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Michael Wolfe, *Walled Towns and the Shaping of France: From the Medieval to the Early Modern Era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. vi + 266 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $84.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-230-60812-2.

Review by Yair Mintzker, Princeton University

In its good moments, of which there are a great many, Michael Wolfe's new book on the relationship between the French crown and its walled towns in the medieval and early modern periods is a tour de force of historiographical synthesis. Clearly written and engaging throughout, it relates military, urban, and political history to one another, allowing the developments in each field to shed light on the others as well as on the history of France as a whole. It is a must read for military and urban historians of late medieval and early modern France and a highly recommended one for all historians who deal with these periods.

The book contains a brief preface, eight main chapters, and a short conclusion, all neatly organized into three parts. The first, entitled "The Walls Go Up" (chapters one through three), sketches the history of walled towns and other fortifications in what would eventually be known as France between 900 and 1325. It starts with a description of Gallo-Roman legacies of fortification, continues with a discussion of the founding of walled urban communities in the High Middle Ages, and ends with the onset of the Hundred Years' War. The second part, "The Walls Move Outward" (chapters four through six), discusses developments in urban fortifications from the Hundred Years' War through the assassination of Henri IV. Of special interest to Wolfe here is the close relationship between the rise of a centralized French state and the strengthening of walled cities in the same period. The third part of the book, "The Walls Come Down" (chapters seven and eight), explores the relationship between crown and walled cities from Louis XIII's reign to the eve of the French Revolution. The short conclusion at the end of this part explores, albeit very briefly, some later developments.

Historiographical syntheses can be divided into three categories. Some are less than the sum of their individual parts: they try to do too much and consequently tell us little we did not already know. Other works, just by surveying the latest literature on several aspects of a general topic, can serve as a good reference for specific aspects of their topic but still add little new to the topic itself. And then there are the best works: those that are greater than their individual parts because they allow us to see the interconnectedness of what are usually separate lines of investigation. It is perhaps only this latter type of books that are really worthy of the name "synthesis." Throughout most of its chapters, Wolfe's work falls into this third category.

The author is, of course, not the first to write about the emergence of a centralized French state, about changes in military technology and fortifications in the medieval and early modern periods, or about the history of individual urban fortifications. His work, however, is by far the best attempt so far to integrate what are usually distinct lines of investigation into a general synthesis in the French case. Regional historians know a great deal, for instance, about the fate of specific urban fortifications in the early seventeenth century, of whether they were properly

maintained, neglected, or actively demolished.[1] Political historians, too, have something to say about fortifications: the construction of Vauban's *ceinture de fer* and the *grande rasement* ordered by Richelieu play a role in almost any general history of France in the seventeenth century. And military historians--most importantly, Geoffrey Parker--have dealt extensively with the changing nature of fortifications in the early modern period.[2] Viewed exclusively from the perspective of individual cities, the state, or the military general, however, the picture is always incomplete: regional historians find it hard to venture beyond their own case studies and are hesitant (with good reason) to extrapolate too much from them, and political and even military historians often say very little about the effects central decisions had on specific cities. Only a synthesis that places these perspectives side by side can help all three lines of investigation overcome their respective limitations. Such a synthesis is exactly what Wolfe sets out to achieve in this book.

The main drawback of the book's introduction--and this is also a compliment in disguise--is that it does not highlight enough the significance of Wolfe's project. True, the book's main arguments are contained here: that walled towns "played a decisive … set of roles in [France's] history;" that "the historical genesis of modern France was over the last millennium a largely ongoing urban phenomenon;" and, most importantly, that "the history of France can be read on the walls of its towns" (p. 1). But in the introduction to a book that so often represents a superb synthesis of the secondary literature on urban fortifications one would have also expected an attempt to situate Wolfe's own work. What did other historians have to say about the relationship between crown and walled towns? What is new about the methodology Wolfe employed? And, most importantly, what is it that makes one learn so much about France in general by looking at the walls of individual towns? Not tackling these important questions head on in his introduction, Wolfe makes it unnecessarily hard for his readers to immediately appreciate the significance of his work.

