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Knowledge, Constraint, and Power in Inaction: The Defenseless Medieval Wall

ABSTRACT

This paper offers some analytical approaches to the social history of medieval walls around towns, castles, villas, monasteries, and fields, using the themes of symbolism, knowledge, constraint, power, and conflict. Walls separate space into the inside and outside, each rife with symbolic meaning, defining areas of authority or symbolizing possession. Walls constrain movement, and through the physical obstacle created, walls remove ambiguity from passage; they impart knowledge of “illegal” entry or exit. Such knowledge is power, but more power is conferred by the ability to control movement, whether of political foes or of merchants wishing to trade. Because walls symbolize authority and power to control or rights of ownership, they frequently are the center of social tension and conflict. These topics are discussed with the recurring subtheme of the relationship of feudal and capitalist political and economic systems to walls around towns and around fields.

Definitions

It was not for nothing that formidable walls stared out from around the new fortified towns: in their yawning ditches lay the grave of the gentile constitution (F. Engels 1884:chap. 9).

Medievalists fear to write about towns without first defining them; the abundance of definitions has allowed Helmuth Schledermann (1970) to write an article on those relating to medieval northern Europe alone. It is perhaps only medievalists who could suggest town walls as part of their definition, but surely only medievalists would *begin* the definition with town walls. Were castles not embraced by strong walls, and was the cathedral and episcopal precinct of medieval St. Andrews not furnished with a stone wall and towers while the town lay unenclosed? Were manors not frequently encircled by walls and, even more impressively, a moat or individual farmsteads not regu-

larly shut in behind walls or fences? Indeed, the early medieval Latin term for estate, *curtis*, derived from *cohors*, “an enclosed yard.” The typical early medieval Irish farm, according to Donncha Ó’Corráin (1972:49–50) was “surrounded by a *ráith* or rampart of earth or stone containing the dwelling house and the farm buildings . . . the enclosed area or *less* was really the farmyard.” The wall itself, *ráith*, was used synonymously with the whole farm. No differently, the German word *Hof* is still today both “farmstead” and “courtyard.” And what of villages with their “town” walls? The *villages perchés* of Provence or the *incastellamenti* villages of Italy characteristically are tightly girdled by a strong stone wall. The *bastides* of Aquitaine were “villages” for all their strong “town” walls, and the Norman villages lying by their lord’s motte-and-bailey castle were frequently enclosed by a “town” wall as at Kilpeck (Figure 1). How are all these walls distinguished from town walls? One presumes they differ simply by not being “urban,” but by being “monastic,” “episcopal,” “manorial,” “castle,” “village,” or “farm” walls. It appears there is no analytical framework to study the social history of these walls.

Obsessions with military explanations in history is a topic which is in need of critical appraisal, but can scarcely be undertaken here. Archaeologists need to break free from the way in which these enclosures have been seen primarily in terms of “real defense” or “pseudo-defense” and discuss walls in general and their social function. By necessity the approach is abstract, but herein lies its strength. One would have to investigate social relations and their mediation by physical barriers:

A society does more than simply exist in space . . . it arranges people in space . . . it locates them in relation to each other . . . engendering patterns of movement and encounter . . . it arranges space itself by means of buildings, boundaries, paths, markers, zones, and so on, so that the physical milieu of that society also takes on a definite pattern (Hillier and Hanson 1984:26–27).

In short, the abstraction forces the examination of humans and society and not of things; to write real history is the goal here.

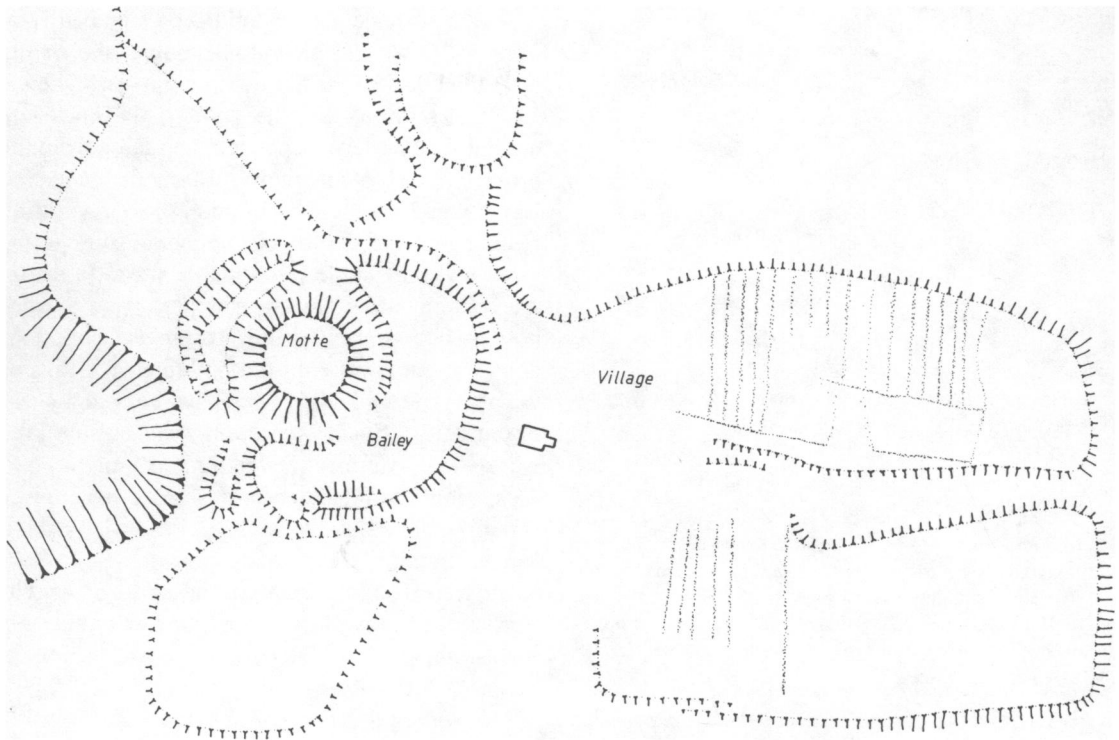


FIGURE 1. Twelfth-century castle and village of Kilpeck, Hereford and Worcester (after Renn 1968).

Separation

Walls break the continuity of open space, but if that were all they did, they would appear to have no sense. To be meaningful, walls must separate space by dividing it into parts. The border where inside meets outside is the liminal zone. As neither one nor the other, “it is the nature of . . . boundaries that they are ambiguous in implication and a source of conflict and anxiety” (Leach 1976:34). In early medieval Ireland a formal satirization ceremony designed to humiliate an opponent was legally ordered to be held at “a height at the meeting point of seven territories,” while other rituals and dangerously ambiguous events associated with boundaries included inaugural ceremonies, the Christian cult, synods fairs, and gatherings of peoples (Ó’Riain 1972). Precisely at the threshold of

the house, *in limitare*, the accused Frank might have cleared himself of an accusation of homicide (*Lex Salica* 1986:58.1). As another example:

Why does the bridegroom carry his bride over the lintel? Because the step, the beam and the door posts make a frame which is the necessary everyday condition of entering a house. The homely experience of going through a door is able to express so many kinds of entrance (Douglas 1966: 114).

