Roman City Walls: Instrument of Oppression or Opportunity for Subversion?

*Isobel Pinder**

University of Southampton

The physical vestiges of many Roman city walls continue to dominate their surroundings even centuries after construction. Built to protect, built to impress and built to last, Roman city walls are a defining symbol of imperial power. But this paper argues that the meaning behind the façade of a city's walls is more complex. Walls may embody the assertion of Roman dominance, but they may also reveal deviance from the superficial norm.

As the Roman Empire expanded, public architecture and urban topography were means by which new patterns of behaviour were introduced and social identities defined.[1] The relationship between Rome and her subject peoples was a continuing dialogue, a negotiation in which Rome set the overarching structure but allowed her subjects latitude to interpret, shape and appropriate Roman culture for themselves. According to Thomas, the outer boundary of a city—more than any other form of public building—represented and projected a city's identity and unity.[2] City walls, found commonly in urban centres throughout the Roman world, therefore provide a good opportunity to examine this process of negotiation. This paper discusses the tensions discernible through the material evidence of city walls in relation to a number of case studies, mostly drawn from cities of the Augustan period (27 BC to AD 14) in Roman Italy.

Roman City Walls were More Than a Defensive Structure

Military and defensive needs dictated the design and construction of urban fortifications in specific geographic and historical contexts. For example, Roman settlers built walls around the cities they founded in newly conquered territories during the early period of Rome's expansion. In the later empire, urban communities decided to fortify their cities when the frontiers of the empire were under pressure.[3] But the

*Isobel Pinder is currently undertaking a PhD in Archaeology at the University of Southampton. Email: irp103@soton.ac.uk.

[1]Paul Zanker, 'The city as symbol: Rome and the creation of an urban image,' in *Romanization and the City*, ed. Elizabeth Fentress (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2000).

[2]Edmund Thomas, *Monumentality and the Roman Empire: architecture in the Antonine age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 108.

[3]See, for example, René Rebuffat, 'Les fortifications urbaines romaines,' in *La fortification dans l'histoire du monde grec*, ed. Pierre Leriche and Henri Tréziny (Paris: Editions du Centre national de la Recherche scientifique, 1986).

narrative of city walls as a purely defensive instrument begins to break down when their distribution, chronology and construction are examined more closely. Around the time of the Emperor Augustus, for example, the heartland of the empire in Italy was relatively peaceful with conflict removed a thousand miles away in frontier zones. As Gros pointed out, walls were not needed to protect a city's inhabitants.[4] Yet a significant number of urban centres in Italy built city walls during this period.[5] It is therefore apparent that city walls embodied more complex meaning and purpose than a simple narrative of defence implies.

The evidence suggests that city walls became a symbol of status and power, intended to dominate not so much the enemy as the physical and social environment in which they were placed. Much more than a concrete expression of an urban community's requirement for defence, city walls embodied and projected a community's status and perception of self. For example, a number of cities constructed walls surrounding an area which was much more extensive than was required for practical purposes. Such long circuits would have proved extremely difficult to defend. The Augustan boundary walls of Nîmes and Vienne, in southern Gaul, each enclosed over 200 hectares including unoccupied land.[6] The walls of Avenches in the province of Germania Superior were 5.5 kilometres long enclosing wide open areas and isolated structures; of its 230 hectares, only 20% was covered by the street network.[7] The city walls of Avenches are also noteworthy in that the 73 semi-circular towers built at regular intervals along the perimeter do not project out to face a potential enemy but are directed inwards, as if their meaning is aimed more at the urban community than an approaching adversary. It seems likely that these and other unusually long and exposed circuits, built in the Augustan or early imperial periods, were intended as a reflection of the cities' sense of their own importance rather than built in expectation of future growth.

The Visual Impact of Roman City Walls could be Deliberately Enhanced

It also appears that some city walls were deliberately engineered in order to maximise their visual impact, beyond what was required for physical protection. Manipulation of the landscape was one way of increasing visibility. At Falerii Novi in central Italy, it seems that the landscape around the city was remodelled to enhance the appearance of the city walls and provide an impressive introduction to the city.[8] Keay reported

[4]Pierre Gros, 'Moenia: aspects défensifs et aspects représentatifs des fortifications,' in *Fortificationes antiquae*, ed. John M. Fossey and Symphorien van de Maele (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1992), 211–225.

[5]Hélene Jouffroy, *La construction publique en Italie et dans l'Afrique romaine* (Strasbourg: AECR, 1986), 62–66.

