THE FORTIFICATIONS OF ARCHAIC ROME: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the political meaning of the fortification of Rome in parallel with the social and urban transformations which took place in central Tyrrhenian Italy in the 6th century BC.

The city of Rome in the course of the 6th century BC was already one of the largest settlements in the central Mediterranean area, which makes this site one of the most advanced experiments in Archaic urban fortification. The paper focuses on the relationship between the fortifications and the evolution of settlement and contextualizes the evolution of the city walls in Rome with the social and political background of its community.

'Men make the city not walls': the famous words by Nicias as reported by Thucydides (VII.77.7) point out the social and political essence of any public building in a community. The way in which a city defines and defends its borders reveals its inner social structure, the level of technology, the economy, the interaction with the physical landscape; last but not least, it is also an expression of the way of doing war, which is, according to Karl von Clausewitz, 'nothing but the continuation of politics by other means'.'

Within such a framework we can also approach the evidence of the fortifications of early Rome.

The physical region of Italy where we find the largest fortifications since the Bronze Age is central Tyrrhenian Italy, corresponding to Southern Etruria and ancient Latium (the so-called Latium adiectum). This area is characterized by the presence of huge flat volcanic tufa hills with vertical cliffs, which create a landscape of naturally fortified areas divided by rivers and deep canyons.²

The nature of this landscape dictated the diffusion of nucleated settlements in the whole area since the Late Bronze Age: to fortify a settlement it was enough to keep the slope of a plateau clean and to place a ditch with an earthwork on the only side of the settlement which was open on the landward side. Usually the earthworks were made only of clay and lumps of tufa, but in the Final Bronze Age and Early Iron Age earthwork of Colle Rotondo, near Anzio, we find a sand earthwork internally reinforced by transverse cross beams.

We have no direct data on the Bronze Age fortifications at the site of Rome, but we can observe that the Final

¹ Howard & Paret 1984, 69.

 $^{^{\}scriptscriptstyle 2}$ Funiciello 1995 with bibliography.

 $^{^3}$ For a review of the Bronze Age fortified settlements in central Tyrrhenian Italy: Barbaro 2010 (Southern Etruria) and Alessandri 2013 (Latium).

⁴ About the Latin settlement of Colle Rotondo (Anzio): Cifani et al. 2013 with bibliography.

Bronze Age community which inhabited this area was mainly located on the naturally fortified Palatine and Capitoline Hills, controlling the nearby ford on the Tiber.⁵

This situation is drastically modified during the Iron Age (i.e. 9th-8th centuries BC), when we have further evidence of settlement on the Capitoline, Palatine and Quirinal Hills and also on the Velia, and of the gradual moving of the cemetery from the Forum Valley to the Esquiline Hill. As pointed out in 1959 by the influential German archaeologist Hermann Müller Karpe, after a phase characterized by different villages with their respective cemeteries, during the Iron Age the displacement of the Forum necropolis on the Esquiline Hill coincided with the definitive formation of a unitary centre, the size of which is about 150 hectares.6 This change occurs in parallel with the presence of already established huge fortified settlements in southern Etruria such as Veii, Caere, Tarquinii and Vulci, which started around the beginning of the 9th century BC.7 All these Early Iron Age communities are characterized by their huge size (i.e. more than 100 hectares) and for being located on naturally defended areas, mainly tufa plateaus. During this phase, the fortifications of Rome can be only surmised from the location of the Esquiline necropolis, which reveals an urban border, probably defined by an earthwork, correlating to the vertical slopes of the Quirinal, Capitoline, Palatine and southern Esquiline. In addition, we can include further works of terracing or fencing along the eastern slope of the Capitoline Hill and along the northern slopes of the Palatine. Along the Capitoline Hill, a segment of a wall, which dates to the end of the 8th century BC and was later rebuilt in the Archaic period, has recently been discovered near the Carcer.8