At some 150 miles long, Offa’s dyke was the longest medieval wall in Europe, if the amazing *Langwälle* of the middle and lower Danube from Hungary to the Black Sea does not date to the 7th century (Fiedler 1986). A similar construction, the Danevirke, is described as the work of King Godfred who

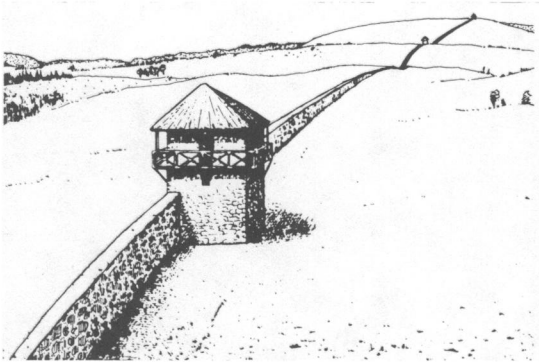


FIGURE 2. Third century A.D. Roman frontier wall in Raetia. (Drawing by F. Koepp.)

decided to fortify the border of his kingdom against Saxony with a rampart, so that a protective bulwark would stretch from the eastern bay, called Ostarsalt, as far as the western sea, along the entire north bank of the River Eider and broken by a single gate through which wagons and horse-men would be able to leave and enter (*Royal Frankish Annals* 1970:sub anno 808).

It divided the Danes from Saxony which was under Frankish dominion. Like a Roman frontier, to live on one side or the other meant to live both “inside” and “outside” of a political entity, each the opposition of the other (Figure 2).

The 25th anniversary of the building of the “anti-Fascist” wall was celebrated in the German Democratic Republic in August 1986. Bortfeldt (1987:1051) writes that “the shock waves of that August day led to a certain sobriety about where the dividing line ran between the USA’s might and Socialism.” Shock waves indeed, but in the capitalist West it remains conventional that the wall was built to keep the country’s citizens “in,” not the Americans “out,” and that West Berlin lay “outside” the wall, although geographically it appeared to be walled “in.” The extremity of possible subjective perception is represented in Douglas Adams’s (1985) novel *So Long and Thanks for All the Fish*, in which Wonko the Sane builds his house inside-out with furniture arranged outside and wild plants inside the four walls. His house was called “Outside the Asylum,” for Wonko believed the world to be a madhouse, outside of which, “inside” his home, he lived alone.

Mormons have always built fences and still do, because “it is still crucial to demarcate the visibly redeemed land of the Saints from the rest” (Leone 1978:199). Similarly, the *vallum*, the enclosure around a monastery, separated the sacred from the profane with no ambiguity. Hermetic monks of Egypt could escape the pollution of this world by fleeing into the desert, but temperate Europe offered no comparable inhospitable waste to divide the contemplative God-worshippers from the unholy aspects of secular life. To prevent pollution, however, required only the building of a wall or the planting of a hedge, which symbolized the end of profanity. “Inside” the wall was “outside” the world. The extremes to which monks might go to escape this world led to archaeologists’ uncertainty about the nature of Tintagel in Cornwall. Was it a fortification in the time of Arthur, or was it a monastic retreat? The *vallum* defending Iona (Argyll, Scotland) from worldly temptations was built on a scale comparable to the defenses of contemporary Pictish fortifications.

The *vallum* did not just symbolize the division of what was considered sacred and profane, it also marked the boundary of the abbot’s or abbess’s claim to authority over the monks or nuns of the religious house. Inside the *vallum* behavior was regulated by the monastic rule as interpreted by the spiritual head. This realm of authority is paralleled by the town walls. Ennen (1979:109) generalizes, “the walls of the town enclosed a territory with its own jurisdiction and its own simple and clearly differentiated administration.”

The bishop of Cambrai in A.D. 1090 improved the strength of the wall around the town and of the ecclesiastical *castrum* within the town. Edith Ennen (1979:86) discusses this within the context of the “bitter necessity” of town walls in a time which knew no peace, but she appears to find the separate ecclesiastical walled enclosure superfluous, a relic perhaps, an idea developed from a doubt of the strategic usefulness of a second wall. The ecclesiastical precinct, however, was marked out as having a different administration and ruled by a different authority. So-called “immunities,” areas in which almost all royal or imperial authority was delegated to a lesser lord, were often held

'by bishoprics. At Paderborn, the ancient circuit of Charlemagne's palace-complex enclosure has been archaeologically discovered simply by following the line of later fossilized episcopal rights which survived from such a former immunity. A wall that once functioned to control access into Charlemagne's palace was later to provide episcopal immunity *from* the officials of Carolingian emperors. Whether the *castellum* inside a town was the castle of a secular lord or the ecclesiastical precinct of a church prince, the separate and conflicting claims of authority within the town were the ultimate reason for their existence, not some tactical notion of defense in depth.

Knowledge and Constraint

In moving from outside to inside, we move from the arena of encounter[ed] probabilities to a domain of social knowledge, in the sense that what is realized in every interior is already a certain mode of organizing experience, and a certain way of representing in space the idiosyncrasies of a cultural identity (Hillier and Hanson 1984:145).

No division of space is operable if the actors who occupy it are unaware of the separation. At a minimal level, dividing lines must be recognizable. When archaeologists are faced with such boundaries they assume function to depend on the ability to prevent ingress or egress, although there is one other, more fundamental level which is commonly overlooked, the transmission of knowledge. A monastic *vallum* which was not "seriously fortified" can at least be seen by archaeologists to function by keeping out animals. If the *vallum* could not even do this, it was "symbolic," a term favored by archaeologists when other functional explanations are lacking. The word is often tainted by the nuance of unnecessary. Reference to animals in this context reveals such functional obsessions, for, from a theological perspective, humans of the opposite sex could pollute or endanger members of a religious house but stray cattle could not.

If a "symbolic" enclosure were only a notional enclosure, a row of daisies or brightly colored stones would have served as well as any bank and ditch. However, to be a functionally effective "symbolic" barrier, an enclosure must also be designed to make entrance a hindrance. To struggle

up a bank, jump over a ditch, climb over a wall, crawl under a fence, or crash through a hedge all involve the individual in unambiguous actions which remove the possibility of unintentional entry. One could walk past painted stones and wonder what they were, especially if one were blind, but no one could mistakenly climb a 10-ft. stone wall.