[6]For the walls of Nîmes, see: Pierre Varène and Jacques Bigot, *L'Enceinte gallo-romaine de Nîmes: les murs et les tours* (Paris: Centre Nationale de la recherche scientifique, 1992); for the walls of Vienne, see: Anne Le Bot-Helly, 'L'enceinte de Vienne,' in *Les enceintes augustéennes dans l'occident romain*, ed. Marie-Geneviève Colin (Nîmes: Ecole antique de Nîmes, 1987), 51–62.

[7]Jean-Pierre Dewarrat, 'Avenches—enceinte Romaine,' *Annuaire de la societé suisse de prehistoire et d'archeologie* 68 (1985).

[8]Simon Keay et al., 'Falerii Novi: A New Survey of the Walled Area,' *Papers of the British School at Rome* 68 (2000).

that in a number of places the natural rock external to the line of the walls had been cut back in order to make the walls stand out. The cliff face appeared to be quarried in order to give an imposing façade to the city rather than for the functional purpose of providing building material. This is particularly noticeable at the point where the city first became visible to travellers approaching along the Via Amerina, the main route from Rome. To the north of the city, the ground level outside the walls has been artificially lowered to exaggerate the difference in height between the exterior and interior of the city.[9]

The walls of Silchester in southern England, although much later in date, also appear to have been designed for maximum visual impact. Here there is no evidence that the ground was landscaped to enhance the walls. But it seems that the fabric of the walls was specifically chosen so as to make the walls conspicuous, by reflecting light to the approaching traveller. The walls use for their bonding course a particularly bright limestone which was sourced 70-80 kilometres away, although stone of an acceptable, but less visually impressive, quality was available much more locally. In a pre-mechanical age, eschewing the easy option was a very deliberate decision.

Visual dominance could also be achieved by other means. At Fréjus in southern Gaul, stones of contrasting colours intermingle in the Augustan city walls, which are laid in horizontal courses with flush pointing and incised false jointing. Likewise, different coloured bricks and natural stones, including limestone, sandstone, greywacke and trachyte—not just from the local area but from further afield—were carefully laid in mosaic patterning on a watch tower incorporated into the mid-first century city walls of Cologne. This pattern gave the tower a very attractive visual quality but served no practical purpose. Bidwell noted that the use of building materials in different colours to provide patterned wall surfaces was widespread; this included not just city walls but even frontier boundaries, for example on the German *limes* where lines of red paint emphasised false ashlar jointing on the exterior walls of watch towers.[10]

Gateways in the City Walls Dominated the Surrounding Environment

Once having arrived at the city boundary, visitor and inhabitant alike were meant to be equally impressed by the monumental and decorative qualities of the city gates. Tracy noted that the double gateways preferred in the Roman empire to angled gateways were less effective defensively but more imposing visually.[11] The move to place greater emphasis on the architectural and decorative features of city gates, charted by Rebecchi, took place during the early principate in Roman Italy, at the time when the importance of city walls as an icon of ideology and status exceeded their utility.[12] The walls and entranceways of Urbisaglia in central Italy, built in the Augustan period,

[9]Sophie Hay et al., 'Falerii Novi: further survey of the northern extramural area,' *Papers of the British School at Rome* 78 (2010), 6.

[10]Paul Bidwell, 'The exterior decoration of Roman buildings in Britain,' in *Architecture in Roman Britain*, ed. Paul Johnson and Ian Haynes (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1996), 19–32.

[11]James Tracy, *City walls: the urban enceinte in global perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11.

[12]Fernando Rebecchi, 'Les enceintes augustéenes en Italie,' in *Les enceintes augustéennes dans l'Occident Romain*, ed. Marie-Genevičve Colin (Nîmes: L'école antique de Nîmes, 1987), 144.

appear to combine both characteristics: the principal gateways comprised two gateways set back from the wall, which had flanking bastions and conformed to a defensive norm, and one gateway set forward from the wall, which appears to be decorative in form and not easily defensible. Moreover, at an average of 1.5-1.6 metres wide, the city walls of Urbisaglia were too narrow to be effective as a defence.[13]

The gateways of the Augustan era in particular were generally spacious and expansive with ornamented façades. Polygonal towers and multiple entrances with elaborate decoration and carvings, such as those in the city walls at Spello[14] and Turin[15] in Italy built in the late-first century BC, would not have helped to repel an attack but would have left travellers in no doubt that they were entering a sophisticated and important city. The main entranceway in the walls of Rimini, dated to 27 BC, lacked a portcullis and was purely honorific.[16] The monumental gateway of the Augustan city of Fano, on Italy's Adriatic coast, appears to be contemporary with the city walls but was constructed from different materials and colours: the walls are built of sandstone but the imposing triple-arched gateway, with entrance passages which could not be closed off with doors, is faced with high quality white blocks of travertine giving it the shining appearance of marble.[17]

