The late Roman city walls in southern France
Marc Heijmans

To cite this version:
Marc Heijmans. The late Roman city walls in southern France. Emanuele Intagliata; Christopher Courault; Simon J. Barker. City Walls in Late Antiquity. An Empire-wide Perspective, Oxbow Books, pp.51-62, 2020, 9781789253641. hal-03475733

HAL Id: hal-03475733
https://hal.science/hal-03475733
Submitted on 27 Apr 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
This pdf of your paper in City Walls in Late Antiquity belongs to the publishers Oxbow Books and it is their copyright.

As author you are licenced to make up to 50 offprints from it, but beyond that you may not publish it on the World Wide Web until three years from publication (April 2023), unless the site is a limited access intranet (password protected). If you have queries about this please contact the editorial department at Oxbow Books (editorial@oxbowbooks.com).
The late Roman city walls in southern Gaul

Marc Heijmans

This paper aims to present the *status quaestionis* of the construction of late antique city walls in southern Gaul, that is to say, the provinces of the *dioecesis VII provinciarum*, after the reorganisation of the Empire by Diocletian. It concerns thus the two Augustan provinces of *Gallia Narbonensis*, in the south-east, and *Gallia Aquitania*, in the south-west, each with their own history. In *Aquitania*, research on the late antique fortifications has especially been done by Louis Maurin and Pierre Garmy, which has given rise to several publications (Maurin 1992; Garmy and Maurin 1996; Souilhac 1996; and more recently, Maurin 2019). Unfortunately, the proceedings of the colloquium held in Pau in 2011 concerning ‘The urban walls of Novempopulanie at the end of Antiquity, between Aquitaines and Hispanies’ have not yet been published. My own research is especially about south-east Gaul, so *Gallia Narbonensis* and especially what we call, since Gregory of Tours, the *Provincia* (Provence). Here, the debate about the existence of late antique city walls has long been dominated by the position of the late Paul-Albert Févier, who has never accepted the possibility of the construction of late antique city walls in Provence (Février 1964, 43–46; 1980, 400–401). For my part, I have tried to show that, despite the opinion of P.-A. Févier, Provence, and more generally the south-east of Gaul, was also touched by the phenomenon of city defences during late antiquity and especially in the fifth century (Heijmans 2004, 83–126; 2006; 2007; 2018; 2019). The latest research in this field has not advanced enough to present a new summary on this topic, and this contribution does not claim to bring great novelties but summarises the state of the question with some recent discoveries. I will limit this investigation to the *civitas* capitals, which generally all became bishoprics in late antiquity (Fig. 5.1).

Before studying the late antique city walls in southern Gaul, it is important to know if there were already towns that had received fortifications in earlier times. We can be very quick about *Aquitania*: no town had been fortified before late antiquity. The situation in *Narbonensis* is more complicated.

The early Roman fortifications of *Gallia Narbonensis*

The study of the late Roman urban walls of the former province of *Narbonensis* is indeed influenced by the existence, real or possible, of fortifications from the early Empire, generally attributed to the Augustan period, or even, in some cases such as in Arles or Marseille, of a pre-Roman fortification, which could still have been in use in late antiquity.

Of the six *coloniae romanae*, Arles (CAG 13/5, 246–252), Orange (CAG 84/3, 105–106), Fréjus (Rivet *et al.* 2000, 349–358), and Valence (CAG 26, 633–640) received fortifications in the first century. For Béziers and Narbonne, no such fortification is attested and archaeologists working on these cities generally believe that they were, during the High Empire, open cities (Gayraud 1968, 281–282; Clavel 1970, 243–244). However, this possibility seems unlikely, since the foundation of a colony with Roman rights, especially during the Caesarean or triumviral periods, was to be accompanied logically by the construction of a, more honorary than defensive, city wall, especially for a *colonia* like Narbonne, capital of the province of *Narbonensis* (Février 1969, 279; see however Gros 1992, 219–220; 1996, 51). In any case, in this last city, the presence of a fortification is well attested in the fifth century AD, and we cannot pretend that the city was open in the early Empire and refuse at the same time to believe in a fortification in late antiquity.