Of the Wansdike, Desmond Bonney (1972:174) suggests that its size and alignment characterize it as "a military work designed to bar movement," although in the next sentence he admits that where the terrain was inappropriate to early warfare it must have been a territorial marker. Much discussion of Offa's dike centers on the ability of the wall to have kept the Welsh out or the type of tactics necessary to have allowed the wall to play a functional role in repelling invaders. Was it used in a tactical squeeze by the deployment of swift cavalry to pin the enemy to the battlefield until reinforcements arrived? Or is this a question derived from playing too often with toy soldiers? Even the Roman frontier walls were not designed in a Maginot-line fashion, repelling invaders in tactical battle. Early medieval kingdoms most certainly did not have the political and military organization such that Offa's, Grim's, or Wan's dike could have held enemy armies at bay; not even Hadrian's wall was capable of such absolute exclusion. Of Offa's dike, however, Peter Sawyer (1978:108) says, "It certainly hindered the movement of cattle and if manned it must have been a formidable barrier; no one, Welsh or English, could claim that he did not know he had crossed it." For those who doubt a military watch was ever present, Offa's dike cannot be said to have been a functionless symbol. Offa's dike was fully functional in the sense that it was a constraint which imparted knowledge to those crossing it. Such a barrier forced individuals into physical actions to overcome it which could be taken as an indisputable sign of cognition. Thus Offa's dike was another way of saying trespassers beware but *also* was a means of removing any ambiguity of who had done so.

All these aspects are combined in the New Testament (St. John 10.1): "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the

sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber." Inside and outside the sheepfold are clearly distinguished, and circumvention of the barrier separating them by means other than by the door is easily recognizable to others as a conscious act and a wrongful act. Walls and fences define private property; consciously overcoming an obstacle to get "in" imputes guilt. The evidence for Merovingian and Carolingian villa enclosures suggests that they were common, but the most intractable part of the evidence is also the most interesting here. The expressions *in curtem* and *foris curtem* are met regularly in the barbarian laws and are often translated as "inside the courtyard" and "outside the courtyard." In fact, *curtis* was a generic expression for a villa or an estate as a whole, and it is almost impossible to find it used as the expression of a physical courtyard. "Inside" and "outside" are used precisely as today are used "on" or "off" one's property. Being found *in curtem alienam*, on or in another's villa, especially by night, was heavily punishable and the perpetrator, if he did not submit, could be killed (*Lex Salica* 1986:34.4; *Edictus Rothari* 1973:32). The assumption was that he that climbeth is a thief and a robber. Meadow, arable land, garden, and trees were to be "defended" by an enclosure according to Lombardic laws, for enclosure was a public statement of ownership and the defense was a legal as well as a physical one (Samson 1987:310–311).

In an attempt to avoid ambiguity, the *Law of the Bavarians* (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica* 1888:12.9–10) said that anyone with a claim to a piece of land should surround it with a fence, thus effectively protecting it from other claims. An Irish tract, *Bretha Comaithchesa*, of the 7th century distinguished "four types of ordinary farm fences, the kinds that inheriting kinsmen erected about their portions of the hereditary family estate" (Ó'Corráin 1983:247). In Rothair's Edict (*Edictus Rothari* 1973:300) a traveler is not to be blamed for cutting down a tree outside of an enclosure, for he is not to know if it belongs to someone. An Irish law (*Críth Gablach* 1923–1924:210) equates breaking into the *less* with breaking into the house, or *treb*. Valuables within the farmyard

enclosure were known by all to be "protected" and protected because privately owned.

Fences and their composition of vertical posts and horizontal poles, their height and above all, the penalties for their destruction, figure in all the barbarian laws, including *Lex Salica*. Marxist historians have argued, following Engels' lead, that the early Franks did not have land as private property, but owned it communally. Even the most recent Marxist version of Merovingian history (Bleiber 1988:92) repeats the belief that the Franks of Clovis' time had only a right of use and that these fences protected that right, but not ownership. This interpretation clearly does little justice to the evidence and is, in any case, dependent on the belief that *Lex Salica* is somehow a full statement of the law and not an odd collection of disputed points that a barbarian king had written down in conscious imitation of late Roman government. As weak as the traditional Marxist interpretation of *Lex Salica* is, equally strong is its archaeological investigation into the origins of land as private property beyond the Roman frontier.

In two articles, Peter Donat (1985, 1987) investigates village plans from the Iron Age to the Migration period looking for evidence of the development of real property, that is, land as a possession. Some of the evidence is drawn from the field arrangements, but the most striking is the growing frequency of fences around settlements from the beginning of the Roman Iron Age and especially in the late Roman Iron Age/Migration period (Figure 3). The most important observation here is that the fence boundaries often remained constant, although the composition of the buildings within the compound might change. In effect, inheritable landed farmyard property remained visibly constant in relationship to neighboring farms, although the size of dwellings or numbers of agricultural buildings within a given compound over time might increase, appearing to imply the growth of families. The continuity remains a far cry from that represented by yards excavated at Coppergate, York, or that which must be deduced from the apparently still definable medieval burghage plots in many modern towns and villages.

The relationship of walling to private property is

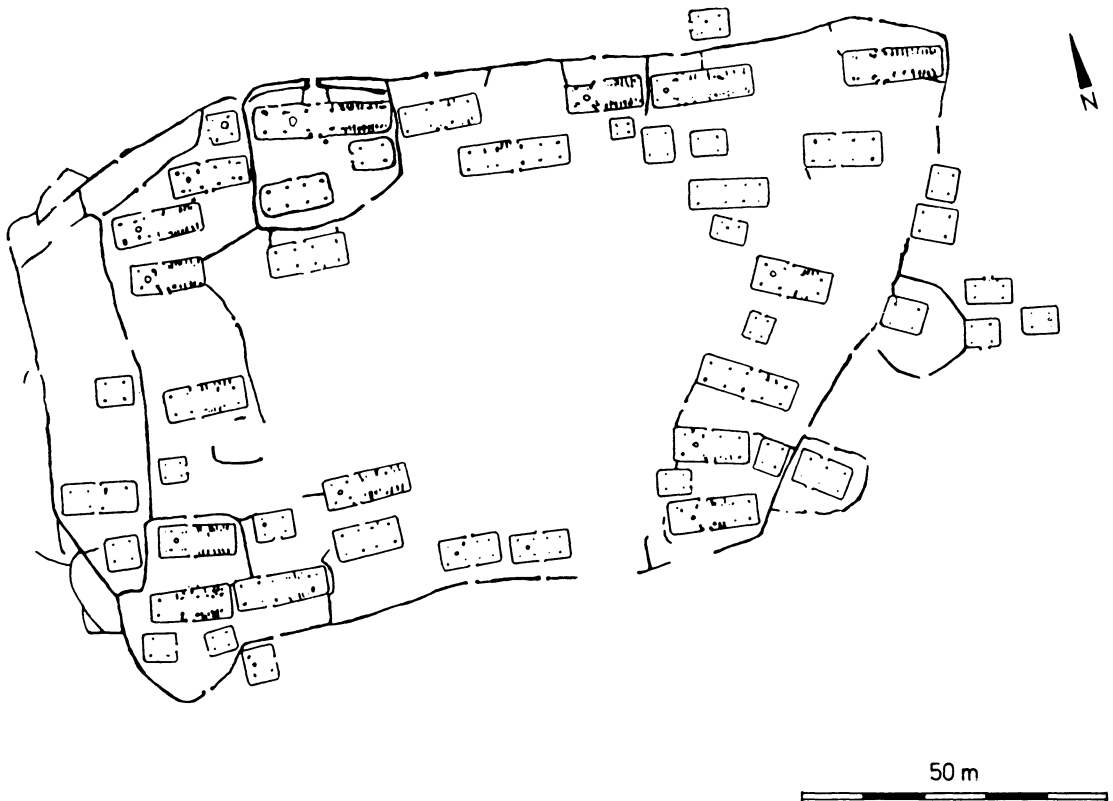


FIGURE 3. Early Roman Iron Age village of Hodde, Denmark (after S. Hvass [in Donat 1987]).