The gateways themselves—and the major long-distance roads leading to them and connecting urban centres across the empire—are constructs in which it is possible to see something of a discourse of control, if not oppression. The Roman imperial road network, carving in an unprecedented way straight across the countryside, exemplified Rome's mastery over the landscape. These highways joined together geographically dispersed urban centres, and their route through a city significantly influenced the organisation of urban space within it. For a walled city, the restricted number of entrance and exit points through the walls further controlled the use of space. For example, the Roman city of Turin occupied an area of nearly 55 hectares with a walled perimeter almost three kilometres long, but only four gateways are known, at roughly equal intervals along the wall;[18] there were only three main gateways in the walls of Urbisaglia, a city of roughly similar size.[19] The walls of both cities were built around the Augustan period, when there was no defensive need to restrict access. Instead, the walls channelled and directed the movement of inhabitants and visitors alike and served—consciously or sub-consciously—as an effective means of social control and exercise of power, much as access to other public buildings in a Roman town was subject to specific controls.

In short, the urban walls of Roman cities could be deliberately constructed and

[13]Penelope J. Goodman, *The Roman city and its periphery: from Rome to Gaul* (London: Routledge, 2007), 86.

[14]Paul Fontaine, *Cités et enceintes de l'Ombrie antique* (Bruxelles: Institut Historique Belge de Rome, 1990), 245–303.

[15]Jacopo Bonetto, *Mura e città nella transpadana romana* (Portogruaro, Venezia: Fondazione Antonio Colluto, 1998); Elisa Panero, *La città romana in Piemonte* (Cavallermaggiore: Gribaudo, 2000), 170–186.

[16]Pierre Gros, *L'architecture romaine: du dèbut du troisième siècle avant J.-C. à la fin du Haut-Empire*, 2 vols. (Paris: Picard, 1996), 41.

[17]CIL XI 6218-6219 = ILS 104; Gianfranco Paci and Roberto Perna, 'Cinte murarie di età triumvirale-augustee nella Marche,' *Histria Antiqua* 7 (2001), 10.

[18]Marta Conventi, *Città romane di fondazione* (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2004), 144–146.

[19]Louise Revell, *Roman imperialism and local identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

embellished so as to increase their visual impact and appeal. They could be used as an instrument of power and control not just against a hostile threat but, in times of relative peace, as a means of influencing behaviour within the community itself. Beyond this expression of dominance, though, it is worth exploring whether there is any hint of deviation from the expected norm in the functionality or design of city walls.

City Walls may be used to Recreate Aspects of Cultural Identity

A number of factors might be expected to influence the footprint of a walled circuit, such as the most defensible line, topography of the site, alignment with the street grid, or regularity of shape.[20] But occasionally other, less obvious, issues come into play. Two case studies, both relating to city walls built following the incorporation of newly subject peoples within the Roman empire, illustrate this point. In the third century BC, Rome defeated the Faliscan tribe and moved them from their hilltop settlement at Falerii Veteres to a new, more accessible location some five kilometres away at Falerii Novi. Millett suggested that while the new settlement and its urban layout reflected Roman values and control, the archaeological evidence showed how it also recreated certain aspects of the Faliscans' own cultural identity.[21] It is noticeable that the line of the walls, whose deliberate visual dominance of the physical environment has already been discussed, does not conform to the street layout but follows an irregular trapezoidal 'D' shape. Neither topography nor the most obviously defensive line dictates its shape. But the shape does seem to echo the footprint of the earlier Faliscan settlement of Vignale at Falerii Veteres. As at Falerii Novi, there is evidence that the terrain at Vignale was deliberately landscaped to dominate the surroundings and create a monumental approach to the complex.[22]

A similar phenomenon has been observed in Roman Gaul. Although later in date, the circumstances are analogous. Following Caesar's conquest of Gaul in the middle of the first century BC, the Aedui tribe moved from their hilltop settlement of Bibracte to a new urban foundation on the plain at Autun, some 20 kilometres away. Unusually for towns in Gaul of this period, a walled circuit was built around the new settlement. It is striking that the size of the enclosed area, which at 200 hectares was far bigger than necessary, and the footprint of the walled circuit, whose line was not dictated by the topographical conditions, seem to reflect and recreate the walls of the Aeduan tribe's earlier settlement at Bibracte.[23] There are further parallels which can be drawn between the pre-Roman and Roman settlements in terms of the orientation of the streets

[20] Compare, for example, the regular octagonal shape of the walled circuit of Alba Pompeia with the irregular outline of the roughly contemporary walls of Spello, which makes use of the contours of the site.

