



Book Reviews

UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT FORTIFICATIONS. BETWEEN REGIONALITY AND CONNECTIVITY, EDITED BY ARIANE BALMER, MANUEL FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ & DIRK PAUL MELKE

Oxbow Books, Oxford. 2017. vi + 180pp, 98 B&W figs and plates, 1 table, hb, ISBN 978-1-78570-748-3, £55.00

Armed violence and conflict, whether internal or external, have long been perceived as having played a major role in shaping human social and cultural development, but in recent decades, they have not been a major focus of attention in many branches of prehistory. In the last few years, however, the pendulum has swung back dramatically, with a spate of conference sessions and publications on warfare and its consequences in the ancient world. To these, we may now add the interesting collection of papers edited by Ariane Balmer, Manuel Fernández-Götz and Dirk Paul Melke reviewed here, which takes a wide-ranging look at one of the most obvious manifestations of violence and insecurity in the past, in the form of the fortifications that constitute some of the most impressive monuments left behind by prehistoric societies worldwide. As the editors are quick to point out, fortifications are much more than just a protection against attack, also serving to define communities, to demarcate sacred spaces and boundaries, and as an expression of power and status; indeed until recently, it has been the symbolic roles of walls or earthworks that have tended to command most attention to the detriment of their military function in defending people against aggression, despite the clear archaeological and historical evidence from different parts of the world that they were frequently attacked and destroyed.

The present volume by an international cast of contributors has its origins in a session on concepts of fortifications in pre- and proto-history organised at the 20th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Istanbul. It consists of a short introduction by the editors and thirteen substantive papers, presented at the meeting or added subsequently (although we are not told which these are). In space and time, the papers range widely, from 5th millennium BC Bulgaria (Boyadzhiev) – where Chalcolithic sites defended by palisades or earthen enclosures, or, more rarely, stone walls, are widespread – to the more familiar Gallic *oppida* of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC (Moret), taking in Pharonic Egypt (Vogel), the Bronze Age Aegean (Gauss), Boğazköy-Ḫattuša and other Hittite fortified sites (Melke), and the Assyrian empire (Halama) along the way. The possible linkages between warfare, defence and emergent socio-cultural complexity are explored further in an interesting analysis of the

proliferation of fortified sites in much of the Mediterranean world in the 3rd millennium BC (Lull *et al*) and in the papers that make up the second half of the volume, focusing on the Graeco-Roman world and Iron Age temperate Europe.

Far from it being the norm for Greek *poleis* to be defended, as is generally assumed, the development of Greek fortifications before the Persian invasions was seemingly uneven in both space and time (Hülten). Diversity is also a feature of the defences of major settlements in central Italy, with city walls built of stone becoming common only from the 6th century BC (Nijboer), whilst in Latium, based on the evidence of Gabii in particular, it can be suggested that Iron Age fortifications were primarily built to protect areas that were at least partly in agricultural use (Helas), an interesting potential resonance with the some of the territorially-extensive late Iron Age *oppida* north of the Alps that are the subject of Moret's paper. Sandwiched between these two chapters are discussions of the likely reasons behind the widespread adoption of a novel type of stone-faced wall punctuated by upright earthfast posts, transversally anchored into the rampart structure – known as the *Pfostenschlitzmauer* – in late Hallstatt Europe (Ballmer) and of individual decision-making in the design of defensive systems, exemplified by the well-known mudbrick wall and monumental stone gate of the same period at the Heuneburg (Arnold, Fernández-Götz), and a reconsideration of the origins – perhaps in the Bronze Age – and purpose of the so-called *chevaux-de-frise* (upright stone bands) that surround many Iron Age hillforts along the Atlantic façade of Europe (Berrocal-Rangel).

Overall, this is a collection of papers that offers many new insights into the nature and role of prehistoric fortifications in Europe and beyond. As the editors themselves note, these tend to be studied in a specific cultural context, but a comparative approach may expose unexpected similarities over great distances, whilst allowing better definition of regional traditions, thereby inviting the reader to ponder on possible explanations for both of these – a challenge neatly expressed in the sub-title, 'Between regionality and connectivity.' I certainly wish that I had this book on hand when I was writing about possible inspirations for the 7 km long stone-faced perimeter at Stanwick in North Yorkshire, given the link that Moret draws between some larger continental *oppida*, and the appearance during the 4th century BC in the Greek world of vast fortified circuits known as *Geländemauern* ('landscape walls') at sites such as Ephesus, Messene and Miletus. Far larger than the built-up areas they protected, the aim of the builders was to seek out hill crests, thereby placing walls in dominant positions whilst minimising their height, with the strategic intent of providing a zone of fields and pastures where the rural population and their animals could take refuge in periods of insecurity (p.177). Both principles could apply to Stanwick, but whether this was actually the case or its builders had some knowledge of these other European and Mediterranean sites is a different matter.

The book is generally well-presented and amply illustrated. Occasionally the editors could have asked the contributors to provide some additional scene setting for the non-specialist reader, or to explain certain details, such as what the prominent grey rectangle represents on the plans of Kolonna. If the book has an obvious shortcoming, it is that the introduction shies away from any pretence at agenda-setting with regard to its title, *Understanding Ancient Fortifications*, and has little to offer on the question of how we can hope to tease out their military and symbolic meanings through purely archaeological means – as prehistorians must – indeed we are told on page 2 that the latter ‘are difficult to trace in the archaeological record, but can often be understood by the use of written sources.’ There is no shortage of interesting discussion of these matters in the individual chapters, however, and it is to these that the reader looking for answers must turn.

*Colin Haselgrove,
University of Leicester*

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Editor*