nowhere clearer than in the early modern English phenomenon known as “the enclosures” which involved three separate features:

[1] the laying together of scattered properties and consequent abolition of intermixture of properties and holdings; [2] the abolition of common rights; [3] the hedging and ditching of the separate properties. The third process is the actual “enclosing” which gives its name to a series of processes which it completes (Slater 1907:85).

Enclosure is further explained as follows:

Enclosure did not merely involve the consolidation of scattered property and the fencing and hedging of fields, but also represented the triumph of individual ownership over the rights of the rest of the community. Walls and hedges serve a practical agricultural purpose, but they also have a wider, symbolic significance as the boundaries of a private landscape (Williamson and Bellamy 1987:94).

Power

Walls are not only “barricades that prevent entropy of meaning” by shutting out unwanted information (Evans 1971), they facilitate understanding. Edmund Leach (1976:33) claims that “we use language to cut up the visual continuum into meaningful objects.” Walls do the same, being most effective when, not simply visual, they also constrain the movement of the human body through its environmental continuum. By forcing conscious effort to overcome such borders and barriers physically, knowledge is imparted. Left to their own devices most individuals could overcome any artificial obstacles. However, the conscious act of circumventing a barrier in other than the recognized way—e.g., climbing into the

sheepfold—attracts social strictures. The greater the effort or the more unusual the actions necessary to overcome the barrier, particularly if destruction is necessary, the greater the “guilt” generally imputed to the action. Thus if Offa’s dike appears to have involved an unnecessary amount of effort in erection, so the “illegal” crossing of it would have been seen as more serious, in a similar way that wrongful entry into an unlocked building today is recognizably less criminal than having to overcome barbed wire and breaking a window to enter.

Thus in the majority of cases, it is the social conditions and propriety, not the obstacles themselves, which give barriers the power to work. As Mark Leone (1978:198) notes of Mormon fences, “In a town where the social structure was based on equal property and close cooperation, and where order was maintained through everybody knowing everybody else’s business, fences drew the literal line between closeness and privacy.” Fences work through social propriety: good fences make good neighbors. When the Merovingian senator, Arcadius, found himself locked outside of Clermont’s town walls, he simply sawed through the gate to let himself in (*Historia Francorum* 1974:3.9). Presumably few others than senators could have dared to attempt such an action. The bishop of Langres found that the walls of Dijon, his “own” town, had become a prison from which he escaped only by being lowered down from them (*Historia Francorum* 1974:2.23). The wars of Scottish independence against Edward I were marked by a Scottish campaign of destroying their own castles once retaken from the English. Without the authority or power to make them function, walls cannot act as barriers, far less as serious defenses; they are neutral without the social relations necessary to make them work.

It takes the extreme, inverted cases of Scots destroying their own castles or a bishop escaping from his own fortification to make this point clear. Most of the time barriers were erected and used in the manner originally foreseen with the appropriate forms of power and sources of authority. Such walls and enclosures are built to operate on different scales depending on the nature of that authority, from controlling the movement of individuals,

or even simple animals, to whole armies. It is at this point that most analyses try to distinguish the functional nature of the walls themselves, dividing those ostensibly designed to withstand attack from a large number of armed men from other types. To understand them, however, one must look at both the forms of authority and relations of power which created them, and the nature of the power which the barriers subsequently conferred upon those controlling them by their ability to constrain different types of movement.

Frankish villas and farmsteads are assumed to have been enclosed by fences, stone walls, or hedges (Dolling 1958). Fences around crops and gardens prevented livestock from causing damage either by eating or trampling. They needed to be sufficiently strong, or functional, to keep cattle out. Cattle are incapable of understanding trespass and the danger of retaliation by an angry farmer. The villa enclosures cannot be seen as “serious fortifications” because the *curtis* was not designed to keep out large numbers of armed men. Gregory of Tours makes this abundantly clear through various anecdotes, and no battles are ever recorded at such villas (Samson 1987). Indeed, although a stranger at night in one’s *curtis* could be killed with impunity should he not yield, it seems unlikely that the enclosure wall can be conceived of as preventing entrance. The fence, therefore, may not have guaranteed security against thieves, but it provided the physical prerequisite for recognizing thievish intent. So far the Frankish example has not added anything new to what was said above, but a look at the villa from the inside out is in order.

The slaves Leo and Attalus escaped their Frankish master by the miraculous event of finding the villa gate unlocked (*Historia Francorum* 1974:3.15). But it was the lack of horses which they needed to make their escape that really kept them in. One might interpret the villa enclosure as a prison wall, but not in a strictly functional way for neither the documentary nor archaeological evidence suggests that these enclosures were particularly formidable obstructions. So how were slaves kept in? Slaves or dependent serfs were probably housed within the stone wall enclosure around Ro-