[21] Martin Millett, 'Urban topography and social identity in the Tiber Valley,' in *Roman by integration: dimensions of group identity in material culture and text*, ed. Roman Ernst Roth, Johannes Keller, and Egon Flaig (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2007).

[22] Claudia Carlucci et al., 'Archaeological Survey at Vignale, Falerii Veteres,' *Papers of the British School at Rome* 75 (2007), 98.

[23] Greg Woolf, 'Urbanization and its discontents in early Roman Gaul,' in *Romanisation and the City*, ed. Elizabeth Fentress (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2000).

along the lines of the solstices and the modelling of the main gateway.[24] Woolf suggested that Autun may have been designed to 'rival' its predecessor.[25] Rather, it may be more plausible to see the lengthy walled circuit of Autun as an attempt to memorialise and recreate the earlier settlement, as a way of reasserting the community's identity and social memory. In both case studies, continuity and tradition seem to be invoked at a time of imposed change.

The Relationship Between City Walls and Urban Layout May Serve to Memorialise Earlier Traditions

Many Roman cities, especially new foundations or colonies in Italy, adopted a grid plan with the main streets intersecting at right angles.[26] So where there is deviation from this layout, it may be worth exploring further. One such instance is at the Augustan city of Fano (see Figure 1).[27] The urban layout follows an orthogonal grid plan except for one street, which cuts diagonally across it. This street led from an area of the city where the theatre was located and exited the urban centre through a secondary gateway in the city walls. This secondary gateway bears no relation to the principal gateway or main streets of the city and breaks up the pattern of towers spaced along the walls, even though it appears contemporary with them. Unlike the principal gateway, whose visual qualities were discussed earlier, the secondary gateway was constructed from sandstone like the city walls. The gateway was modest in design but the wear in one of the pillars suggests that it was heavily used. It is known that a pre-Roman sanctuary existed some six kilometres away from the Roman city. Although there is no archaeological proof that the two were connected, it may be significant that the deviant street leads towards the sanctuary.[28] It is possible that it was used as a formal route linking the sanctuary and the theatre or memorialises an earlier sacred way.

Returning to the case study of Falerii Novi, this city also has a road which is out of alignment with the orthogonal street grid. It runs from the south-east corner of the city around the eastern and northern perimeter of the walled circuit, which, as has already been noted, is irregular in its footprint and may recall the footprint of its predecessor settlement close by at Falerii Veteres. The archaeologists researching the site noted that this road linked up a sequence of six peripheral temples or sanctuaries in the northern part of the site and suggested that it may represent a sacred or processional route.[29] It exits the city through a secondary gateway into a valley which leads to

[24]Kenneth Aitchison, 'Monumental architecture and becoming Roman,' in *TRAC 98: Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, ed. P. Barker, et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999).

[25]Greg Woolf, 'Urbanization and its discontents,' p. 118.

[26]This view is challenged by Laurence et al., who prefer the concept of an 'aesthetic of connective space'. See Ray Laurence et al., *The city in the Roman West, c.250 BC-c.AD 250* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 115–169.

[27]Mario Luni, 'Fanum Fortunae—la cinta muraria,' in *Fano Romano*, ed. Francesco Milesi (Fano: Editrice Fortuna, 1992), 89–138.

[28]Luni suggested that this street was connected to the republican-era route of the Via Flaminia to Pesauro and Rimini but acknowledged its lack of integration in the street grid. See Luni, 'Fanum Fortunae—la cinta muraria,' 114.

[29]Keay et al., 'Falerii Novi: A New Survey of the Walled Area,' 91.

