

The wall-top at *castrum Bigorra* (Saint-Lézer): an alternative interpretation and reconstruction

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The Late Roman military site of *castrum Bigorra* (Saint-Lézer) lies c.18 km north of Tarbes in the département of Hautes-Pyrénées.¹ The site forms part of a regional group of Late Roman defences in the province of *Novempopulana* characterized by hill-top locations, relatively small enclosed areas, narrow walls, irregularly spaced towers, and the absence of *spolia* in the foundations.²

Between 1998 and 2005, a research programme led by C. Darles sought to identify and survey the visible remains of the wall circuit, large sections of which now lie fallen and displaced due to erosion of the sloping ground. The aim was to record and analyze the mode of construction, the form of the surviving wall-top, and the overall morphology of the defences. A project to display and interpret the site is now envisaged, including a full-scale replica of a part of the curtain wall.³

The form of the wall-top at Saint-Lézer

As reported in *JRA* 15 (2002), evidence for the form of the wall-top was recovered from the western sector of the circuit (fragments "A", "D" and especially "E") and from the site of a probable N gate (fragment "100").⁴ These observations coincided with the discovery of further evidence for Late Roman wall-tops in SW France at Carcassonne⁵ and at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (perhaps the best surviving example in Europe).⁶ At Saint-Lézer, only the basal remains of the wall-top survive, seen best in fragment "E" (figs. 1-2) where a protruding bed of mortar is laid mostly across the central part of the wall-top. The mortar bed is smooth and level. Its roughly straight edges are set back from the line of the denuded external and internal faces of the wall. This has the effect of creating a slight longitudinal step in the masonry on each side. Protruding from the surface of the mortar bed, and against its edge closest to the external wall face, are three more or less equidistant square stumps of mortar and stone. A series of 7 square-sectioned slots interrupt the mortar bed. These are evenly spaced but alternately long and short. The longer slots traverse the full width of the mortar bed and are seated against the right-hand side of the square stumps of mortar and stone. The shorter slots penetrate only half the distance into the mortar bed. All the slots traverse the masonry at the base of the longitudinal step above the internal wall face. There is no indication that they continued beyond the mortar bed to traverse the equivalent step above the external face.

1 For background information and full bibliography, see J.-F. Le Nain, D. Schaad and C. Servelle, "La cité de Tarbes et le *castrum Bigorra*-Saint Lézer," *Aquitania* 14 (1996) 73-104; C. Darles, "Etat des recherches concernant les fortifications de Saint-Lézer, un *castrum* de l'antiquité tardive en *Novempopulanie*, province d'Aquitaine," in A. Rodríguez Colmenero and I. Rodà de Llanza (edd.), *Miradas de ciudades romanas en el Occidente del imperio* (Lugo 2007) 187-99.

2 As well as Saint-Lézer, the sites include Auch, Bazas, Lectoure, Lescar, Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, and Saint-Lazier-en-Couserans. For a description and discussion of the context of this regional group, see S. Esmonde Cleary and J. Wood, *Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges* III. *Le rempart de l'antiquité tardive de la ville haute* (Pessac 2006) 721-26.

3 Darles (supra n.1) 187.

4 C. Darles, A. Badie and J.-J. Malmay, "Le couronnement du rempart de Saint-Lézer (*Castrum Bigorra*) en *Novempopulanie*," *JRA* 15 (2002) 317-24; Darles (supra n.1) 193.

5 J. P. Fourdrin, "Vestiges d'un parapet antique près de la tour du Sacraire Saint-Sernin à Carcassonne," *JRA* 15 (2002) 311-16.

6 J. Wood, "The wall top of the Late-Roman defences at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges: interim report," *JRA* 15 (2002) 297-309. The discoveries are now published in full, together with detailed comparative evidence for Greek and Roman defensive wall-tops: Esmonde Cleary and Wood (supra n.2), especially 128-33.