One example (of many) for Wolfe's synthetic achievement can be found in the book's seventh chapter, which discusses the demolition of urban fortifications under Richelieu (the so-called *grande rasement*). This story is usually told through the prism of high politics or through the fate of particular fortifications, especially that of La Rochelle.[3] By surveying in an almost encyclopedic manner what we know about both state actions and developments on the ground, Wolfe shows how even at the height of the "absolutist" policies of Richelieu only very few towns actually demolished their walls. Richelieu's policies of *rasement*, in other words, were absolutist in their language much more than in their physical effects on individual towns. Moreover, many of the cities that kept their fortified footprint in this time period did so not as the result of a successful opposition to the king. Rather, they remained fortified because their elites were incorporated into the state apparatus and were consequently granted the privilege of retaining the walls (p. 137).

This might seem a rather technical point, but in fact it carries far-reaching implications. Recent historiographical debates about the nature of the relationship between the French crown and its cities during the seventeenth century are characterized by two opposing arguments. Some historians--Nora Temple and Bernard Chevalier, for instance--have claimed that the Crown's relationship with its cities was based on subjugation,[4] while more recent studies emphasized the cooperative relationship between crown and urban elites in some cities.[5] But how can one extrapolate from a few cases and reach a conclusion about France as a whole? Was the rise of "absolutist" control of French towns more indebted to negotiation or to imposition? Wolfe's brilliant approach to this question is the following one. If the demolition or maintenance of urban fortifications is an indication of whether the crown imposed its will on, or compromised with, urban elites--and Wolfe presents convincing arguments for this view--then in most cases the expansion of the crown's authority was done through negotiation and not imposition.

Conducting detailed research on the politics of every town and city in France to explore this question is neither practical nor necessary. Count the walls, Wolfe urges us, and you shall have a good (though of course not perfect) indication about the power relations between crown and cities. In this case as in so many others in his book, Wolfe demonstrates his point in the introduction: France's history, indeed, can be read on the walls of its fortified towns.

Whenever Wolfe considers a familiar question by synthesizing different perspectives, the result is similar to that of his discussion of Richelieu's *grande rasement*. This is true, among many other instances, in his discussion of the foundation of *bastides* (the walls of these urban communities, which, Wolfe claims, were not an expression of an opposition to the crown but rather of the *bastides'* inherent connection to it, pp. 42-50); when he writes about the relationship between the construction of cathedrals and urban fortification in the Middle Ages (often two separate, yet related, stages in urban developments, pp. 39ff.); or when he discusses the crucial role of urban fortifications during the Hundred Years' War (more important, he claims, than those of the war's famous great battles; pp. 57-74). The best parts of the book--roughly chapters three through seven--are full of important insights. Here Wolfe creates a textual tapestry that weaves together both a superb survey of existing secondary literature and the author's own contribution to it.

Less convincing are large sections of chapters one, two, and eight of the book. Here, either because of the lack of relevant secondary literature or because he does not distinguish enough between different political actors, Wolfe's arguments are sometimes not fully developed. One example for this can be found in chapter two ("Lords and Towns," especially pp. 27-30), which, despite its title, often overlooks the distinction between lordly castles and urban fortifications. To describe the construction and especially the demolition of city walls and feudal castles almost in the same breath is to assume that they belonged to the same political actors and is consequently to blur the line between urban community and feudal lords. The distinct trajectories of urban and lordly powers in this period are consequently blurred as well. The same is sometimes true of specific historical agents. While Henry II (Plantagenet) did rely on castles and towns to control the French part of his empire (pp. 21-27), he also demolished close to two thousand castles in England itself! Without considering this fact one can reach only a very partial understanding of the working of the Angevin Empire.

The book's eighth chapter and its short conclusion suffer from a different kind of weakness, though this, too, can also be construed as a veiled compliment. The fact of the matter is that we do not have at present anything like Wolfe's book about any other European country. Existing statistics about the construction, location, and demolition of urban fortifications in England or central Europe are incomplete at best, and thorough syntheses like Wolfe's have simply not been attempted in other national contexts. This is the reason why Wolfe's claim that "the shift from walled to open cities was a Europe-wide phenomenon in the seventeenth century" (p. 159) is at best a hunch (most German towns, for instance, *began* to lose their walls only in the mid-eighteenth century). This is also the reason why Wolfe's claim in his conclusion that "[t]his study has highlighted the distinctly urban origins of much of what makes France so distinct" (p. 171) is not supported by any evidence in the text. With little in the way of reliable comparisons with other national cases, France's distinctness cannot be proved. This reviewer was also not entirely convinced of the way Wolfe decided to end his story of walled French towns in the second half of the eighteenth century. Many French towns remained fortified well into the nineteenth century (Toulon, Grenoble, Sedan, and Brest are only four examples). This does not mean that this book, which already covers a whole millennium, should have ventured into the nineteenth century as well; it does mean, however, that its conclusion could have been a tad more nuanced.