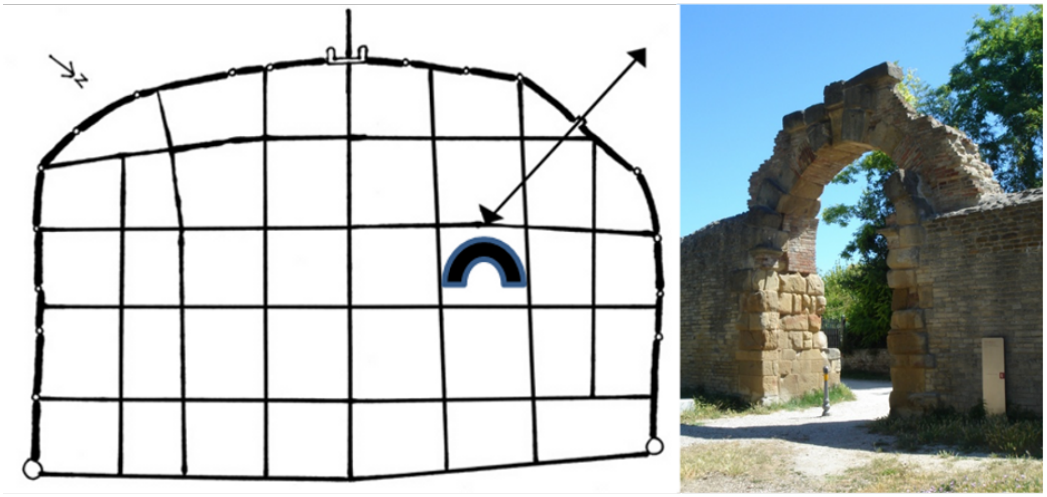

Figure 1: The secondary gateway at Fanum Fortunae provides access to a street which does not conform to the regular street grid. Leading to/from the theatre at a diagonal to other streets, it may recall an earlier route to a nearby pre-Roman sanctuary. Photo and plan © Isobel Pinder

Falerii Veteres. It is known from an inscription[30] and from contemporary sources[31] that there was a *via sacra* (sacred way) at Falerii and that processions took place between Falerii Novi and Falerii Veteres. It may be that this road had a special significance for the local community and was preserved as an assertion of Faliscan identity within the regular urban layout.

An exploration of the relationship between city walls and the urban layout, then, can elucidate the way in which a city developed. It suggests that deviations from the expected pattern repay careful investigation and may evoke earlier traditions. On this interpretation, the town of Saepinum illustrates how the apparently dominant Roman city walls may have been subordinated to the pre-Roman cultural identity of its inhabitants.

Saepinum was a small settlement in the Abruzzi mountains, strategically located on an important *tratturo* (drove road) used for the seasonal migration of shepherds and livestock into Puglia and Campania. Saepinum was the beneficiary of a monumental building programme in the early principate, including the construction of town walls and four monumental gates; these are dated to between 2 BC and AD 4 by reference to an inscription[32] which records that they were a gift from the imperial family. There is a tension inherent in the incorporation of a traditional transhumance route, which tended to avoid urbanised centres and places of governmental control, into the main streets of a Roman town. There is also unresolved tension at Saepinum between the imposition of a new urban layout and the existing settlement. It would have been possible to redesign Saepinum's town plan as a regular grid within the walls, as was done in other cities which were monumentalised around the same time. But rather than the walls dictating the spatial logic of the town, the urban layout was shaped by

[30] CIL XI 3126.
[31] Ovid, *Amores*, 13.5-6.
[32] CIL IX 2443 = ILS 147.

existing infrastructure dating back to pre-Roman traditions.[33] Of the principal routes through the town, one follows the line of the north-south *tratturo* while the other, linking the mountains to the coast, led towards a nearby Samnite sanctuary and the pre-Roman settlement of Terravecchia. As a result, and diverging from the pattern found in many Roman towns of this period, the main streets in Saepinum are neither straight nor do they meet at right-angles at the centre of the city.

Conclusion

As an icon of visual power and cultural manipulation of the landscape, Roman city walls represented much more than a protective border. Behind the solid, imposing walls which dominated and controlled the physical and social environment lay hidden meaning. The construction of city walls was very much part of the expected urban package, especially in Roman Italy. But there are hints that urban communities could use their city walls and the urban layout enclosed by the walls to evoke their pre-Roman identity and to negotiate an acceptable accommodation of Roman culture. Walls could be used to memorialise and perpetuate a community's pre-Roman traditions through appropriation and subversion of the city wall's design and function, whether through modifications to the expected urban layout, reconciliation of Roman and indigenous features, or deliberate re-creation of pre-Roman paradigms. City walls may therefore represent the assertion of Roman power, but they may also incorporate deviation from the expected norm. City walls thus play a role in a landscape of social memory and as an expression of continuity and tradition. The material presence of city walls and the metaphorical and symbolic significance which they projected were pervasive in shaping the social context and cultural identity of the individuals and communities whose lives they framed.

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[33] Paolo Braconi, ed. *Sepino: archeologia e continuità* (Campobasso: Edizioni Enne, 1979), 7.

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