On the northern Palatine slopes a segment of a wall about 11 metres long has been stratigraphically excavated. This wall was rebuilt three times between the second half of the 8th and the first half of the 6th century BC, and it

may derive from an inner line of fortification or fencing around the Palatine, the largest and the most strategic of the seven hills of Rome.⁹

The establishment of a huge unified settlement in Rome during the course of the 8th century BC is accompanied by the development of a series of strongholds at the most strategic crossroads of the lower Tiberine valley, such as Ficana, Decima, Laurentina, La Rustica, Antemnae and Fidenae.¹⁰

The rise of the city of Rome is accompanied by the reorganization of the nearby territory which was controlled by means of small communities settled on naturally fortified sites of about 2–16 hectares, located along the borders.

Some elements of the ideology of the elite of such communities can be reconstructed from the luxury burials of the 8th-century tombs found at Decima or Laurentina, but also in Rome during the course of the 8th century we have funerary tomb groups which reveal the self-representation of the elite as warriors, as shown by the Esquiline tomb 94, which had a chariot, a bronze helmet, spears and a rich pottery set.¹¹

The urban transformation

By the end of the 7th century the rise of urbanization had led to a dramatic increase in building activity in Rome. Within a few decades there was a transformation from a building technique consisting of mud bricks and thatched roofs into a new architecture of squared stones, tiled roofs and monumental buildings. This transformation, which has been often summed up by the phrase from huts to houses, implies several transformations of the economy: concentration of manpower, further craft specialization and conceptual improvements such as

⁵ Alessandri 2013, 369–90 with bibliography; Fulminante 2014.

⁶ Müller-Karpe 1959; 1962, 61; Peroni 1960; Alessandri 2013, 369–90 with bibliography.

⁷ Pacciarelli 2000 with bibliography; Early Iron Age fortifications: Moretti Sgubini_2008, 171 (Vulci); Boitani 2008, 139 (Veii).

⁸ Fortini 2000; 2001.

⁹ Carandini & Carafa 2000, 139-60, 161-74, 181-9.

Alessandri 2013, 53–79 with bibliography; about the fortifications of Fidenae: Amoroso *et al.* 2005, 312–15; Amoroso & di Gennaro 2014; for a definition of the possible boundaries of the *ager romanus antiquus*: Colonna 1991; Cifani 2005 with bibliography; About Gabii: Helas 2013. The complex is dated to the Latial phase III A: Lanciani 1884, 346; Pinza 1905, 144–9; Bettelli 1997, 145 with bibliography. On the funerary ideology of the Latin elites between the 8th and the 7th century BC: Bietti Sestieri 1992; Waarsenburg 1995; Fulminante 2003 with bibliography.

¹² Cifani 2008 with bibliography; 2014.

¹³ Holloway 1994, 51-67.

standardization and modularity in building activity and also in the management of resources such as timber and stones.

In addition, during the course of the 6th century, impressive public building programmes took place in the city of Rome: the urban fortifications, the drainage and filling of marsh areas inside the walls and the construction of monumental temples, among them the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the largest sanctuary in central Tyrrhenian Italy.¹⁴

The social context

This phenomenon occurs in parallel with a change in funerary practice: from the beginning of the 6th century onwards (in terms of cultural phases, from the advanced Latial Phase IVB), graves became very poor, almost without objects and with a very austere funerary architecture.

A realistic interpretation proposed by Giovanni Colonna is that the aristocratic surplus was diverted from private consumption of prestige luxuries to expenditure in public contexts, particularly on sanctuaries, temples and public works. 15 This phenomenon took place in Rome and in the main cities of ancient Latium and it also seems to influence the nearby Etruscan community of Veii.¹⁶ As rightly pointed out by Tim Cornell, the public orientation of patterns of elite expenditure, with the appearance of sacred and secular buildings, can be seen as a further symptom of the rise (or better of the consolidation) of the state.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, this change had deep implications also for the ways in which luxury objects, above all metals, were hoarded: from private funerary deposits to public votive contexts, which appear now as related to monumental stone-built temples and sanctuaries, under the control of public authorities.¹⁸

The new fortifications

Around the second half of the 6th century a new circuit of urban fortification was built.