Several *coloniae latinae* also had the privilege of the construction of a city wall. This is certainly the case for Nîmes...
Marc Heijmans

Monteil 1999, 69–93; 341–358), Vienna (CAG 38/3, 118), Toulouse (De Filippo 2002, 212–218), Aix-en-Provence (Guyon et al. 1998, 232–236; Nin 2014), Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (Lert et al. 2009, 157–166; CAG 26, 562–566), perhaps Antibes (CAG 06, 147–151), and even a minor city like Carpentras (TCCG XVI, 73; CAG 84/4, 180–181). In several cases, we do not know, and it is possible that medieval building has destroyed all remains of earlier fortifications. Why was there a city wall in Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux or Carpentras and not in Avignon? Could it be that the building activity under the popes in the fourteenth century has erased all traces of the Roman fortifications? But of course, it is not impossible that some cities of minor importance remained open, whether they were Latin colonies, such as Alba, Apt, and Riez, or federated cities (Vaison and Die). So, of the 24 Roman or Latin colonies in Narbonensis, at least 10 but certainly more, were already fortified in the early Empire. In some cases, like Vienne or Nîmes, these walls also covered the hills around the town and thus included large parts that were not occupied.

During the Roman Empire, these walls, generally built with small blocks and no brick layers (except for Toulouse), and round towers did not seem to have undergone any modification. At the end of the third century, and, at least in the traditional view, during the invasions of 260 and 275, which were supposed to be at the origin of the construction of the enceintes réduites, the walls were built with foundations of huge, re-used blocks, often re-cut, and an elevation of small blocks of stone, alternating with brick layers at regular intervals. One of the most beautiful examples is of course the city wall of Le Mans, which also shows that these walls were not just simply an answer to a military emergency (Guilleux 2008; see also Dey 2010 and more generally, Dey 2011, 123–130; Bayard and Fourdrin 2019).

The late antique walls of Aquitania

We find walls of the same kind in Aquitania, with the use of massive foundation blocks and an upper part in small blocks with regular brick layers. The walls can reach a considerable thickness, up to 4 m and a height up to 10 m. The majesty of these walls and their gates, like those of Périgueux, testifies to the care given to their construction, a sign of the ostentatious as well as military role of these fortifications. These walls, which form the first ‘generation’ of the late antique fortifications in Aquitania distinguished by L. Maurin (1992),

Fig. 5.1. The city walls in southern Gaul.
5. The late Roman city walls in southern Gaul

concern the principle cities north of the Garonne, especially Bordeaux (Barraud, Linères and Maurin 1996; Barraud and Maurin 1996; Bachrach 2010; CAG 33/2, 56–57), Bourges (CAG 18, 101–102), Poitiers (TCCG XVI, 219–220), and Saintes (ILA Santons, 45–51; CAG 17/2, 77; 316–343). The fortification of Périgueux, although covering a much smaller surface (only 5.5 ha), seems to belong to the same group because of its architectural features (Girardy-Caillat 1996; CAG 24/2, 68–69, 133–169; Gaillard 2009; Maurin 2019, 51).

What is special about these walls is not only that they occupy only a part of the ancient city, sometimes leaving important monuments like the theatre or the amphitheatre extra muros, but also, more surprisingly, that stones from the civic and political centre were re-used in their foundations (Fig. 5.2). In some cases, the wall incorporates some earlier monuments, as in Périgueux, where, as in Amiens or Tours in northern Gaul, the amphitheatre became a part of the fortification. Although they were greatly reduced in relation to their extent in the early Empire, these cities were large enough (up to 42 ha for Poitiers) to contain the entire population, albeit perhaps a little cramped, if we believe the description that Ausonius gives of Bordeaux (Ep. X, 19–28). This does not exclude, of course, the existence of extra muros quarters.

The dating of these walls is mostly based on the terminus post quem given by the inscriptions re-used in their foundations, which do not go beyond the middle or the third quarter of the third century. Like the better-known walls north of the Loire, which were built from the end of the third century after the first invasions that touched Gaul, the construction of these walls in the large cities north of the Garonne, which were important road and river centres, generally date from the Tetrarchy or the beginning of the fourth century. For some of these walls, such as Bordeaux or Saintes, there are some arguments to date them to the late third century, based on the terminus post quem of the re-used stones (CAG 33/2, 56–57; CAG 17/2, 77; see more generally, Hiernard 2003); however, things are not so simple. It would be unreasonable to pretend that the wall was built the day after the date of the most recent inscription, if it could be dated. It may have been necessary to allow a certain amount of time between the moment when one decided to fortify a city, a decision that also required imperial authorisation, and the beginning of the work, after the establishment of a plan, the acquisition of land, and the demolition of the buildings therein. The re-usable materials for blocks in masonry, especially foundations, or to make lime, had to be stored somewhere (Hiernard 2003, 263–264; Bernardi and Dessales 2017, 163). In Saintes, such a place for the storage of blocks may have been observed in the 1950s, although the interpretation is not without problems (CAG 17/2, 240–242).

