but were not poleis themselves.

Chapter 3 (20–40) examines city walls and attestations of actual fortified poleis in the written records and the visual arts and gives a useful inventory of the different meanings of the words *teichos* and *pyrgos*, in addition to verbs and adjectives derived from *teichos*. Although the author acknowledges that Homeric references to walls are difficult to interpret, he believes that occurrences of the term *teichos* in the archaic and classical literature give a reliable picture of the situation in archaic times.

In the fourth chapter (41–9), the author deals with the preservation of city walls and the different methods of destruction (e.g., expansion, reconstruction, natural disaster) that occurred from antiquity to modern times. He suggests that the complete destruction of archaic city walls explains why it is commonly noted that Greek poleis were not protected by walls before classical and Hellenistic times; he believes that archaic fortifications could be found under all later remains of city walls.

The archaeology of city walls is presented in chapter 5 (50–61), which inventories the different types of urban fortifications and their components but says very little about towers and gates or building techniques. This chapter will thus not replace Winter’s *Greek Fortifications* (London 1971) on the subject; nevertheless, the descriptions of several walls from the Classical period complements McNicolls’ *Hellenistic Fortifications from the Aegean to the Euphrates* (Oxford 1997).

The sixth chapter (62–9) discusses the dating of city walls—a crucial problem in studies of fortifications. The author argues

that walls can be dated by external evidence and by masonry style (to support this last claim, illustrations would have been useful). Here we find a serious methodological problem. The author rightly points out that “attempts to correlate developments in masonry styles to absolute dating have failed and that R.L. Scranton’s book [*Greek Walls* (Cambridge 1941)] has been severely criticized” (64). And while comparisons among masonry styles can be useful to either establish relative chronology on one fortification circuit or to propose a date for a wall compared with another one already dated by excavations, it is difficult to concur that Scranton’s “book remains a fundamental tool in the study of ancient Greek city wall architecture” (64). It should be kept in mind that the choice of masonry style is first of all a technical and economical one. Moreover, the style is adapted to the function of the portion of wall: for example, polygonal style is more efficient to sustain the pressure of soil and is more common in a terrace wall than on a two-faced curtain wall, which explains why this style was used from the Archaic period to Roman times. Written sources can help confirm that a wall already existed at the time of a described event but cannot date the wall precisely. Therefore, although the dating of any building can be approached by considering different elements, only stratigraphic excavations can give an absolute and precise date.

Chapter 7 (70–102) contains an interesting synthesis of the data assembled in the catalogue and attempts to answer a number of questions relating to the architecture and topography of city walls before the Classical period. The analysis is divided into four periods: Early Iron Age fortification walls (900–700 B.C.E.), the seventh century, the Middle Archaic period (600–550 B.C.E.), and the Late Archaic period (550–479 B.C.E.). The author concludes that the classical city wall, with most of its elements, was a continuation of developments that had already taken place in the Archaic period (99).

The last chapter presents an interesting discussion of the occurrence and distribution of fortification walls in the Early Iron Age and Archaic periods (103–20). The author tries to determine how common city walls were during the Archaic period and detects a gradual increase in the number of fortified poleis from the seventh to the early fifth centuries B.C.E. He rightly observes that this gradual increase does not necessarily reveal an increasing preference for fortification, but that it is simply a reflection of the growing numbers of poleis during the seventh and sixth centuries. He concludes that “the early walls cannot be used to date back the existence of the *polis* in the Classical sense but they may be used to date back urbanization and the incentives behind it” (119). Chapters 7 and 8 are the most interesting ones; they give a real analysis and synthesis on archaic city walls.

The catalogue, which closes the volume, presents 132 city walls, describing each one’s location, construction, and components, giving a date, sometimes parallels, the sources, and bibliography for this fortification, and often a map of the site with the city walls circuit. This catalogue is comprehensive and useful, but some entries could have benefited from updating. For example, in the case of Apollonia of Illyria (Albania), more recent publications on the site should have been included, as well as an up-to-date map (e.g., *Apollonia d’Illyrie*. Vol. 1, *Atlas archéologique et historique. Etudes réunies par Vangjel Dimo, Philippe Lenhardt et François Quantin* [Rome and Athens 2007] 159–86, fig. 93).

In sum, considering how little has been published regarding archaic city walls, the publication of this book is noteworthy; nevertheless, because the evidence for archaic city walls remains meager even with new excavations, it does not substantially improve our knowledge.

The book’s content is much broader than the title suggests: it gives a general view of the state of city walls and all defensive works in Greece at the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E. and more generally in the Classical period. As is common with the publication of dissertations, the discussion is overly simplified and broad, explaining at times matters already well known to scholars working on fortification or defensive policies of the Greek cities. Despite these shortcomings, this well-written book, with its useful catalogue and a mostly up-to-date bibliography, is a worthy read for any student of fortification studies and the origins of Greek urbanism. Scholars interested in Greek city walls of the Archaic period will find the final two chapters especially interesting.

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period of the geometric city was. transformed into a city-state with a. consolidated consciousness of common. origin language and customs. confidence in man and the rational. approach to the world are perhaps the. most significant achievements of archaic. civilization since this outlook did not. change until the domination of. Christianity. Download Subtitles Download Video Bilingual Subtitles. † Return to Top †. Greek history - Aegean stone sculpture.

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