The new fortifications had a perimeter of 11 km which makes Rome one of the largest fortified settlements in the Archaic Mediterranean, and they enclosed an area of about 365 ha, corresponding to the traditional seven hills; during this phase the city also included the Aventine and the northern area of the Esquiline (Figs 1–2).¹⁹

The topography of the Archaic Roman walls has been fully described and discussed in the works of eminent scholars since the 19th century.²⁰ Here it is stressed that once again the Archaic city walls took advantage of the local geomorphology, by using firstly the natural defences already offered by the vertical slope of the tufa plateau, which were possibly improved by means of rock-cut and squared stone walls built on the tops of the hills. On the north-western side of the city, where the Esquiline plateau was linked to the hinterland and for this reason was particularly vulnerable, the most expensive fortification work was constructed, by means of a ditch and an earth rampart faced by a squared stone wall, the well-known Esquilinus agger.

To summarize, the new fortifications included:

- 1. vertical cuts on the slopes of the tufa hills;
- 2. raised and regularized edges of the hills by means of earthworks and retaining walls;
- 3. ditch and earthworks (e.g. Esquiline agger);
- 4. walls possibly reinforced by internal earthworks and ditches in the bottom valley areas;
- 5. gateways possibly supplemented by towers (e.g. the Porta Collina);
- 6. pathways on the tops of the walls;
- 7. various complementary works, e.g. outside pathways or roads parallel to the fortification line, internal retaining walls of the earthworks, drainage ways and wooden bridges across the ditches;

¹⁴ Forum Valley: Ammermann 1990; 1996; Ammermann & Filippi 2004; Palatine northern slope: Carandini & Carafa 2000, 208; Colosseum Valley: Panella 1990. Comparisons with Etruscan and Latin cities: Cifani 2008, 308–13; 2012b, with bibliography.

¹⁵ Colonna 1977 and also: Bartoloni 1987; Bartoloni et al. 2009 with bibliography; Palmieri 2009.

¹⁶ Drago Troccoli 1997, 268–78 with bibliography.

¹⁷ Cornell 1995, 105–8.

¹⁸ Nijboer 2001, 40-3.

¹⁹ Cifani 1998; 2008, 45-73, 255-64.

²⁰ E.g. Nibby 1821; Lanciani 1871; Parker 1874; Säflund 1932; Lugli 1933; more recently: Coarelli 1995; Andreussi 1996; Battaglini 2004, 2006; Barbera & Magnani Cianetti 2008.

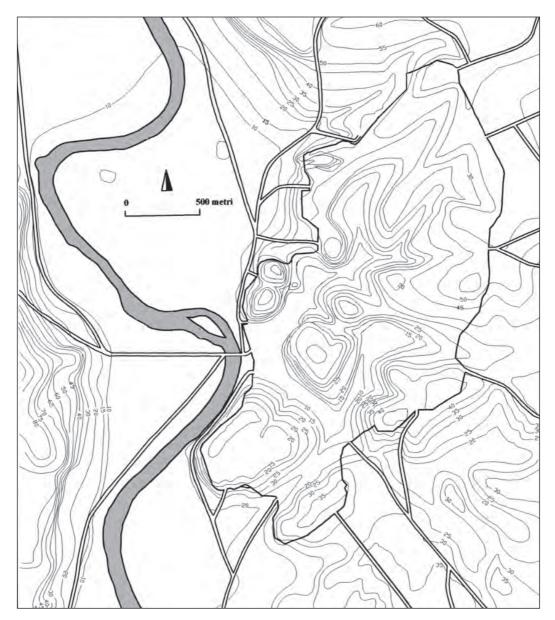


Fig. 1 Rome, Archaic walls.