It has been noted that the buildings on the site of the late walls were abandoned long before the construction of the latter, but it seems unlikely that Roman engineers took this into account when deciding the route of the rampart. On the other hand, sometimes, as we have seen for Périgueux, the wall incorporated into its circuit pre-existing monuments. After the demolition was made and the re-used stones were set aside, the foundation trenches were dug, the foundations were laid with the re-used blocks, and the elevations were constructed. The study of Bernard S. Bachrach estimates that for the case of the fortifications of Bordeaux, the duration of this part of the work took 240 days for 100 people, to which was added undoubtedly as much, or even more, for the digging of the ditches,² not to mention the removal of the land and rotation of the wagons towards the place where the land was spread. According to the estimate, the duration of the construction work of the enclosure of Bordeaux may have taken 20 to 25 years (Bachrach 2010).

The wall at Bordeaux is traditionally dated to the end of the third century, based, among other things, on the
date of the latest inscription found in the enclosure (CIL XIII, 633, of AD 261). The duration of the work is not the only factor that could cause a gap between the date of the inscription, especially funerary, and its re-use in the foundations. We must also ask after how long the memory of the deceased disappeared to such an extent that his tomb could be despoiled. It can be assumed that 30 years was enough, in some cases, to remove the attachment to a grave (ILA-Bordeaux, 114–115). In the case of Bordeaux, Jean Hiernard (2003, 266) has observed that the inscriptions re-used in the wall for the most part concern foreigners, so without family to keep their memory, and tomb, alive. This point needs to be confirmed by other case studies.

Recent excavations also have given other chronological hints. At Poitiers, the enclosure seems to have been built shortly after the fire of the Cordeliers district, so after AD 253, with the terminus provided by the latest coinage. This discovery thus seems to confirm the traditional dating of the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth century attributed to this enclosure (TCCG XVI, 219). Despite the similar architecture to the walls of Bordeaux and Poitiers, with thick foundations built exclusively with spolia, the walls of Périgueux seems to be more recent. Recent work on the ‘porte de Mars’ has given some indication for a construction date during the first half or perhaps even the middle of the fourth century (CAG 24/2, 68–69; 133–169; TCCG XVI, 217). It thus confirms the chronology already proposed by Claudine Girardy-Caillat in 1996 (1996, 153). In Limoges, an enclosure is attested by sources in the seventh century, but no section has ever been discovered with certainty and the plan is therefore hypothetical. On the basis of topographical indications, however, Jean-Pierre Loustaud proposed a wall around the cathedral, situated at the north-eastern limit of the ancient city. This castrum could have had an area of 7.5 to 12 ha. Some ancient observations of spolia on the layout of this enclosure, as well as the discovery of a rather thick wall in 1968, can plead in favour of this hypothesis. Despite the limited surface remains, Loustaud assumes that this wall belongs to the first generation (Loustaud 2000, 371–380). Likewise, in Angoulême, which became a civitas capital only in late antiquity, the existence of a wall is assured by a mention by Gregory of Tours (HF, II, 37), but it is still poorly understood and seems to differ from the walls of Bordeaux, Bourges, or Saintes, as it is less wide (only 2 m), there are no towers, and the elevation does not show tile courses (Maurin 1992, 372–373; CAG 16, 50–51; TCCG X, 49; Maurin 2019, 51–52). It could thus also belong to the second ‘generation’ of late antique walls in Aquitania, as distinguished by L. Maurin.

Indeed, in this second group, the foundations are thinner, and spolia is very rare; the elevation is also in more irregular opus mixtum, and the thickness of the curtain is less important (about 2.50 m). The care provided is therefore much less than in the first group; however, the construction method is not the only difference between these two groups of walls. The placement of the fortifications of the second group is very different. Here, the walls were not built on the site of the pre-existing city but on a hilltop that dominates the lower city, often unoccupied in the High Empire, which perhaps explains the rarity of spolia. The enclosed area is not a real city but rather a small citadel (Fig. 5.3).