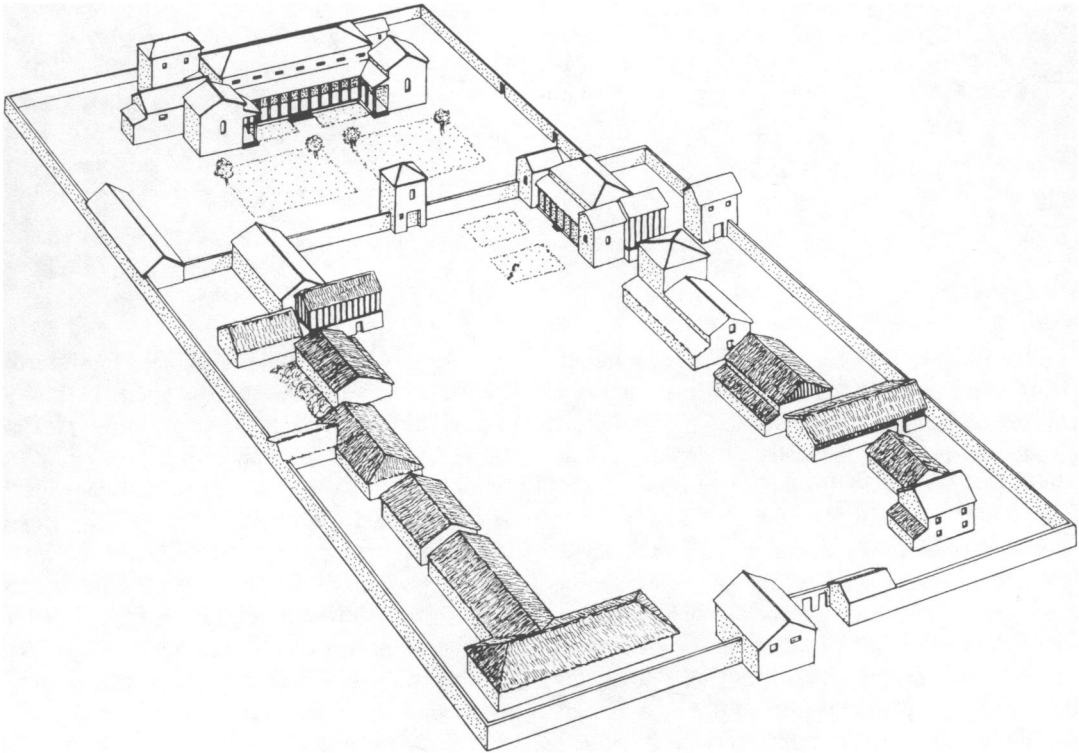


FIGURE 4. Roman villa of Estrées-sur-Noye, Somme, France. (Drawing by Dick Barnard.)

man villas containing a variety of agricultural buildings (Figure 4). Archaeologists and historians have paid only little attention to this labor force, primarily because the archaeological evidence will not allow recognition of whether the peasants in question were “free” or “unfree.” The legalistic worry about their status of freedom is perhaps unimportant; the spatial organization suggests the close supervision of the workers, who thus labored under conditions more akin to slavery than serfdom (Samson 1989). The problem of the flight of slaves is one to which whole books are devoted for the Roman period (e.g., Bellen 1971) and was a particular obsession of early medieval laws, particularly those of the Visigoths (King 1972). The enclosure wall could thus be seen as the physical prerequisite for recognizing the intention of flight by slaves. Slaves found outside the enclosure at inappropriate times lost all ability to argue inno-

cence; the wall prevented any ambiguity about their actions. Seen in this light it is startling to note that humiliating a free woman by cutting off her hair was punishable if inside her *curtis*, but not if outside, according to the Burgundian law (*Lex Gundobada* 1972:92.1–2). A woman was responsible for her own victimization by leaving the confines of her farmstead! Did villa enclosures further act to “imprison” women?

These enclosures, like Roman Iron Age fences around farmsteads in *Germania libera* and like the stone wall enclosures around Roman villas, “defended” the Merovingian villa in the sense of Rothair’s Edict, legally. At the great Carolingian palaces of Charlemagne, excluding Paderborn, there were no “serious fortifications,” but the amount of physical control was considerable. At Aachen, Charlemagne’s hall and church were connected by a *porticus* (Figure 5). It may have of-

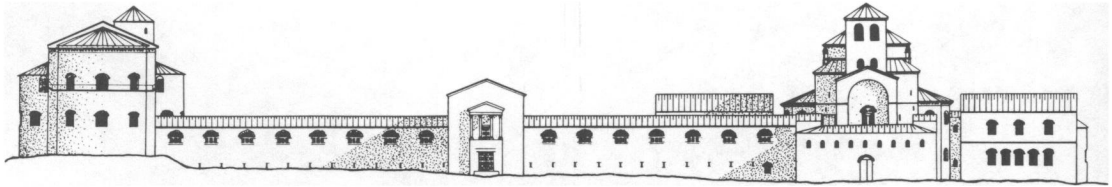


FIGURE 5. Charlemagne's palace, Aachen. (Redrawn by author, from drawing by F. Kreusch.)

fered the king and his retinue shelter from the elements, but at 400 ft. long this amazing construction functioned mainly to prevent access into the courtyard of the palace complex, access which was controlled through a gatehouse. At Aachen and Ingelheim it is possible that obstruction and restriction of movement was necessary to prevent the milling masses, to whom alms were distributed, from pressing too close. Thus Aachen is even more interesting in its spatial arrangement of the Minster atrium which itself lies outside the palace complex. Was this also for the commoners who might vaguely follow the service through a window in the westwork; was it here or at the gatehouse that they received alms?

Charlemagne's watchfulness over the comings and goings of his men at the palace appears untrustworthily in the pages of Notker's (Notker the Stammerer 1969) account of the life of Charlemagne, but it serves to remind that knowledge is power and that closely channeled movements allow close observation. Many Scottish towerhouses of the Reformation had spyholes and listening holes through which the laird of the house could remain informed of passage through the main hall, through which one was compelled to move in earlier houses to gain access to all other parts of the house. The importance of knowledge is certainly underestimated in the "tactical" siting of castles and fortified houses overlooking important passes. The claim of the *Royal Frankish Annals* (1970) that the Danevirke had only one gate through which all wagons had to pass was untrue, but the impression it leaves is less one of defense than of the total control of movement, and knowledge of who came and went in and out of the kingdom.

This aspect of Offa's dike is perhaps reinforced by evidence from later centuries when the political frontier did not coincide exactly with the wall: "Long after the clarification of a frontier . . . the 'Ordinance of the Dunsaeete' took care to insist that no-one crossed the frontier between the English and Welsh without a guide" (Davies 1982:113). This was a case of official control, not the public spirited provision of a helpful escort.

By constricting and confining passage, walls gave rulers, lords, and masters the power of knowledge, knowledge of who was going where with what, and knowledge of their intent. But control of movement was important power in itself; it was the major function of medieval walls. Chramn was greeted by the bishop of Langres in A.D. 555 and allowed to take communion in the churches extra muros, but was not allowed inside the walls of Dijon (*Historia Francorum* 1974:4.16). Chramn was a potentially powerful political character; his father Lothar was an important Merovingian king. Chramn was also a dangerous political character; his father finally killed him. The bishop trod a careful political path by greeting him outside the city and fulfilling his spiritual duties by celebrating mass, but by not letting him inside the city, avoided Lothar's complaint of treachery or complicity in handing over his kingdom to his rash son. When one considers that Merovingian bishops were frequently the major political power in a town, that they may frequently have had the responsibility for maintaining the town walls, one must begin to question whether communal security was more important to them than the increased power given by such control of movement.

Walls preventing or controlling entrance into

town conferred the power to deny access to armed enemies. In such instances the exercise of power was generally one of force easily described as military in nature. Not so easy is the case of political rivals, unwanted deputations from unpopular kings or ecclesiastical authorities, or the exclusion of thieves, lepers, and other social “undesirables.” Just as the Pictish king kept St. Columba waiting outside the gates of his fort, so the pope was to keep the German emperor waiting barefoot in the snow outside the gates at Canossa. These are but unsophisticated versions of the extremely formal and ritualized process of access to Byzantine emperors or early modern Spanish kings: an access to the ultimate political power. Added to this social and political control was a power that must be termed economic.

