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The late Roman defences at Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges (Haute Garonne): interim report

Simon Esmonde Cleary, Michael Jones and Jason Wood

Introduction

The town known in antiquity as *Lugdunum* or *Convenae*, and since the Middle Ages as Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, lies where the upper valley of the Garonne passes out of the Pyrenean piedmont into the plains of Gascony. The ancient site consists of a Gallo-Roman *civitas* capital on the floor of the valley, dominated by the hill on which now stand the mediaeval cathedral and the *ville haute* enclosed within the late Roman walls (fig. 1). The archaeology of the town on the valley floor and its development from the 1st c. B.C. down to the 6th c. A.D. and later were admirably summarised and presented to an anglophone audience by J. Guyon and his collaborators in *JRA* 4 (Guyon *et al.* 1991). But apart from the theatre cut into its NE face, the hill was not discussed — a reflection of the lack of excavation and research which had taken place in this area. This interim report sets out to present the preliminary results of work conducted between 1993 and 1997 by a British team directed by the authors.

Background to the work on the upper town

The late Roman walls of St Bertrand are some 900 m long, enclosing a roughly triangular area of c.4 ha (c.10 acres) (cf. fig. 2). The ground within them is not level but slopes steeply up to the high point within the SE defences on which the cathedral now stands. The Roman work is for the most part easily distinguished from that of later periods by its regular, coursed core-work or by its facing in *petit appareil* with courses of brick/tile. At several points the wall is penetrated by marble-lined drains to permit the evacuation of water from the interior (cf. figs. 7-8). On the NW side of the defences the core-work is visible over most of the present outer face, though almost all the facing has fallen away or been robbed. On the NE side much Roman core or facing survives, though often patched in the mediaeval period, when also the foundations which had been exposed by erosion were underpinned. By contrast, on the SE side the exterior face is now almost all mediaeval and later work, masking or destroying the Roman fabric, particularly where the walls support the cathedral and cloister.

The earliest mention of the defences is to be found in the account given by Gregory of Tours (*Hist. Franc.* 7.34-39) of the siege of the town by King Guntram in his war against the pretender Gundovald in 585. Gregory describes a fortified hilltop town with an episcopal church. A covered way linked the upper town to a spring within a fortified tower at the foot of the hill.

The first modern work on the fortifications was undertaken by R. Lizop in the early part of this century (Lizop 1931). Though his ambitious scheme for an extensive early-imperial fortification of the lower town has proved illusory, his recognition that the walls which encircle the upper town were of Roman origin has stood the test of time. The first excavations in the upper town, and more specifically on the defences, were undertaken by the father of St Bertrand's archaeology, B. Sapène (cf. Schenk 1985). In 1942, 1957, 1965 and 1967 he excavated a number of *sondages* against the inner face of the wall to test its character and the associated stratigraphy. These excavations demonstrated clearly that the walls were of late Roman type and free-standing with no earth bank, but no dating material was recovered. Between 1967 and 1993 there was no further excavation on the defences, and they are not discussed in the synthetic volume on St Bertrand by May (1986).

The significance of the defences has been brought to wider attention by L. Maurin in his considerations of late-Roman urban defences in SW Gaul (Maurin 1992; Garmy and Maurin 1996; Maurin in Aupert *et al.* 1996, 63-65). This work has established that the walls of St Bertrand