- 8. inside respect area around the walls to move the troops:
- 9. outside respect area in order to optimize the view from the top of the walls and to deprive attackers of covered positions.

The chronology of these walls has been fully debated in the scholarship of recent decades. The main evidence for the chronology of the walls includes stratigraphic and topographic data, information about building techniques, literary tradition and comparative material. On the Quirinal Hill, a layer accumulated the Archaic walls was dug last century; the archaeologist found a fragment of Attic red-figured pottery, dated by Sir John Beazley to the end of the 6th century BC.²¹ In 1999, as a result of modern building activity in the area beneath the Stazione

²¹ Gjerstad 1960, 40, note 3.

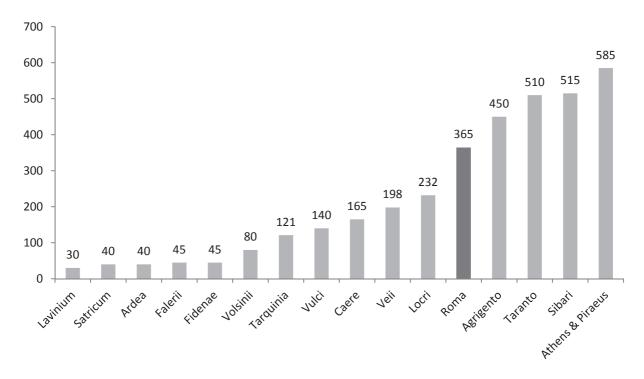


Fig. 2 Histogram of Archaic fortified cities, by size in hectares (after Cifani 2008).

Termini, a small segment of the Archaic agger was found and few weeks later demolished; the archaeologists recorded the presence of Archaic pottery in the earth fill of the walls.²² In two other cases archaeologists recorded the presence of an artificial layer of earth beneath the foundation of the wall on the Quirinal and Esquiline; this layer was also filled with fragments of *bucchero*, the typical pottery used in Rome and Etruria between the 7th and 5th centuries BC.²³

There is also another important element to date the walls: the topographical distribution of the Archaic cemeteries. It is well known that Roman law did not allow intra-mural burials, ²⁴ and on the Esquiline Hill, where the most important early Roman cemetery was found, the tombs dated to the Archaic periods are always outside the walls, whereas the tombs of previous phases are

dislocated in areas inside and outside the future Archaic walls²⁵ (Figs 3-4).

The Archaic fortification is characterized by grey granular squared tufa blocks. This kind of tufa was used for public buildings mainly in the Archaic phase as shown for instance by the podium of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus or by the podium of the temple of Dioscuri. A further element of chronology is offered by the system of measurement adopted for cutting the majority of the Archaic walls' blocks: the so called Italic foot (27.2 cm), which was used mainly in the 6th and 5th centuries BC.²⁶

Consideration to the whole corpus of literary tradition about Archaic Rome, which is very coherent regarding the presence of walls around the city when recounting events associated with the late regal period or the

 $^{^{\}rm 22}\,$ Filippa & Sbarra 2001; see also Säflund 1932, 152–4 with bibliography.

²³ Cifani 2008, 70-1.

²⁴ E.g. Lex XII tab.: 10.1: hominem mortuum in urbe ne sepelito neve urito; for a discussion about the exceptions to this rule: Gusberti 2008; Gallone 2008; Guidi 2008 with bibliography.

²⁵ Colonna 1977 (the paper also includes a critical review of some previous hypotheses about the possible evidence of isolated Archaic or mid-Republican tombs inside the city walls); Colonna 1996, 338; Bartoloni 1987, 152–5.

²⁶ Cifani 2008, 221–2, 239–40.