When Hilary Turner (1971) describes “town defenses” as having an economic function by encouraging traders through providing security, she portrays medieval trading and municipal authorities in an anachronistic light. Medieval town councils, quite unlike their modern counterparts, did not simply encourage the creation of favorable economic conditions to allow economic activity and growth, they were the traders and artisans who monopolized the economic activities of the town. Medieval town councils were often composed of burgesses representing guilds of various types, but it was the merchants everywhere who dominated; merchants whose power resided in their trading monopoly and in their control over the market. The council led the burgesses who “agreed on restricting, in an often draconian manner, the right to become a burgess” (Fourquin 1978:61). Their control over membership to the merchants’ guild was even more complete. The council had the authority and power to legislate about the holding of markets and to levy tolls on goods. This was a power the council inherited from a period predating their autonomy when secular or ecclesiastical lords effectively controlled incipient urban centers and trade. “Every town has as many main streets as it has main gates appointed for the collection of tolls and dues,” states the *Leges Henrici Primi* (1972:80.3b), but even the laws of Alfred the Great were regulating both the payment of tolls

and dues on trade and where it might be practiced. The existence of walls with a limited number of gates was ideal for controlling the transport of goods to sell, and it is no surprise that illegal entrance to a town through private property and not by public roads was regularly heavily fined. Such transgressions avoided the tolls which formed part of the council’s income and thus power. They also evaded the restrictions on who had the right to trade, a closely guarded source of power in financial terms and as a source of patronage. They might also have directly competed with the council members’ personal trading monopolies. Formal restriction of movement in and out of town combated such circumvention of the council’s authority and thus reinforced the major sources of the council’s power.

If such cynical manipulation by the worldly town council, merchants, and guilds is not easily recognized, how much less so is it in the sacred world where such games of power must surely be considered less likely? The monastic *vallum* or *septa*, which could rival even the ramparts of early medieval royal centers, is generally interpreted as a sign of asceticism, perhaps the over-emphasized symbolic separation of monastic life from the secular world. The symbolic divide, however, was also a physical barrier of some magnitude. An escaped nun trying to return to Radegunde’s nunnery in Poitiers was hauled over on a rope (*Historia Francorum* 1974:9.40). Nuns trying to escape from Faremoutiers used a ladder (*Vita Columba* 1982:2.19). The *vallum* served as much a prison-like function of keeping the contemplative in as it did a symbolic role of spiritual segregation, thus the frequent presence of a ditch inside rather than outside the earthen bank. The *Rule of Benedict* (1970:67) says, “And let him be punished likewise who shall presume to leave the enclosure of the monastery . . . without the permission of the abbot.” It was the abbot or abbess who had the authority to allow temporary release from the enclosed world of communal living. The *vallum* increased that authority by the power of controlling movement in and out. In the *Programmatic Capitulary* (1987:22) of A.D. 802 is found: “Canons are by no means to be permitted to wander about

but are to live under the fullest supervision. Not to roam through the *vici* and *villae* like the so-called *sarabaitae* with no authority or discipline over them.” Authority and supervision meant discipline, which would be impossible if people were free to move about. Keeping order and keeping everyone in their place was self-evident to the Carolingians, who sought to prevent canons, anchorites, those doing penance, swindlers, and tramps from wandering. With his capitularies Charlemagne strengthened ecclesiastic authority, and it should come as no surprise that the abbatial authority controlling monks’ movements was likewise supported by the state. Control in the case of nunneries was even more strict. The capitularies further stated:

A close watch is to be kept over monasteries of women, who are by no means to be permitted to wander about but are to be kept secure with all diligence. . . . And that no man is to enter their enclosure or monastery except a priest, who is to enter, accompanied by a witness for the visitation of the sick and for the mass alone and is to leave forthwith (*Programmatic Capitulary* 1987:18).

Supervision and control over nuns, facilitated by spatial constraints is a topic of some interest (Schulenburg 1984). Few historians, fortunately, attempt to idealize religious life for medieval women as freedom from the burden of domesticity, but the direct comparison of medieval nuns “contained within a private domain, not dissimilar to that of their secular counterparts” (Gilchrist 1988:27) is an observation rarely made, recalling to mind the observation made above that women’s rights were diminished beyond the confines of their farmsteads.

Symbolism

When Gregory of Tours depicted the walls of Babylon as being impossibly tall and over 47 mi. long with 100 gates, he was trying to express the importance of the site. The fabulous dimensions were, nevertheless, based on the realistic assumption that the importance of towns was reflected in the impressiveness of their walls. Two of the long-

est town walls in the western Roman provinces of the late empire also belonged to the two most important towns: Rome and Trier. Archaeologists similarly use the criteria of rampart height, width, and length (and thus internal area) as a guide to the importance of towns, hillforts, and raths; in short enclosed settlements of any type. Because town walls were a major expense for the town council—in 1379 Köln spent 82 percent of its total expenditure on the town’s walls and guards—it was naturally recognized as reflecting the town’s wealth and importance. Competitive expenditure on architecture is clearly visible in town halls, town parish churches, and town gate towers. The corporate wealth of north German trading cities can still be read in the splendid late Gothic gate towers, as at Lübeck.

The symbolic importance of town walls is reflected by Gregory of Tours’ belief that their collapse was an unmistakable sign that a king would die. The close association of possession, authority, and power combine to make the symbolism of walls particularly strong, a symbolism naturally extending to social relationships.

At Kilpeck (Figure 1) there existed three enclosures: around the motte (artificial hill), around the bailey, and around the village. The walls defined William FitzNorman’s lordship and authority over his vassals and serfs. The tripartite division of the settlement further created a spatial hierarchy which roughly coincided with the social divisions. Perhaps more accurately, they reflected the nearness of social relations to the lord so that socially superior vassals but also the lord’s personal servants might be found in the bailey. The spatial arrangement of Roman villas was briefly discussed above. Villa owner/tenant was separated from the work force by a courtyard wall. The domestic slaves, with their more immediate dependency on their masters, may well have been housed in the main house, while the *actor* probably lived in the outer courtyard with the work force he supervised (Figure 4). Thus, again, the spatial divisions may relate more closely to the dependent social relationships with the creator and controller of the architectural arrangements than on social status as such. Are the humblest the furthest from the social

elite because they are the lowest ranked, or nearest, being the most closely dependent or controlled?

In early medieval Slavic regions, the 5th and 6th centuries produced communal enclosures or, more often, no enclosures at all, which were to give way either to settlements of which only part was defended or to entirely enclosed settlements that were internally divided. By the 10th to 12th centuries small, massively enclosed sites can be found separate from simple unenclosed settlements (e.g., Herrmann 1970). The now traditional historical explanation among socialist archaeologists is that the changes in the spatial arrangement of these sites reflect changes in social relations. The dependency of a large group of peasants on a noble/warrior class became most complete when they were totally excluded from the enclosure; when they lived permanently "outside." This explanation has the real advantage of placing warfare and violence in its proper context as a phenomenon of social relations and political organization and not the causative explanation either of social development or of the development of "military" architecture. The extremely "bourgeois" approach of Heinrich Dannenbauer (1941) or Josef Fleckenstein (1978) which argues that the ability to offer protection was the source of lordship is quite untenable. The walls at Kilpeck "defended" the FitzNormans' serfs in the same way walls "defended" the free Lombards' fruit trees, as private property. It was a form of protection that the slaves Leo and Attalus were glad to be rid of.