Fig. 5.3. Walls of the ‘second generation’ in Aquitania. Saint-Bertrand de Comminges et Saint-Liziers.
Ramparts in this second group are mainly situated in towns south of the Garonne, in the province of *Novempopulana* (Souilhac 1996; Esmonde Cleary and Wood 2006). They are surely attested in Auch (6.4 ha) (*CAG* 32, 67–68), Bazas (3 ha) (Maurin and Pichonneau 1996), Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (4.5 ha) (Esmonde Cleary and Wood 2003), Saint-Lizier-en-Couserans (2.6 ha) (Dieulafait and Sablayrolles 1996; *CAG* 09, 151–153; *TCCG* XIII, 88–89), Saint-Lézer (6 ha) (Schaad et al. 1996; Darles et al. 2002; *TCCG*, 130), and perhaps Lescar (3.3 ha) (*TCCG* XIII, 104). The wall of Lectoure seems to be less sure than was supposed until recently (*ILA*-Lectoure, 28–35; *TCCG* XIII, 46; Maurin 2019, 51). The only wall north of the Garonne that seems to show the same architectural features (little *spolia*, thin wall, and small surface; only 3 ha) are those of the city of Sidonius Apollinaris, Clermont, which is also the only wall of this group built on the site of the early Roman town. L. Maurin proposed to date these walls to the beginning of the fifth century, as a reaction to the great Germanic invasion of 406/407, whose disastrous effects on Aquitaine are well attested by literary sources, although certainly exaggerated. For at least one case, Saint-Bertand-de-Comminges, the recent study seems to confirm this dating. In their study of the walls of Saint-Lizier-en-Couserans, Christine Dieulafait and Robert Sablayrolles proposed to attribute their construction, but also more generally that of the other fortifications of *Novempopulana*, to the initiative of the patrician Constance in the years 414–418 to strengthen the border between Aquitania and Spain (Dieulafait and Sablayrolles 1996; *CAG* 09, 151–153; *TCCG* XIII, 88–89). This idea has also been followed more recently by Christine Delaplace, who insists on the defensive role of the Pyrenees not against the danger coming from the north, but to protect Gaul from incursions from south of the Pyrenees, where the Vandals, Alans, and Suevi, were installed (Delaplace 2015, 258–262).

The walls of Bayonne and Dax are distinguished from the other walls known in *Novempopulana*. Their situation in the plain has allowed them to develop over a larger area, without reaching those of the cities north of the Garonne. The architecture of the fortifications of Dax, of which important parts remain, is a mixture of the characteristics of both generations of Aquitanian fortifications, both with foundations with little amounts of *spolia* and a large elevation (4 m) (*CAG* 40, 66–69; Maurin and Watier 1996). The enclosure of the neighbouring town of Bayonne, which was not a civitas capital or bishopric, has comparable characteristics (*CAG* 64, 77–78). L. Maurin supposed that these enclosures, which had characteristics of the two groups of fortifications, are also chronologically between these two groups, i.e. in the second half of the fourth century. The construction of these walls would then be linked to the promotion of Bordeaux as the seat of the vicar of the diocese of the Seven Provinces and their position on the road that leads from Trier to the Iberian Peninsula. The purpose of this construction would therefore not be primarily military (Maurin 1992, 384; Garmy and Maurin 1996, 122). Nevertheless, the architectural differences can also be explained by their position along the river on less solid ground that would have required larger foundations (Dieulafait and Sablayrolles 1996, 121, n. 44). A military role in the defence of the Pyrenees is not excluded either and the wall of Bayonne has also been able to defend against the entrance of the river Ardour (*CAG* 64, 78; see also Dieulafait and Sablayrolles 1996, 121).

Finally, there are in Aquitania, north and south of the Garonne, cities where no enclosure is attested. Must we conclude that these cities remained defenseless until the Middle Ages? One can doubt it, in any case for some of them. L. Maurin had noticed the fragility of the walls of the second type, which could quite easily disappear from the urban landscape or be masked by medieval revivals, as, for instance in Agen (*ILA*-Nitobroges, 21; *CAG* 47, 112), and it would be particularly strange that the capital of *Novempopulana*, Eauze, should not have been fortified (Maurin 1992, 376–378; Garmy and Maurin 1996, 10; Souilhac 1996, 63–64).