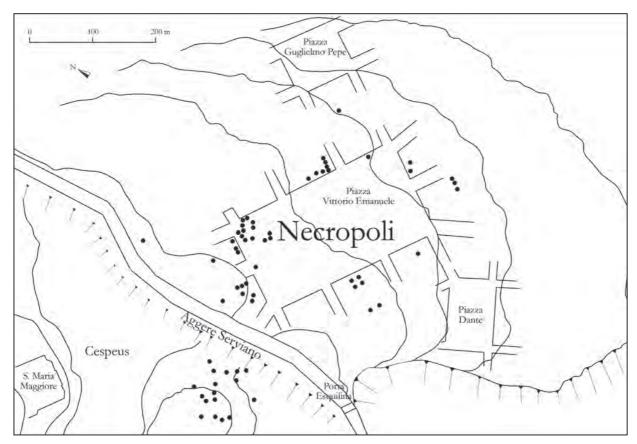


Fig. 3 The Esquiline necropolis between the 8th and the 6th centuries BC (after Bartoloni 1987).

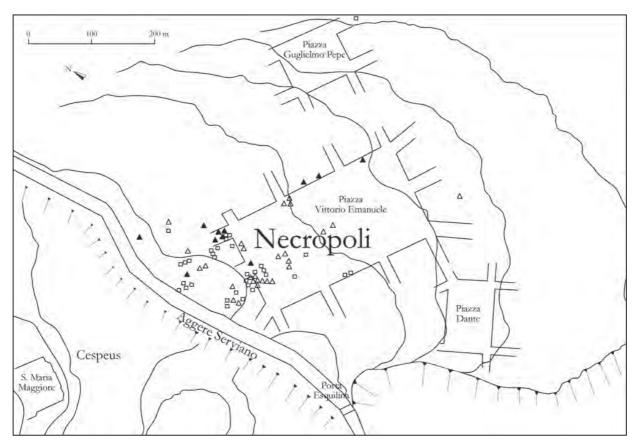


Fig. 4 The Esquiline necropolis between the 6th and the 4th centuries BC (after Bartoloni 1987).

Early Republic, could be a further element to date the walls. 27

Urban comparisons with the nearby Etruscan and Latin settlements show that all the cities had rings of walled fortifications in the Archaic period.²⁸ If Archaic Rome was without city walls, it should mean that she was already strong enough to survive without fortifications, exactly like the contemporary city of Sparta, which had the best army in the whole of Greece,²⁹ or rather like Rome in the early imperial phase, when the city lived without urban fortifications for almost three centuries.

The view that Archaic Rome was unable to build a fortification of 11 km and only fortified the individual hills³⁰ must be rejected for a number of simple reasons:

- 1. There is clear evidence of grey granular tufa squared blocks composing fortifications in between the individual hills and in the low-lying areas or valleys, as exemplified by the walls found between the Forum Boarium and the Aventine (near the basilica of St Maria in Cosmedin)³¹ and along the southern slope of the Quirinal (Salita del Grillo);³²
- 2. On the contrary, there is no evidence of fortification works along the inner slopes of the seven hills;
- 3. Some very important public areas of the city located

- in the valley bottoms, for instance the Forum, would have been left undefended;
- 4. Last but not least because, ironically, the sum of the length of the fortifications of each hill would have been at least twice the length of the so-called 'Servian walls'.

Obviously some hills, with their retaining walls around the sharp slopes, could also have functioned as single fortifications, as is possible in the case of the Capitoline Hill during the Gallic sack of 390 BC,³³ but this does not imply that the defensive system of the city in the Archaic phase was based on the single hills.

City walls: economy and politics

The realization of the new fortifications was probably the result of a long-term project. To have a vague idea of the manpower required for the execution of the walls we can analyse the Esquiline *agger*: it was 40 metres in width and 12 metres high, forming a barrier at least 1100 metres in length (Fig. 5). This means that the earthwork was about 286,000 m³ (excluding the tufa blocks of the façades), which is the equivalent of about 171,600 working days, or almost two years, with 300 men digging on the site.³⁴

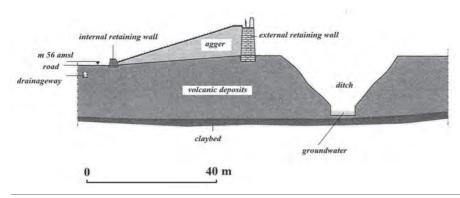


Fig. 5 Section of the Esquilinus *agger* in the 4th century BC (after Cifani 2012a).

