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The Fortifications of Pompeii and Ancient Italy

Ivo Van der Graaff, *The Fortifications of Pompeii and Ancient Italy*. London; New York: Routledge Ltd., 2019. 352. ISBN 9781472477163 \$120.00.

Review by

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Preview

Under the direction of Queen Caroline Bonaparte (1808-1815), the decision was taken to discover the fortifications of Pompeii in order to define the land to be expropriated for excavation and create a perimeter to deter looters and thieves (p. 14). Today, the walls are some 3.2 km in length and 8 metres in height, with eight gates. This fortified circuit existed over a 600-year period beginning with the construction of the Pappamonte fortifications in the sixth century BCE. A second set of fortifications, characterised by orthostats, is dated to the fifth century BCE. The third set of fortifications, dating to the late fourth and early third centuries BCE, is associated with the Samnite city. Towers were added in the late third to early second century BCE, alongside a widening of the *agger* (internal earth embankment). No full survey of the fortifications has been attempted, but this book provides a means for students and scholars to begin to appreciate a key element of this famous ancient city.

Given the prominence of Pompeii's fortifications and their availability for study, it is surprising that no book has been written on this subject before. Frustratingly, as Ivo Van der Graaff emphasises (p. 9), there is little record of the state of preservation when they were originally excavated, which he tracks in detail in chapter 1. Yet the author has extracted many details from the excavation records, duly setting them down with a full history of the excavations, including, for example, fragments of bronze statuary found at the Porta Ercolano that subsequently disappeared.

There follow two chapters devoted to the chronological development of the fortifications at Pompeii. The original Pappamonte wall-circuit, the remains of which can still be seen in places, could not have been built to more than six courses of stone, according to Van der Graaff, who thinks it would simply have collapsed under its own weight if it exceeded this height (p. 30). The defensive capabilities of such a wall-circuit seem marginal, but as Van der Graaff argues (pp. 27-30), this wall-circuit was set along a defensible line sufficient to meet threats posed by the seasonal warfare typical of the sixth century BCE. The stone was quarried as close to the wall-circuit as possible, and the author argues that we should see the building of the defences in the context of wider urban development, including the building of the temples of Apollo, Mefitis Fisica, and

the Doric temple of Athena (p. 31). The renewal of fortifications using orthostats seems to precede a fifth-century disjuncture at Pompeii; Van der Graaf interprets the development of the so-called *Altstadt*, centred on the later Forum, as a contraction of the city, and reviews the evidence for the fortification of this zone, which he sees as an 'urbanized citadel' comparable to those at Atri, Volterra and Veii.

The initial Pappamonte fortifications were nothing compared to the fourth-century Samnite fortifications, some 9 metres in height and backed by an *agger*. Van der Graff points out the fortifications from this period are the largest public building in the city, and he also notes the care with which the walls were created to present a well-made and aesthetically pleasing structure (p. 44). However, the walls that we see today were subject to hundreds of years of repairs and an upgrade raising them to 11 metres in height, which the author seems to associate with the threat of Hannibal in Italy (p. 56). He relates a further upgrade to the threat of the Cimbri and the Teutones (p. 66). Ultimately, of course, the real threat was from Rome and Sulla's soldiers in the Social War of 91-88 BCE. It may be that with Rome's power increasing within its alliances with Italian cities, the allies felt less secure (especially after the destruction of Fregellae in 125 BCE); or we might see the continued improvements to the circuit in terms of peer-polity interaction. The twelve towers, coated in white plaster, added to the walled circuit are found by the author to be far from standard (pp. 71-78), but are located in most cases at the end of streets. It is suggested that these towers provided the inhabitants of Pompeii with a sense of security, by the simple prominence of the towers both from the inside of the city (at the end of streets) and from the outside for those returning to Pompeii.

These points on the development of the fortifications are followed by a chapter (4) devoted to the creation of 'an image for Samnite Pompeii'. The human power needed to build the walls is a matter for discussion (pp. 83-84). The fortification of Syracuse in c. 400, for which Diodorus Siculus (14.18) suggests 60,000 free peasants and 6,000 yokes of oxen were employed to build a circuit of 5.2 km is discussed prior to moving to an evaluation of the human power required to build the walls of Samnite Pompeii. Van der Graaff begins but does not complete the calculations. He observes that each block, on average, was 45cm x 100cm x 75cm, and provides the basis for a calculation of scale of the project over the 3.2 km circuit at 9m in height – c. 95,000 blocks of stone (c. 32,000 cubic metres). Quarrying, Van der Graaff calculates, would have involved 300 men over a period of 160 days. This does not include any calculation for the dressing of stone or its transportation. The calculation is interesting, but there needs to be some refinement to include transportation and construction. It is unfortunate that Van der Graaff does not follow through from his initial calculation of the number of blocks to estimate their weight, which might have facilitated a scaling of transport costs, perhaps utilising Janet DeLaine's estimates made for the construction of the much later Baths of Caracalla.² No calculation is attempted for the human power needed to construct the *agger* or to dig the ditch beyond the walls of the city. These activities would have caused the building of the fortifications to require much more labor than the estimate of the number of blocks of stone required might suggest initially. One way to place a scale on the figures derived for the amount of labour power is to make a comparison based on quarried stone to the amount of quarried stone used in the paving of Pompeii's streets, as calculated recently by Eric Poehler. To pave the streets of Pompeii over a surface of 243,582 square metres

required c. 85,000 cubic meters of stone was needed,¹ almost double the amount used in the fortifications. We should note that the paving of the streets involved the use of lava, a much denser rock than the tuff used on the walls, with a much higher transport cost.