What is true of the strength of Wolfe's claims is sometimes also true in terms of his writing style. Chapters three through seven are elegantly written, while chapters one, two, and eight are at times less so. A rare mistake can be found on page 167, where Wolfe conflates Louis-Sébastian Mercier's *Le tableau de Paris* (1781-1788) with his much earlier work *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1771). An extremely rare omission in the text is M. Maigret's work *Traité sur la Sureté et Conservation des Etats, par le moyen de Fortresses* (Paris: Billiot, 1725), which was studied in engineering and military schools throughout eighteenth-century Europe and which, as its title suggests, deals with the fundamental relationship between national defense and fortresses. Even a brief discussion of Maurice de Saxe would have been welcomed as well.

Michael Wolfe's book, though more convincing in some parts than in others, is undoubtedly an impressive and important addition to the secondary literature on military, urban, and political history of medieval and early modern France. Historians of specific cities, of urban form and urban politics, of military technology and, last but not least, of national politics will all find it to be by far the best guide in existence to the fascinating relationship between fortification and state building in France. It is extraordinarily rich in terms of its survey of secondary and some primary sources but goes well beyond a laundry list of relevant literature. Georges Clemenceau once said that war is just too important to be left solely to the care of generals. Michael Wolfe's thorough and often brilliant synthesis demonstrates, to those of us who are in need of such a demonstration, that military history, too, is simply far too important to be only worthy of the attention of specialized military historians.

NOTES

[1] For the case of the Dauphiné, for instance, see René Favier, *Les Villes du Dauphiné aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles: La Pierre et l'Ecrit* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1993), pp. 140-45.

[2] Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3] Most important here, as Wolfe acknowledges (p. 210 n. 41), is David Parker, *La Rochelle and the French Monarchy* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

[4] Nora Temple, "The Control and Exploitation of French Towns during the Ancien Regime," *History* 51 (1966): 16-34; Bernard Chevalier, *Les bonnes villes de France du XIVe au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1982).

[5] See, among other examples, Hilary J. Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca: Cornell Unviersity Press, 2004). Michael Breen, *Law, City, and King: Legal Culture, Municipal Politics, and State Formation in Early Modern Dijon* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007) tries to strike a balance between the two extreme approaches.

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by Michael Wolfe. No Customer Reviews. This book focuses on the development of towns in France, taking into account military technology, physical geography, shifting regional networks tying urban communities together, and the emergence of new forms of public authority and civic life. Product Details. Format:Hardcover. Language:English. ISBN:0230608124. ISBN13:9780230608122. Release Date:October 2009. 4 Wolfe, Michael, Walled Towns and the Shaping of France: From the Medieval to the Early Modern Era (New York, 2009), 123â€"70CrossRef Google Scholar. 5. 5 On the fear of child abductions, which exploded in the Paris riots of spring 1750, see Farge, Arlette and Revel, Jacques, The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution, trans.Â 33 The English translation of the 1775 remonstrance by the Cour des Aides is drawn from Baker, Keith Michael, ed., The Old Regime and the French Revolution, vol. 7 of University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization, ed. Boyer, John W. and Kirscher, Julius (Chicago, 1987), 69â€"70 Google Scholar. 34. Medieval Europe was miserable and bloody, but also a period of great innovation. Read on to explore the inventions that shaped Europe.Â Far from being a period of little to no technological progress, the Middle Ages had its fair share of new inventions, like any other period of history. These 18 medieval inventions and how they made it to Europe are prime examples. Some of them were so important that they would ultimately pave the way to certain aspects of the world we live in. The following list is far from exhaustive and in no particular order. 1. The Printing press was revolutionary.Â Source: Public Domain/Wikimedia. The earliest-known wheelbarrows that there is archaeological evidence for, were one-wheeled carts that date to second-century China.