²⁷ E.g. Cic. *De Rep.*, 2.6.11; Liv. 1.36.1; 1.44.3; Dion. Hal. 3.67.4; 9.68.3; Strab. *Geogr.*, 5.3.7; Plin. *HN*, 3.5. 66–7; Liv. 2.11.3; 2, 51, 1–3; 2.64.3; Dion. Hal. 9, 24.4; for a systematic review: Begni 1952. For a synthesis of the debate about the value of literary sources and early Roman history: Cornell 2005 with bibliography.

²⁸ Latium: Guaitoli 1984; Quilici 1994; Etruria: Colonna 1986, 496–502; Fontaine 2002 with bibliography: Chianciano Acts 2008; about Tarquinii: Bonghi Jovino 2010 with bibliography; about Caere: Bellelli 2014 with bibliography. For a catalogue of the fortified pre-Roman sites of the middle Tiber Valley: Cifani 2003 with bibliography.

²⁹ For a list of the fortified Greek cities: Hansen & Nielsen 2004, 135–43; for a catalogue of the Archaic Greek fortifications: Frederiksen 2011.

³⁰ Säflund 1932, 164–7; Bernard 2012, 37–8.

 $^{^{\}rm 31}\,$ Lanciani 1886, 274; Cifani 2008, 61, n. 12 with bibliography.

 $^{^{32}}$ Lugli 1933, 22, n. 4; Cifani 2008, 63–6, n. 15 with bibliography.

³³ For a discussion of the archaeological evidence for the walls and fortifications of the Capitoline Hill: Mazzei 1998; Fabbri 2008 with bibliography; about the literary and archaeological evidence regarding the Gallic sack (mainly in the area of Forum Caesaris): Delfino 2009, 2014 with bibliography.

³⁴ Cifani 2010 with bibliography.

The source of manpower for building the Archaic city walls is probably to be found among the lower classes of the population of the city itself, in terms of corvée, but we can also consider the tribute from some of the surrounding Latin cities. The rapid growth of public building activity required huge manpower which could have been available only by imposing tribute on external communities. The literary sources, above all Livy and Dionysius, describe corvée with the term 'munia', 35 above all for the public building of Tarquinius the Proud, 36 but they also link the building of each Archaic temple to military victories and war booties.

War booty probably included not only precious objects or cattle, but also manpower represented by prisoners of war or by the inhabitants of a conquered enemy city, who could have been temporarily employed as forced manpower, above all for works which required unskilled labour forces, such as digging and quarrying. These are activities which can be included in the generic definition of *ad metalla* work, a kind of sentence the invention of which is attributed by literary tradition to Tarquinius the Proud.³⁷ In addition, literary sources for the Greek world describe many episodes of the use of prisoners of war for public building plans: we can recall above all the use of Carthaginian prisoners, taken at the battle of Himera of 480 BC by the tyrant Theron, as a labour force for the building programmes at Agrigentum.³⁸

But what could have been the reasons for investing such huge resources in building new fortifications? There are at least two political aims in building new city walls. The first one is the more obvious: to reinforce and enlarge the city against external enemies. A second reason can be linked to internal politics and social struggle: the aim of the community, led by kings, to reinforce the authority of public institutions by concentrating huge amounts of manpower in public building plans and to emphasize the role of a 'regular', public army against the power of aristocratic groups. The political meaning of the city walls was clearly stated by Aristotle: 'As to fortified positions, what is expedient is not the same for

all forms of constitution alike; for example, a citadel-hill is suitable for oligarchy and monarchy, and a level site for democracy; neither is favourable to an aristocracy, but rather several strong positions'.³⁹