### The late antique walls of Narbonensis

In *Gallia Narbonensis*, the situation is very different (Heijmans 2004, 83–126; 2006; 2007; 2018; 2019). There are no walls with brick layers, except Carcassonne in the west and Die in the north. As noted above, this was one of the reasons why Paul-Albert Février did not accept the idea of late antique city walls in Provence. The construction at the end of the third century of some small walls in newly-founded civitates in the Alps, however, is generally accepted (Fig. 5.4).

In the civitas of the Allobroges, whose capital was Vienne, two new capitals and bishoprics were created. For the first, Grenoble, the date itself is assured thanks to two inscriptions, currently lost, which attribute to the emperors Diocletian and Maximian, between 286 and 293, the construction of the walls, the gates, and the monuments of the city (*CIL* XII, 2229; *ILN*–2, n° 366). This enclosure, built in small stones without brick layers, included a surface of approximately 9 ha (Boucheron et al. 1998, 39–56). The wall was 2.50 m wide, while the foundations, 4.50 to 5 m wide, rested on wooden piles. Elliptical in shape, the layout of the enclosure is punctuated by semicircular towers, spaced from 20 to 25 m. Re-used stones are reported during the various phases of the demolition of the gates but seem absent from the curtains and towers, at least in recent observations. Grenoble was promoted to the rank of an autonomous civitas at an unknown time, but at the latest in 381, when the bishop Domninus attended the council of Aquileia as *episcopus Gratianopolis* (*Acta conc. Aquil. 62*). For many researchers, it is to Gratianus that the city owes not only its
name but also its autonomous status. The construction of the city wall came, however, a century before the intervention of the emperor, and it is probably more logical to think that the change of status took place during the reorganisation of the province under the Tetrarchy (Remy 2002, 32–35; *ILN* V–2, 72).

The second new *civitas* capital in the territory of the Allobroges was Genava, currently in Switzerland. Its rampart, which has a large amount of re-used stones, covers an area of 5.5 ha on the plateau above Lac Leman but seems, according to the latest findings, to be open on this side. As for Grenoble, this enclosure may have been raised after the dismemberment of the vast *civitas* of the Allobroges (*ILN* V–2, 72), but recently a later date in the middle of the fifth century has been proposed (La Corbière 2006, 109–111). In the eastern part of the *civitas* of the Voconces, a new capital was created in Gap. It is of a polygonal form and covers only 2 ha with a length of less than 500 m, and a thickness of 3.8 to 4 m, the curtains are built in small blocks without brick layers. Nothing is known about the foundations, but a fragment of an ancient altar was found during the demolition of the Roman wall that suggests that the altar was used in these foundations. Ancient documents show that there were 11 circular towers, about 40 m apart, of which three has been observed. The arguments for dating this construction are slim. It is clearly after the dwellings of the High Empire, which were destroyed for the curtain wall, but there is nothing to attribute the construction of this fortification to the era of the Tetrarchy, other than its appointment to the status of an autonomous chief town, which can only be said to be after the *Notitia Galliarum*.

But were these walls only ostentatious signs of the new status of these cities? During the military events of the second half of the third century and, in particular, the Gallic Empire (260–276), the Western Alps were a strategic place between the Germanic countries and northern Italy. Geneva was destroyed during the Alamans raids in 259/260 and, after the death of Postumus and the advent of the Gallic emperor Victorinus, a strong army sent by the central emperor Claudius II crossed the Alps under the direction of Iulius Placidianus and established his base in Grenoble. This allowed eastern *Narbonensis* to come back under the authority of Rome (*ILN-Vienne*-2, n° 365; cf. Drinkwater 1987, 36–37, 120–121). The installation of this army of Placidianus in Grenoble seems to have been sustainable because, as a praetorian prefect, he dedicated, a few years later, an inscription in Vif, about

---

*Fig. 5.4. Third century walls in Narbonensis. Grenoble, Genève, Die, Gap.*
5. The late Roman city walls in southern Gaul

15 km south of Grenoble, in the neighboring capital of the Voconces (Die) (*ILN* VII, 1, n° 268). The military importance of Grenoble continued in the fourth century, when the *cohors Prima Flavia Sapaudica* was based there (*Not. Dign. Occ.*, XLII, 17). This was undoubtedly a military *tractus* created at the beginning of the fourth century to protect the Alpine passages between Gaul and Italy. The creation of new fortified cities in the Alps was probably no stranger to the desire to secure the mountain passes.