Social Tension

The importance of the gatehouse is revealed in the Welsh laws when the royal official of porter is discussed. He was supported by a handful taken from every gift that came through the gate: a stick from every cart of firewood, a small pig from the pigs brought in as tribute, among other things (Hywel Dda 1986:35). The action of going through the gate entrance into the royal court may well have expressed the passage of dependent peasants' tributary produce from their possession into that of their lord. There is even more reason to expect that

resentment might have focused on the Welsh gatehouse, for the porter was also the serjeant of the *maerdref*, the estate, and he summoned the peasants to work on the lord's demesne lands. The same gate that took away a portion of their produce housed the representative who enforced the expenditure of their dependent labor.

If walls embodied the symbolism of possession, authority, and power, reinforcing the authority held by those who controlled or owned them over those whom they ruled or lorded, one might expect them to be the object of social tension. Peasant uprisings often occasioned the almost symbolic destruction of manorial gatehouses. Archaeologically one discovers many an abandoned hillfort with slighted gateways. The Midlands Revolt of 1607 was directly concerned with opposition to enclosure of common ground. In the early days of the French Revolution the custom's wall around Paris was destroyed. Not surprisingly, the tensions inherent in constraint of movement were felt even at the highest levels of society. Factional fighting of nobles during King James VI of Scotland's minority included a struggle over inclusion in "the chamber," literally the right to a physical proximity to the king in his palaces.

The power inherent in controlling movement is seen in examples of circumvention, whether it be the illegal entry into a town through private property or gaps in the wall, or the examples of nuns escaping from the confines of their nunneries. In the latter case the dispute was generally with the authority of the abbess rather than the simple desire to wander freely through the world. This close relationship is brought out splendidly when the nuns revolted at Sainte-Croix in Poitiers in A.D. 590. The grievances were against the behavior of the abbess and her exercise of power, which was perhaps symbolized by her power to control who entered and who left the nunnery—and one allegation was that she allowed men into the nunnery—for the nuns saw it as a fitting threat that they would kill the abbess by throwing her from the wall (*Historia Francorum* 1974:9.41).

Even the actual building of the wall could be a source of tension. Anglo-Saxon kings demanded obligations of bridge, road, and rampart building.

The Ottonians are documented demanding similar duties somewhat later while the Carolingians, at least in Italy, may have continued a Lombard, Ostrogothic, and ultimately Roman obligation. At least in the case of the Anglo-Saxon kings this right was regularly and expressly retained no matter what other royal rights were relinquished. The *Críth Gablach* reveals “the *céli giallnai*, clients, of a king expended labor on erecting the *drécht giallnai*—an additional earthwork around his ringfort, of little practical value but demonstrating in concrete form his wealth and prestige” (Byrne 1971:138). The symbolic content resided in the number of clients who built the ditch and rampart themselves and the king’s ability to force them to do that work. At Kilpeck one may safely assume that much of the construction of the ditches and ramparts was the work of serfs. The FitzNormans may well have “defended” their serfs by forcing them to build the low rampart and shallow ditch that surrounded them, as well as the massive hill which protected only the FitzNormans and their vassals. The erection of town walls “was one of the most burdensome communal obligations of medieval townsfolk” (Ennen 1979:87). Tension was created by a town council’s enforcement of the expenditure of labor, time or money by the whole urban community, but for something which was not necessarily recognized by all as a communal good. Was it really a “brutal necessity”?

Seriously fortified town walls there were, for the town council maintained its power and independence not only against would-be rival merchants or tax dodgers, but also against nobles. The autonomy of their administration was so jealously guarded that Rudolf of Hapsburg prompted military opposition from his towns when he tried, not to increase the tax they paid, but to interfere with its system of levy (Rörig 1967:50). The Hanseatic League towns successfully waged war against King Waldemar of Denmark. England, exceptional with its continuously powerful monarchy which regulated such tensions, did not see the endemic warfare and skirmishes that characterized the German scene between towns and landed nobility. Like so many other towns, Rostock eventually bought out its former lord, and once the last piece

of property was bought, he was banished from behind the walls. Although several attempts were made, the town refused to allow the construction of his castle or house inside the city. There was to be no toleration of a rival authority. The town walls were a necessity to maintain the social, economic, and political relations of medieval towns controlled by their council, particularly in areas without a strong centralized government which might recognize and defend their right to autonomy.

Conclusions

Walls provide a physical structure to the structures of social relations. In conclusion, it should become clear that a history of walls must be a history of those relations, for the same victory of capitalism eliminated town walls while it enclosed the countryside. The inclusion of walls in medievalists’ definitions of a town must appear odd to anyone who seeks an Aristotelian ideal concept, “town.” To model such a generalized ideal one would expect to draw upon ancient and modern towns, but town walls are conspicuously absent from modern cities. They are missing because there are fundamental differences between medieval and modern towns. There are no special laws for towns today or special legal rights for their burgesses. Being a “Glaswegian” is no jealously guarded status which brings great benefits and is only obtained with difficulty. The reason is that modern capitalism differs from medieval capitalism in that monopolies are not legally generated nor politically and physically maintained; indeed, they are theoretically prevented today by central government. Free trade and free markets are free in the sense that they are free to everyone with sufficient capital to compete, free from the social and political controls that typified medieval urban economic activity, where membership of an appropriate guild and appropriate citizenship were necessary prerequisites. If free market economists like to portray modern capitalism as representing the ultimate victory of rationalism over the irrational protectionism of a darker age, they forget the most

important fact about medieval capitalism. It existed in towns set in a sea of other forms of exploitative relations. The most important, feudal lordship, was not fundamentally hostile, it even encouraged the plantation of new towns; but it sought, when possible, to control them. Protectionism was not the product of irrational economic policies from which modern capitalism has freed itself; modern capitalism has crushed almost all other competing forms of exploitative relations. The end of town wall building as a general phenomenon in Europe coincided with the transition to a predominantly capitalist form of economy: when capitalism was no longer confined predominantly to towns but spread into the countryside; when capitalist relations themselves could no longer be contained and regulated as they had been; when the wealth and power of great merchants, like the Tobacco Lords of Glasgow, resided in their control of vast capital resources, not monopolies; and when tolls, customs, and excise were the revenues and concerns of local and central governmental bureaucracy grown separate from the commercial concerns of merchants. Town walls were essential for medieval merchants' survival and the execution of business; at best they did not hinder the mercantilism of traders in an increasingly capitalist Europe.