For these reasons the literary tradition on the Servian city walls can be considered as coherent with the tradition on his military reforms, ⁴⁰ but it also finds parallels in the significant disappearance of warriors' and elite tombs in the course of the 6th century as evidence of the new rules on austerity and isonomy imposed on the elite of the city. ⁴¹

The line of the fortification of Archaic Rome survived until the late Republic, but many sectors of the walls were heavily restored or rebuilt in the 4th century BC. This restoration is clearly visible along the external side of the Esquiline *agger*, which is retained by a wall of yellowish lithoid tufa squared blocks, while the internal side was still retained by the original Archaic wall (Figs 6–7).⁴² Another context where the mid-Republican restoration is very clear is on the Aventine, near the Basilica of St Sabina, where we find a segment wall composed of grey granular squared tufa blocks which was restored by means of yellowish lithoid tufa blocks.⁴³



Fig. 6 The yellowish lithoid tufa squared block of the mid-Republican phase of the Esquilinus *agger* (author's photo 2011).

³⁵ The word munia is linked with moenia, according to Fest. 137 L; Varr. LL 5, 141.

³⁶ Cassius Hemina fr. 15 P; Liv. I.59.9; Dion. Hal. IV.44.

³⁷ Ioh. Antioch., fr. 36 (ed. Müll.); Ioh. Lid., de mens., 4. 24; Suida, s.v. Souperbos; Isid. Orig. 5. 27. 23; see also: Milazzo 1993 with bibliography.

³⁸ Diod. Sic. 11, 25, 2-4.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* 7.1330 b; translation by Rackham 1932; see also the memory of the Turris Mamilia in the *Subura* (Festus 131; 178; *CIL* VI, 33837 = *ILS* 7242), probably an aristocratic fortified building inside the city before the Servian reform.

⁴⁰ Ampolo 1988; Cornell 1995, 173–97; Clerici 2009; 2010 with bibliography.

⁴¹ About the aristocratic clans and gentilician institutions between the 6th and 5th centuries: Smith 2006 with bibliography.

⁴² Cifani 2008, 223–4; Panei & Dell'Orso 2008; Volpe 2014 with bibliography.

⁴³ Quoniam 1947; Cifani 2008, 59-61.



Fig. 7 The internal retaining wall of the Esquilinus agger: rescue excavations at Stazione Termini, 1948 (after Cifani 2008).

The reason for adopting this material, which is much harder than the grey granular tufa of the previous Archaic phase, is linked not only to its ready availability after the conquest of the territory of Veii, but also to its greater suitability in resisting artillery strike. Fourth-century military history is characterized by the introduction of the use of catapults and other machines to besiege fortifications, as in the case of the conquest of the Punic city of Motia in Sicily planned by the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius I in 397 BC.⁴⁴ The development of technologies and war strategies is also shown by specific works on this topic written by Democritus of Abdera and Aeneas Tacticus in the course of the century, which mark the beginning of poliorcetics in the ancient Greek world.⁴⁵

Within such a framework we could understand the reasons behind the massive restorations of some of the most vulnerable sectors of the city walls in 4th-century BC Rome, and their update with the new strategies of siege warfare. However, the circuit of the Archaic city walls survived until the 1st century BC and some of the Archaic city walls were also transformed into monumental arches, such as the Porta Esquilina or the Porta Coelimontana. The whole complex of the fortification represented one of the landmarks of the collective memory which linked the Roman community not only to the events of the late regal period, but also to the shaping of the authority of the *res publica*.

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⁴⁴ Diod. Sic. 14.42.1; 14. 50. 4; see also: Garlan 1974, Sáez Abad 2005, Rihll 2007 with bibliography.

 $^{^{\}scriptscriptstyle 45}\,$ Bettalli 1998; Loreto 1995; Hellmann 2010, 317–42 with bibliography.

 $^{^{46}}$ Cifani 2012a, with bibliography.

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