The case of Die is different. This town, which became, probably in the course of the second century (Planchon 2010, 245), one of the two capitals of the *civitas* of the Voconces with Vaison in the southern part, has a very large fortification (25 ha) that included not only the Roman town itself but also a large part of the hill that dominates the city to the north-east. Rather well-preserved, its architecture is not very homogeneous, with sections of brick layers alternating with sections of only small blocks. Some sections use large amounts of *spolia* in the foundations, but again, this is not homogeneous across the wall’s length. At least 46 towers are still conserved, of the 60–70 towers that have been proposed. The most important element of this fortification is the gate of Saint-Marcel in the eastern part of the curtain wall. This gate re-uses the vault of an ancient municipal arch, which can be dated because of its decoration to the second century, perhaps the Antonine period. The original position of this arch was perhaps on the bridge, which crosses the river Meyrosse about 75 m to the east. The fortification itself is dated, without real argument, to the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century, so a century after the promotion of the city to a *civitas* capital.

Other cities were created much later, such as Uzès and Maguelone in the *civitas* of Nimes, and became bishoprics in the fifth century for the first and not before the sixth century for the second, which was on an island and did not need a fortification. Designated as *castrum* by the *Notitia Galliarum*, Uzès was certainly fortified in the sixth century, as Gregory of Tours testifies, but we do not know much about this fortification, which perhaps re-used a fortification of the Hellenistic period (Assénat and Mercier 2006, 801–802). The same is probably true for Agde, absent from most manuscripts of the *Notitia Galliarum*, but which became a bishopric before 506. Much is unknown about the late ancient city, but it is likely that the protohistoric
enclosure, probably restored in places, was still conserved during late antiquity (Ugolini and Olive 2002, 354–356).

Much more interesting is the case of Carcassonne, the only city wall in the province of Narbonensis entirely built in opus vittatum mixtum. Occupying a small promenade of about 7 ha, it is closer to the fortifications of Novempopulana than those of Narbonensis (Fourdrin 2001; 2014); however, the foundations do not seem to have been built of re-used blocks. The dating of this remarkably preserved construction, longtime attributed to the end of the third century because of its architecture, seems, according to the latest research, to be from the end of the fourth century (CAG 11/2, 218–219). This dating is rather surprising, since it was a Latin colony in the early Empire that seems to have lost importance around AD 400 (so at the same time, or shortly after, the construction of the walls), since it does not appear in the Notitia Galliarum; however, Carcassonne became a bishopric but not before the sixth century.

As we finally look at the cities that were already civitas capital during the early Empire, we can see in several of them the construction of massive walls, built entirely with spolia. This is the case in Arles, Narbonne, Nîmes, and perhaps in Avignon (Fig. 5.5). In Arles, the existence of a late antique city wall has long been recognised, even by P.-A. Février. I will not discuss again the layout of this wall, now well known, or the historical and literary data that is widely presented elsewhere (Heijmans 2004, 85–111, 123–126; 2006; 2007; 2018). Since 2010, several studies and interventions have concerned the southern part of this wall, which showed the presence of two polygonal towers, one of which is still preserved today. These interventions have delivered some pottery, which seems to confirm the dating of the early fifth century as I had proposed in 2004.

In Nîmes, the existence of a wall from late antiquity was revealed in 1975. It followed, at a distance of about 55 m, occupying a small promenade of about 7 ha, it is closer to the fortifications of Novempopulana than those of Narbonensis (Fourdrin 2001; 2014); however, the foundations do not seem to have been built of re-used blocks. The dating of this remarkably preserved construction, longtime attributed to the end of the third century because of its architecture, seems, according to the latest research, to be from the end of the fourth century (CAG 11/2, 218–219). This dating is rather surprising, since it was a Latin colony in the early Empire that seems to have lost importance around AD 400 (so at the same time, or shortly after, the construction of the walls), since it does not appear in the Notitia Galliarum; however, Carcassonne became a bishopric but not before the sixth century.

