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# The wall-top of the Late-Roman defences at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges: interim report

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## Introduction

Between 1993 and 2001 a British team led by S. Esmonde Cleary, M. J. Jones and the author examined the Late-Roman defences of the 'ville haute' of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (SW France). The project fell within the overall theme of studying the transition from the classical to the late antique/early mediaeval town, a principal objective of the international 'Projet Collectif de Recherches' at Saint-Bertrand. The primary aim of the British investigation was to document and analyse the construction of the Late-Roman defences and their subsequent development through a combination of architectural survey and excavation. During the nine seasons of fieldwork, the architectural remains of the entire wall circuit were analysed and 11 separate trenches excavated. The evidence obtained from these excavations dates the wall's construction to the early years of the 5th c.<sup>1</sup>

The architectural survey included collating old photographs and unpublished excavation records; preparing a plan showing the surviving original and rebuilt stretches of the walls; making a general survey of the principal external and internal elevations, and recording the outline of all visible Roman facing and corework, vertical and horizontal breaks, offsets, tile courses, drains, re-used masonry and later building and repairs; making stone-by-stone drawings of the best surviving elevations and features; making a detailed analysis of the wall fabric, interpreting its building periods and phases of construction, and identifying changes in alignment of the defences, the presence of external towers, work-gang divisions, and so on. For ease of reference, the circuit was divided into 26 sectors on the basis of criteria such as change of alignment and state of preservation.<sup>2</sup>

In 1999 and 2000, work was concentrated at the SW angle of the defences (Sectors 21 and 22). This relatively short stretch of curtain was subjected to a lengthy and detailed study, partly because it exhibits the best preserved features of the Roman circuit but also because its interpretation is especially complicated. The most significant, and unexpected, discovery of 1999 was a section of the original Roman wall-walk, external cornice and parapet at the summit of Sector 22. Fortuitously, this masonry had survived *in situ*, embedded in the core of the post-Roman and mediaeval curtain which was built on top of the Roman wall. Such features are extremely rare in Roman defences and the example at Saint-Bertrand therefore merited further study. In 2000, permission was obtained from the Conservation Régionale des Monuments Historiques to expose and study the surviving remains of the Roman wall top in Sector 22. This work included: removing vegetation from the wall top and part of the internal elevation; systematically dismantling the remains of the later curtain (mostly wall core with some facing); taking detailed photographs and making analytical drawings of the plan, cross-sections, and external and internal elevations of the Roman, post-Roman and mediaeval remains to illustrate the features, building periods and construction phases; studying the Roman architectural fragments re-used

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1 Work is well advanced on the final report, which will be submitted in 2002 for publication in the series *Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges: Etudes d'Archéologie Urbaine* in 2003. For a description and interpretation of the preliminary findings for 1993-97, an assessment of the significance of the defences at Saint-Bertrand, and discussion of their place within the debate on the functional and symbolic aspects of Late Roman urban fortifications, see S. Esmonde Cleary, M. Jones and J. Wood, "The late Roman defences at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (Haute-Garonne): interim report," *JRA* 11 (1998) 343-54. See also M. J. Jones, A. S. Esmonde Cleary and J. Wood, "Les remparts de la ville haute de Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges 1993-1997: rapport préliminaire," *Aquitania* 14 (1996) 65-71.

2 The methodology for the architectural survey was devised by the author: see J. Wood (ed.), *Buildings archaeology: applications in practice* (Oxford 1994), id., "Le Castrum de Tours: étude architecturale du rempart du Bas-Empire," *Recherches sur Tours* 2 (1983) 11-60; id., "The fortifications," in A. Northedge, *Studies on Roman and Islamic Amman, 1: history, site and architecture* (Oxford 1993) 105-27.