Chapter 4 then moves on to the use in other buildings of masonry resembling that of the fortifications to create the image of Pompeii established in the second century BCE, when the author sees it as developing ‘the necessary architecture to call itself a city’ (p. 91). This is an interesting concept or question in itself: when do we see nucleated sites with walls shifting from just that to what we would identify as urbanism? The multiplicity of developments at Pompeii: sanctuaries, houses built with ashlar blocks, and first style wall-decoration tend to confirm that Pompeii had become a city. Yet, should we see these developments as specific to Pompeii or as part of a wider redefinition of urbanism in the second century BCE? The problem will be returned to in discussion of chapter 7. Chapter 4 also discusses evidence for patronage or *euergetism*, which is addressed through extant inscriptions and a case is presented for the fortifications being of central importance to the city with, for example, gates funded by the elite. The author even suggests, looking to the *aituns* inscriptions, that Pompeians ‘must have had a rational conceptual understanding of the city and its urban organization’ (p. 105). The phrase ‘must have’ always acts as a warning that speculation is occurring. It is a big shift to go from saying, at the beginning of the chapter, that Pompeii had reached a level to be ‘called a city’ to invoking, by the end, a ‘conceptual understanding of the city and urban organization’. The *aituns* inscriptions would seem to have been an attempt to create order in a city that was subject to considerable change.

The next chapters, 5 and 6, take us into the period of the Roman colony and make clear that the fortifications continued to be an important element in the representation of the city. Developments at the gates are particularly significant and are covered in depth; mostly these are dated to the Augustan period, but include discussion of the Porta Marina in the Sullan period and the Porta Ercolano after the earthquake of 62 CE. The balance between the symbolism of walls and practical defence is maintained here, with threats such as Spartacus and Catiline named, along with Cicero’s contention (in relation to Catiline) that walls create a symbolic division between the civilised and the “other”. Van der Graaff (p. 137) extends things to suggest that *securitas* underpinned *Romanitas* and that ‘The defenses in their strategic and symbolic role would have acted as engines of mutual assimilation’ in the context of the settlement of veterans in Pompeii. The argument needs further development to assert this view, especially because not all cities had walls in the late Republic and early Empire. It is also possible to see the walls of Pompeii as a symbol of the oppression of the local population, with the gates controlling their movement into and out of the city. There is also a lengthy discussion of the representation of defences in mosaics and wall-decoration at pp. 157-69.

Chapter 7 sets out to place Pompeii into the wider context of fortifications in Italy and the Mediterranean. Parallels for Pompeii’s *agger* are sought. The closest is found locally at Nocera (p. 178). The technology is seen by Van der Graaff to have its origin in the Samnite hillforts, later transferred to the context of a free-standing defensive circuit (p.

179). The towers of Nocera and Pompeii also have much in common (p. 180). The chapter shifts back to the earlier theme of ‘patronage and the concept of the city’ as identified from inscriptions (pp. 198-200).

The final chapter, “City Walls and Gods”, is compelling and involves an in-depth analysis of the association. Gods such as Minerva appear at the gates, to conclude from remnants of sculpture that adorned these entry-points to the city, as well as a *sacellum*. There follows a review of the evidence for gods at Pompeii to be associated with gods in other cities in Italy.

The book provides the reader with the evidence for Pompeii’s fortifications and the author is to be commended for undertaking the challenge of making this important feature accessible to advanced students. Reading the book, though, I was left wondering about the conceptual framework of Roman archaeology in the 21st century. When we discuss building inscriptions, we can be sucked into a discussion of patronage and *euergetism*, and on identity, we can be drawn towards “assimilation” or “acculturation” (not to mention “Romanization”). Equally, the very idea of what a “city” constituted is open to question – for Van der Graaff Pompeii becomes one only in the third-to-second centuries BCE. It may be necessary for urban studies of Italy to consider urbanism alongside complexity: building inscriptions could perhaps be better understood as a development of the city’s complexity, rather than explained through a lens of patronage. But there is an admirable amount of work in this book that provides a way into the subject of defences at Pompeii that – after the paved streets – were the city’s largest public monument.

Notes

1. Poehler, E.P. 2017. *The Traffic Systems of Pompeii*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 77-78. BMCR [2018.09.22](#), see my own review of this book [AJA Online](#).

2. DeLaine, J. 1997. *The Baths of Caracalla*, Portsmouth RI: *JRA* Suppl.25. BMCR [1998.11.41](#).