As we finally look at the cities that were already civitas capital during the early Empire, we can see in several of them the construction of massive walls, built entirely with spolia. This is the case in Arles, Narbonne, Nîmes, and perhaps in Avignon (Fig. 5.5). In Arles, the existence of a late antique city wall has long been recognised, even by P.-A. Février. I will not discuss again the layout of this wall, now well known, or the historical and literary data that is widely presented elsewhere (Heijmans 2004, 85–111, 123–126; 2006; 2007; 2018). Since 2010, several studies and interventions have concerned the southern part of this wall, which showed the presence of two polygonal towers, one of which is still preserved today. These interventions have delivered some pottery, which seems to confirm the dating of the early fifth century as I had proposed in 2004.

In Nîmes, the existence of a wall from late antiquity was revealed in 1975. It followed, at a distance of about 55 m, the curvature of the amphitheatre. Entirely built in spolia, much of which was inscribed, the wall was recognised over a length of more than 40 m, and must, on the south side, have stopped against the Augustan wall. Recently, Richard Pellé has speculated that these blocks come from a single monument, perhaps a circus that was to be located directly south of the Augustan precinct (Pellé 2015). Recent observations seem to indicate that this construction does not circumvent the amphitheatre to the north but is grafted to its façade (Manniez and Pellé 2011). In fact, nothing proves that this wall was a part of the fortification of the entire city and the early Roman wall was at least partly preserved, although in some places it was destroyed in the fifth century. This late antique wall is certainly to be identified with the wall mentioned by Julian of Toledo (Historia Wambae regis, 18) in his discussion of when the Visigoths tried in 673 to seize the amphitheatre, which was then surrounded by a powerful wall. For my part, I have proposed a date in the fifth century for the wall’s construction, which seems to be confirmed by the discovery of a shard of DSP in a joint (Manniez and Pellé 2011, 139). Admittedly, this is only a terminus post quem, but for lack of other later elements, it must be taken into account.

Unlike Arles and Nîmes, an early Roman wall is not attested in Narbonne, although its absence would be surprising. Late antique sources show that the city was fortified from at least the fifth century, and a late antique fortification entirely built of big re-used stones is visible in the south-west corner of the palace of the archbishop. This fortification has been dated by historians of Narbonne to the end of the third century (Gayraud 1981, 284–286; CAG 11/1, 147), but we have argued for an early fifth-century date (Heijmans 2004, 120–122). Recent research has shown that the temple known as the ‘capitole’, which formed the north-western corner of the city wall, was demolished at the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century (Boularot et al. 2014). This could provide another argument to date the wall to this period.

As for the enclosure formerly proposed by Monique Clavel at Béziers (Clavel 1970, 246–257), its plan remains uncertain (Heijmans 2004, 118–119; CAG 34/4, 163–165), and only a part of a curtain with one or two towers seems to belong to an ancient fortification (Fig. 5.6). Located in the western part of the city, it seems to block the rocky outcrop overlooking the river Orb, where the Saint-Nazaire cathedral is located and seems to exclude the latter, which is contrary to ancient habits. Recently, Olivier Ginouvez has proposed that the rampart encompasses only the western end of the plateau, thus forming a citadel of 2.5 ha. (Ginouvez 2013, 239). This solution has the advantage of locating the cathedral intra muros, but it would be a rather rare case, as the few known fortifications of the south-east are real urban ramparts. A last possibility, but very hypothetical, is to find a parallel in the enclosure of Autun, where the end of the plateau where the cathedral is located was separated from the city by a reduced enclosure (Balcon-Berry 2011).

Like Narbonne and Béziers, Avignon is generally considered an open city, in the absence of the slightest trace of an enclosure of the High Empire; however, if we believe Gregory of Tours (HF II, 32 (500); VI, 1 and 26 (582/3)), the city seems to have been fortified in the sixth century. Possible elements of a late antique fortification have been observed since the nineteenth century and also in 1970–1980. This rampart, made of large blocks of spolia, seems to include the civic centre, which was fortified, and to cover about 18 ha. The few indications we have allow us to date this enclosure to between the end of the third century and the middle of the fifth century, and more probably towards the second date (Carru 2011; CAG 84/4, 114–119).

