

Urban fortification and defensive strategy in fifth and sixth century Italy: the case of Terracina

N. Christie and A. Rushworth

Introduction

The ancient town of Terracina in southern Lazio, dominated by the height of Monte S. Angelo, and overlooking the sprawling modern coastal resort, is deservedly famous not only for the extensive archaeological remains of all periods (from Volsco-Roman to early mediaeval), but in particular for the survival of a circuit wall endowed with towers and wall-walk, and featuring relatively minimal mediaeval restructuring. Despite this surprising survival the city walls of Terracina have been paid little attention and have only been considered in depth by Lugli.¹

In 1926 Lugli proposed, on the basis of somewhat tenuous historical data and structural comparisons, that the powerful curtain walls of Terracina were a Byzantine construction, datable to the early years of the Gothic War (A.D. 535-553).² This chronology has been followed without question by historians ever since, to the effect that Terracina, like the bastion affixed to the republican citadel of Ardea and the documented restorations by Belisarius to the Aurelian walls at Rome, has been regarded as one of the prime examples of Byzantine military architecture in Italy, to rank with the well-known 6th c. works in Africa.³ This paper seeks to challenge the established chronology and to reassess in the light of new data the importance of the city walls and their place in our understanding of the development of defences and defensive-systems in Italy in late antiquity.

Details of construction of the walls

Lugli's Byzantine circuit substantially encloses the area of the ancient Volsco-Roman citadel, traces of whose walls are still visible in the lower courses of the later curtain; these defences thus excluded the port area and the Roman town of the coastal plain, and also neglected the zone of Monte S. Angelo defended by the still extant curtain wall constructed under Sulla in c. 80 B.C.⁴ The 'mura bizantine' gird a quadrangular area of c. 110/160 x 340 m., and are best preserved on the northeast side (fig.2), whereas the line of the walls on the southwest is heavily obscured due to the southward extension of the town and its defences which occurred in the 10th and 11th c.⁵ (fig.1).

As noted, these walls often directly overlie and in parts incorporate stretches of the earlier Volsco-Roman circuit, which is easily distinguishable by its cyclopean (or occasionally polygonal) construction; the upper wall fabric consists of small, roughly-cut, coursed blocks of local stone, solidly mortar-bonded. In contrast with the towers, the circuit wall shows very few tile courses, except above the string-course marking the level of the rampart-walk. There is limited evidence for the reuse of Roman material in the wall, although the fragmentary inscriptions *CIL* 10, 6388-89, 6405, 6418 and 8399 are claimed to have derived from the circuit, with at least two from the lower courses of towers B and D; at the same time a

1 G. Lugli, *Anxur - Terracina*, (Forma Italiae, pars prima, vol.I, Rome 1926) (= Lugli, *Terracina*) nb. 58ff.

2 Lugli, *Terracina* xxi-xxii, xxv.

3 This date has been championed in particular by A. Lawrence, "Early medieval fortifications near Rome," *PBSR* 32 (1964) 89-90; Id. "A skeletal history of Byzantine fortification," *BSA* 78 (1983) 195; G. Schmiedt, "Le fortificazioni altomedievali in Italia viste dall'aereo," in *XV settimana di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* (Spoleto 1968) 864; G. Zander, "Ruines de fortifications d'époque byzantine et du haut-moyen âge dans le sud de l'Italie," *Actes Reunion Scientifique, Institut International des Châteaux Historiques VIII* (1968) 88; and cf. T. S. Brown, "Settlement and military policy in Byzantine Italy," *Papers in Italian Archaeology I*, eds. H. Blake, T. Potter, D. Whitehouse (BAR S41, Oxford 1978) 324.

4 Lugli, *Terracina* xxiv-xxv; A. Bianchini, *Storia di Terracina* (Terracina 1952) 112-13.

5 Lugli, *Terracina* xxv, 64.