Late Roman Fortifications and their Social Implications
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Introduction

Camille Jullian wrote his great work *Histoire de la Gaule Romaine* (8 volumes, 1908-1921) in an era when Germans were seen as ruthless conquerors to be confronted. He saw Gaul as a proto-France suffering dramatic shocks in 270’s when the Gallic Empire fell and was followed by large-scale Germanic invasions: these stimulated a massive crash programme of defensive building under Emperor Probus. As a great historian how has archaeological work supported or changed his vision?

The lecture will investigate the fortifications themselves and whether they represented a traumatic change in society.
1. Early Roman fortification in Gaul

Gaul: a largely open society

City ramparts: examples Nîmes, Autun, Trier, Reims

Fortresses and forts: examples Xanten and Boulogne

- Their characteristics
- Their military effectiveness “une gigantesque mise-en-scène”

2. Social implications of Early Roman fortification - and its absence

Initially: actively seeking to be seen as Roman by colonies and retired legionaries in southern France. Subsequently: in the ‘Three Gauls’ after violently effective conquest being part of Empire accepted as fact – ramparts became largely unnecessary both in reality and as symbols of status.

The Imperial settlement was a mix of change and continuity becoming ‘Gallo-Roman’

(i) Romanisation and the environment. Roads, standardized pottery, more varied goods, money, brick and stone houses, towns on a Mediterranean model with regular water supply and drainage and a totally new and distinctively decorated set of public buildings and housing both in cities and in the countryside; religious practice transformed

(ii) Tribal states to civitates. Central Roman model town replaces oppida. The Iron Age nobility retain local power and status but adopt Roman lifestyles. They collect taxes for the Empire and live in ‘domus’ and ‘villas’

(iii) Nobles and followers become a benevolent elite and their dependents. Peasants and clients gave up their surplus production in return for public facilities and spectacles

(iv) Religious integration. Gallic and Roman features in gods worshipped; the design + building material of sanctuaries (eg fana); and how religion was experienced: the elite played a key role. It was a cement holding society together. Tintignac > Neuvy-en-Sullias (Orleans)

3. Late Roman fortification

Characteristics: numbers of fortified towns (see map above); length/area (urban) on average quarter covered; construction methods modified for greater strength; towers made more effective; gates more practical; funding and contractors.

Dating fortifications: Not panic, far too well built, a few are late (Tours 370s and Orleans 360s), but the rest have been dated to a thirty year period 280s-early 300s.

Their military effectiveness
City ramparts: selected from the many known - Bavay, Sens and Le Mans (the most impressive).

Forts: Jublains. Rare example. Coastal defence, St Malo (Anet) + Le Yaudet

4. Social implications of Late Roman ramparts

(1) What happened to towns in Late Roman northern Gaul?

- **Fate of Early Empire urban structures**
  - Clearance for foundations and field of fire, destruction of numerous buildings
  - Conversion of public buildings for defence forums, theatres and amphitheatres into parts of defences [eg Lillebonne, Tours and Amiens]
  - Major public buildings left outside [eg Senlis amphitheatre], even whole towns [Augst, Joublains, Vannes]
  - Widespread use of ‘remploi’ (baths, milestones, temples, fountains, even funerary monuments, etc)

- **Urban life much reduced**
  - Defended areas much smaller, reduced to a core. Typically contraction outside: limited and mainly poor occupation incl cemeteries. But exceptions: Rennes; Tours; Orleans
  - Undefended towns largely decline: Valanges, Vieux, Carhaix with occasional surprising survivals, but rarity of new buildings

- **What took place inside these severely curtained urban spaces?**
  
  Limitations of archaeology. Imperial/local officials for tax collection? Warehouses for annona? Housing for soldiers (eg Arras)? Residences for elite (Yvan Maligorne, 2006)? Rare new construction outside ramparts eg Rennes and western zone of Tours. Episcopal centres? The thin evidence for Christianity

*To understand the change that had taken place we have to look beyond the truncated cities. The ramparts were the culmination of earlier trends*

(2) What was happening to the Gallo-Roman settlement outside the towns?

- **Villas**. Problems of definition + research. Mané Vechen (Plouhinec); Plestin-les-Bains; Villa abandonment widespread. A comparison of numbers in 3rd and 4th century indicates a decline of 70%. In Normandy modern excavations confirm this picture. [Not like SW France or Britain]

- **Small towns**. ‘Agglomérations’. Problems of definition + research. Market distribution/industry/sanctuary centre (conciliabulum) Vieux-la-Romaine third century contraction; Genainville, partial destruction (3rd); abandoned 4th. Amboise little evidence activity in 3rd let alone 4th century. Douarnenez abandoned 270s/80s (decline salted fish and garum)
(3) **What was happening at the Sanctuaries?**

100s across Gaul, from vast suburban temple complexes to tiny *fana* in a small enclosure. Large numbers go out of use along with their theatres/amphitheatres and baths - lack of repair, fire and collapse. The overall picture could be modified, but not by much.

Examples: Sceaux-du-Gâtinais 240s delapidation >; Pithiviers 8 temples abandoned by beginning 4\(^{th}\) century; Aubigné-Racan the same; Gennes amphitheatre deserted by end 3\(^{rd}\); Vieil Evreux baths out of use late 4\(^{th}\) (L. R. castellum used buildings on this vaste site); Allonnes marked decline 330s (no bishop until 450s)

- Only 10 of 700 G-R sanctuaries known destroyed by iconoclasts. St Martin’s difficulties [Goodman] The minimal evidence for Christianity in the region’s countryside until the 7\(^{th}\)- 8\(^{th}\) centuries.

**Putting it together**

- Ramparts were the last major public investment in Roman Gaul
- Ramparts were the culmination of the growing problems in the third century (the ‘crisis’)

>>>The Augustan settlement had been undermined permanently

- The meaning of *civitas* narrows: it is now the town. The link with their old ‘tribal’ countryside broken. > Longer lasting significance of diocese and ‘pays’
- The Elite look to their own interests. Ramparts give security; a reduced presence in country (concentration of ownership); wealth and power take on new forms: *potentiores* express their status in personal appearance –military-style dress belts, brooches, even swords - not ‘evergetism’
- The physical world is being transformed, increasingly one of wood and thatch, not brick and stone
- Paganism becomes a narrow local mix of religious beliefs and practices. Christianity made minimal impact before the 400s. Sceaux-du-Gatinais and Aubigné-Racan evidence (and range of non-sanctuary places of worship)
- Taxation and rent more oppressive the military have a major role in enforcement; the elite avoid old responsibilities and instead seek ‘positions’ and titles (and then bishoprics)
- For the masses rebellion and acceptance of “barbarians” and non-Roman rulers becomes much easier
Bibliography


The *Guides Archeologiques* (Ministère de la Culture series) covers a number of the sites both mentioned and unmentioned in the talk. Eg *Autun: Ville Gallo-Romaine* (M. Pinette and A. Rebourg, 1986)


Lavan L. + Mulryan M. (2011) *The Archaeology of Late Antique Paganism*, Leiden (see P J Goodman ‘Temples in Late Antique Gaul’)


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