In other cities, no sure sections of a late enclosure have been found, but we can nevertheless assume that large public monuments would have served as a protection for the city, and that some would have been strengthened. In Orange,
5. The late Roman city walls in southern Gaul

for instance, the topographical study seems to indicate that habitation was grouped at the end of antiquity around the monumental centre, delimited still today in the west by the so-called ‘arceaux Pontillac’, the western closure of the Roman forum, which may have served as a kind of reduced enclosure (CAG 83/3, 140) (Fig. 5.6). Another location case, where the existence of a late antique fortification has been proposed, is Vienne on the northern Rhône valley between the Rhône to the west, the creek of Saint-Marcel to the south, Mount Pipet to the east, and the Gère to the north. This is an area of about 36 ha. Unfortunately, without clear archaeological remains, the very existence of this rampart has been questioned (TCCG III, 23; Helly 2013, 117–148). It seems unlikely, however, that the city remained until the Middle Ages in its Augustan wall, one of the largest in Gaul, which runs along the hills that dominate the site and seems difficult to defend during the multiple sieges that the city suffered between the fifth century and the ninth century. On the other hand, from the fifth century, necropoleis developed inside the Augustan walls, which is contrary to the ancient tradition that certainly still maintained burial extra muros during late antiquity, at least in Gaul. One can therefore wonder whether the existence of these late necropoleis on either side of what would have been the medieval city is not an argument to support the existence of a reduced enclosure from the fifth century and the ninth century. On the other hand, from the fifth century, necropoleis developed inside the Augustan walls, which is contrary to the ancient tradition that certainly still maintained burial extra muros during late antiquity, at least in Gaul. One can therefore wonder whether the existence of these late necropoleis on either side of what would have been the medieval city is not an argument to support the existence of a reduced enclosure from the fifth century (Heijmans 2004, 115–116; 2006, 67; Guyon, Nin 2014, 299). We can see the same situation in Fréjus, where the walls of the early Empire are well known and still largely standing, even if much of the ancient agglomeration seems to have been gradually abandoned from the beginning of the third century. It is probably around the cathedral in the south-west corner of the city that the dwellings were concentrated, but did it have its own protection from the late antique period? (Rivet et al. 2000, 485–486; Garcia 2011.) As for Aix, I am inclined to believe it.

It is not easy to date the late antique walls of Narbonensis, which have benefitted little from detailed studies, unlike the Aquitaine ramparts. Although objective dating criteria are often lacking, in many cases there have been arguments for dating these walls to the first half of the fifth century. I have proposed to explain these constructions in the context of the threat of the presence of Visigoths, who settled in 418 in Aquitania, in particular in Arles, the residence of the prefecture of Gaul. Although this threat may not have been as serious as the ancient sources suggest, the fact remains that during this period not only the cities but also the secondary agglomerations were fortified.

This brief presentation of the fortifications of late antiquity in the south of France shows the differences between the situations in Narbonensis and Aquitania, which are due in part to their different histories and to a more advanced state of knowledge for Aquitania, where the remains are more important. It would however be important to do the same kind of research in Narbonensis although the possibilities to do archaeological investigations in the urban centres are limited. Despite these differences, we can see in both regions two main periods. At the end of the third century and the first half of the fourth century, the cities north of the Garonne received new large enclosures, excluding the civic centres, while in the same period in the new Alpine cities, small
fortifications seem to have been built. The second period is situated at the beginning of or during the first half of the fifth century. It is at this time that small city walls were built in Novempopulana on hilltop sites, whereas in Narbonensis, several old colonies, most of them already fortified, had new, smaller enclosures, especially in Narbonensis I and the Rhône valley. This does not mean that in Narbonensis there were no fortifications on perched sites, but, not being cités capitals, they are not part of this study (see however Schneider 2007, 34–39; 2010, 137–141). Whether it was as protection against the Visigoths of Aquitania or against threats from the south of the Pyrenees, what matters is the omnipresence of late antique urban walls in southern Gaul, not only in Aquitania, where they had been attested for a long time, but also in the south-east of Gaul, particularly in the fifth century.

Notes
1 See Bachrach 2010 for an estimation of the time and organisation needed for the construction of these walls.
2 As attested in Poitiers (TCCG XVI, 219). The existence of ditches in Bordeaux has been questioned by Maurin 2019, 46–48.
3 The editors of ILA Pétr., 27–28, maintain an earlier date.

Bibliography

Abbreviations


Secondary sources

5. The late Roman city walls in southern Gaul


