

ARIANE BALLMER / MANUEL FERNÁNDEZ-GÖTZ / DIRK P. MIELKE (eds), *Understanding Ancient Fortifications. Between Regionality and Connectivity*. Oxbow Books, Oxford 2018. £ 55.00. ISBN 978-1-78570-748-3 (Hardcover). 180 pages with 97 illustrations.

Fortifications, especially those of the Bronze and Iron Age, have become a popular topic amongst scholars in the recent years. While there was always a certain interest in this type of sites, one can clearly note a more intensifying discussion throughout the past decade. Many recent contributions to the subject have been published as collected volumes and proceedings. The volume to be reviewed here is no exception to this. In 180 pages, it encompasses an introduction by the editors to the topic and 13 individual papers, consisting of selected contributions presented during a session on “Concepts of Fortifications in Pre- and Protohistory” at the 20th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA) held in Istanbul in September 2014, alongside some additional articles. The papers are presented roughly in a chronological order, reaching from Neolithic enclosures dating to the 5th millennium BC (Kamen Boyadzhiev, pp. 5–12) to c. 100 BC (Bettina Arnold and Manuel Fernández-Götz, pp. 147–156; Pierre Moret, pp. 171–180). The geographic scope is equally wide ranging and covers sites from all over Europe and the Near East. This includes (to pick a few in no particular order): Egyptian fortifications in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC (Carola Vogel, pp. 25–42), fortifications in the Early and Middle Bronze Age of the Aegean (Walter Gauss, pp. 43–62), Iron Age fortifications in Gabii / Latium (Sophie Helas, pp. 123–134), Greek fortifications before the Persian wars (Oliver Hüllden, pp. 93–110) as well as reflections on the “Pfofenschlitz-Concept” (Ariane Ballmer, pp. 135–147).

As the editors put it, the volume is meant to be “a reflection of current academic research, reflecting the diversity of the archaeological engagement with fortifications” (p. 3). To study the phenomenon of fortifications with a diachronic perspective with emphasis on their diversity is a valid approach, yet it makes it incredibly hard, if not completely impossible, to evaluate each individual contribution, considering that the volumes’ wide scope in space and time hardly overlaps with a single scholar’s area of expertise. Since it especially touches on topics from various schools of archaeology such as Pre- and Protohistoric, Classical, and Near Eastern studies, this review will therefore try to summarise and discuss the recurring topics that present themselves in various degrees within most of the chapters. These recurring observations and related questions can be identified as the meta-topics of the current discourse on fortified sites in contemporary archaeology. Individual papers will be mentioned where they contribute extensively to the discourse regarding the topics.

The wide scope is at the same time a great asset to this volume. The phenomenon of fortification is often studied on scales limited by chronological periods or certain regions. The total renunciation of these “borders” limiting most studies opens up a welcome opportunity to compare and investigate fortifications in a new light; or, as the editors put it, it allows for “multi-faceted opportunities for comparisons and distinctions” (p. 3). Just how multi-faceted it gets becomes noticeable when we list the different forms of defences to be addressed throughout the book. These range from palisades over ramparts and stone walls, to more uncommon forms like clay walls or upright stone bands. A broad variety like this sheds light on a main problem of a comparative study of fortifications: to define what makes a fortification in the first place. It appears to have been a missed opportunity by the editors to not have every author compelled to give a short definition, as it would have been fruitful to gather and compare these from different timeframes, regions, and, most intriguing, different academic schools of thought.

From the available definitions, the one given by Vicente Lull et al. is striking. The authors conclude that “by fortification we understand an architectonical structure which unites the effective,

affective and symbolic character of violence” (p. 13). A definition like this is not only a broad dismissal to the many concepts that somehow still cling to the concept of a pacified past, but it further illustrates the change in the field that for a long span of time only studied fortified sites in connections with elites, social representation, and / or a sometimes crude grasp of centrality. To put defensive structures back in their primary context as a materialisation of violent threads is meritorious, even if only a few contributions even mention or discuss military tactics and their change through time. It still becomes evident that changes and adaptation in the tactics and military gear aimed at the fortifications are the driving force to remodel, rebuild, and enlarge a standing fortification over time. This topic is addressed most prominently by Carola Vogel in her study of Egypt’s fortification system in the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC (pp. 25–41).

This is a key aspect where the benefits of the comprehensive approach taken become apparent. Some disciplines can use a wide array of sources spanning from scriptures to depictions and alike, and from utilising these sources, they can see how warfare changed and placed new challenges on the defenders of a site; others, however, are lacking comparable sources, therefore many researchers in central Europe are missing such information. I see a high probability that analogous developments have taken place and shaped the manifestation of fortifications, but a proof of this notion might remain close to impossible.

Skimming through the papers illustrates that fortifications are not primarily viewed as static units anymore. This reflects another change of thought in the field that emphasises more and more on the genesis, or what we can call the “biography”, of an enclosure. Only a few papers argue in favour of understanding a fortification as a system of defensive measures that altogether add up to become a fortification, as Dirk Paul Mielke rightfully concludes in the instance of Hittite fortifications (p. 64f.). This notion is utterly important and should play a key role in the development of a practical definition of fortification. The same goes for a biographical approach to the genesis of a site and its defensive structures. Prime examples for this approach from the volume are Albert J. Nijboer’s investigations into the fortifications in and around ancient Rome (pp. 111–122). As we follow the frequent modifications of the individual perimeters, it becomes evident that they also acted as perimeters in the social topography of their time. This duality is elucidated in Simon Halama’s study (pp. 83–92), where he demonstrates how recorded Assyrian names of city walls and gates demonstrate their task as fortifications, while simultaneously serving as a barrier between civilisation and wilderness (p. 84).

The almost complete absence of mentions of an elite that used the fortifications for self-representation is highly interesting to note. It is a very positive and refreshing aspect to see the enclosures themselves put to the centre of the debate. Still, it is fair to assume that a high-ranking social group played a role in the process of establishing a fortification. For a long time, the research in the field tended to be occupied by circular reasoning along the terms of elites, monumentality, and fortification, but in my opinion, this has hindered a more open approach that should be based on the understanding of fortification as a complex system that shows traces of adaptive behaviour. Within such a system, elites are only one of many factors contributing to what we see imprinted in the archaeological record. If we connect this level of understanding with a bottom up approach that links systemic thinking on the biography of a place, we can come to a more nuanced and varied understanding of fortifications and their impact on various levels of society. We need to emphasise on the interplay of the enclosure and what it encloses and excludes – namely the various spaces it is built into and upon. A fine example of this interconnected approach towards understanding fortifications in this particular way is added by Bettina Arnold and Manuel Fernández-Götz, who trace the agency of the architecture of the Iron Age Heuneburg in Southern Germany (pp. 147–155).

There is one more thing that proves the approach the editors take as beneficial, even though we should always be aware or even careful not to broadly generalise observations that are well documented in a certain area or time period. The anthology demonstrates that fortifications are a phenomenon that shares certain structural features and similarities but exists in many different societies in terms of economy or social organisation throughout a long stretch of history. This underlines the pressure that violent threads put onto these societies to undertake great investments to neutralise or diminish the same. Fortifications are therefore a materialisation of violence, the proof of how prevalent conflicts were. This alone should be enough to finally renounce any conception of fortifications as mainly symbolical buildings that only benefited a nebulous elite. They were an answer to a structural problem that showcases analogue characteristics while taking into account the individual conditions.

Despite the overall positive impression, some of the contributions sadly tend to get carried away by simply amassing data without drawing conclusions. It still seems a common approach in the archaeological engagement with fortified sites to list a wide array of sizes, diameters, square metres covered, and other measurements. This procedure aims to make the sites comparable on statistical scales. It has to be said that the longest list of the most detailed descriptions becomes obsolete if the data is not used to contribute towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon itself. On the other hand, many contributions compile an extensive bibliography on the individual sites, which serves as an excellent jump off point for further research. Yet, the contributions I would deem more valuable are those which frequently address questions beyond typology and chronology, especially from the interregional perspective chosen by the editors.

What we can take away from the volume is a snapshot of the contemporary research. What this snapshot prominently depicts is the change in the framework that took place over the last years. It is neither a surprise nor a coincidence that the changing notion of defence goes hand in hand with the rise of an archaeology of conflict and violence in prehistory (e.g. D. DELFINO, *Bronze Age warfare in barbaric Europe – Current trends and perspectives in the future*. *Global Journal Arch. and Anthr.* 4,1, 2018, 1–7). I would argue that the study of fortified sites is deeply entangled with any study of conflict in their related epochs. The reverse engineering of the individual components that sum up to make a defensive system might even tell us more about the military challenges a community faced, rather than identifying patterns of weapon disposal in hoards or graves. It further illustrates how the standing question of the social dimension is tackled in a different fashion than it was before. These are developments that are most welcome and have long been necessary. Aside from this, the volume suffers from a flaw most anthologies with an extensive reach through time and space endure: the phenomena described become incomparable on most scales. It is safe to assume that every reader will find some papers that touch their area of interest, and therefore, the volume is a welcome addition to broaden a reader's horizon regarding the phenomenon in general. To gain a more nuanced understanding of fortifications, it needs more in-depth studies that limit themselves while somehow reflecting the changes in the field that this volume brightly shines a light on.

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