Turning to the countryside, one finds contemporaneous spatial changes but of an opposite nature. Tom Williamson and Liz Bellamy (1987:102) note that "as the concept of absolute ownership emerged in the post-medieval period, landlords increasingly came to think of the commons as 'their' property." The steady decrease in the number of smallholding farmers was the result of an increasingly capitalistic economy which did not favor small enterprises, of the ideology of absolute property and ownership, championed by landlords, and, probably most importantly, of the extra-economic force exercised by the state in favor of the "rationalization" programme of those landlords (Figure 6b). It was no coincidence that the process of eliminating the smaller farmers, particularly those holding land severally, was known as enclosure, nor that the peculiar form of land ownership which most suffered produced fields which were termed common or open (Figure 6a).

Common fields were the product of common ownership, but such communalism was anything but primitive communism. In the case of most non-arable land, communally owned land was exploited freely, but individually, by the community. Arable land was likewise primarily individually exploited, but differed slightly from private property in that it was regularly redistributed, although most emphatically not according to egalitarian principles, and such redistribution necessitated a certain amount of communal organization and planning. The reconstructed open fields of Raunds show the individual ridges within great fields and a hypothetical spread of one holding throughout, which is stippled in Figure 6a.

Alan MacFarlane (1978) reveals that the medieval English peasantry did not treat their land as some immutable piece of inheritance with which their very existence might be closely associated. In short, the market for land was sufficiently active that one might suggest that land was often seen as a commodity. MacFarlane admits that his aim was partially to challenge the assumption that peasants in the central Middle Ages lacked a capitalist mentality towards their land. The very success of his arguments even leads him to suggest an earlier development of capitalism in England than is generally accepted. To some extent MacFarlane's approach is misguided, although through no fault of his own. Not only the traditional Marxist version of the origins of medieval peasant communal life, but also the majority of non-Marxist versions of the origin of common fields, are based on the liberal or "Whig" historical interpretations of the last century which saw the communally owned fields as a survival of an even more communal life: a true primitive communism of communally worked and exploited fields practiced by the early Germans of the Migration period. There is, however, precious little evidence to support this view.

Donat (1985, 1987) suggests, as noted above, that the fences around Iron Age villages were evidence for the beginnings of private property. The field evidence, whatever it reveals about ownership, is surely suggestive that fields, given their size (Figure 7), were worked by a small number of individuals. This interpretation suggests that indi-



FIGURE 6. *a*, Reconstructed medieval common fields at Raunds (drawing by David Hall); *b*, enclosure of common fields and common ground at Deenethorpe, Northamptonshire (after Yelling 1977).

viduals or families worked the fields and had near full control over the products of their private, not communal, labor, something like Marshall Sahlins's (1974) domestic mode of production. One might call this private property, but it is not then "theft" in Proudhon's terms, for such ownership was little more than the physical expression of the individual or family's own labor. When or if com-

munal agricultural production and communal consumption ever existed is a question whose answer lies well outside the medieval period. The spatial arrangements of the great Neolithic Bandkeramik houses are suggestive of such a possibility.

Paradoxically, the traditional Marxist view of Frankish right of use and not of ownership of land may have much to recommend itself, but for the

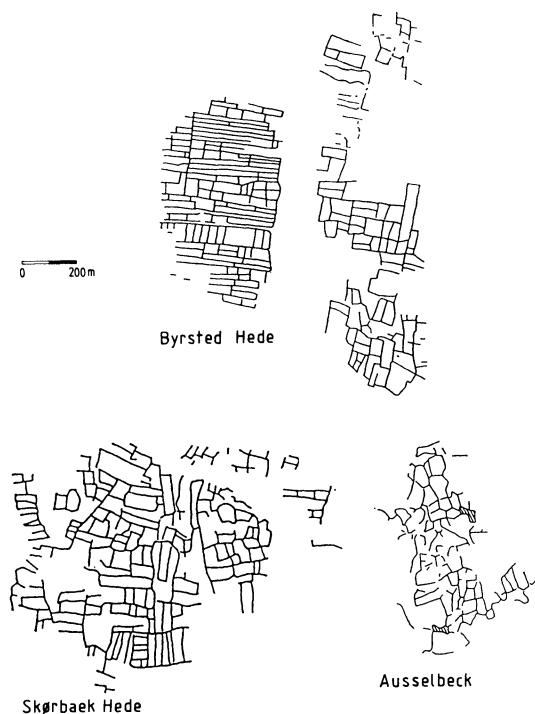


FIGURE 7. Roman Iron Age fields, Denmark (after Todd 1975).

wrong reasons. Communal ownership was not threatened and was not being eroded, but rather ownership of land itself and not just the labor to work it was in the process of developing. Thus the very individualistic and very private form of production that MacFarlane finds among English medieval peasants was little different from past ages. The great open fields and the elements of communal organization and ownership, far from being relics of the past, were the result of both property becoming part of the means of production and the new dependent relationship that developed between peasants and lords. Peasant communal ownership developed within a feudal, exploitative relationship but did not eradicate an older domestic and private mode of production. MacFarlane's attempt to recognize capitalism in a supposedly capitalist peasant mentality is as wide of the mark as the Marxist tendency to impute communal agricul-

tural production and consumption from communal ownership.

In broad terms the change from enclosed to open to enclosed fields from late prehistory to early modern history marks the changes in social relations of production as well as in the forms of ownership. Such an observation, admittedly, involves a large amount of generalization, concentrating on some salient characteristics of long and ill-defined time spans. The development may be best interpreted in the following way. Early enclosure of fields marked a privatization of land, when property itself became as important as the labor that worked it, and when the two were closely linked. Exploitation in, for instance, Germania of Tacitus's time, was achieved primarily through social obligations and only partially through the control of others' labor. Almost certainly it was not achieved through the "ownership" of land. In feudal Europe the "opening" of the countryside was the product of an increasing exploitation that caused a divergence of ownership and labor. Feudal exploitation was achieved through a hierarchy of rights, and the land worked by peasants was not "owned" by them, for the demands and rights to the soil were many. With the advent of capitalism the countryside was once again bounded and enclosed, and more rigorously than ever. For now land was a commodity, part of the means of production. A hierarchy of rights to it could no longer work; it had to be owned outright, without compromise.

Inverse to this enclosure of land was the spatial relationship of the exploited to the exploiters. The close supervision of Roman slaves or *coloni* resulted in spatial proximity and enclosure (Figure 4). The serfs of feudal Europe who spent as much or more time organizing their own labor as they did on their lords' demesne were less closely tied to castles or manors. Kilpeck was not exceptional (Figure 1). This tendency developed to its logical conclusion when agricultural labor was primarily waged, when laborers might be forcibly moved out of the sight of the great gentlemen and gentlewomen. As stated in *Property and Landscape*:

From the sixteenth century the landed elite gradually isolated themselves, and became divorced from the world of

agriculture and rural labor. The landscape parks . . . served as a barrier between the house and the rural community, and in its exclusion of the realities of rural life denied the importance of labor within agriculture and as an essential part of the production of wealth (Williamson and Bellamy 1987: 116–117).

Capitalism unwallled the town because mercantilism was no longer based on monopoly and control of movement but on capital wealth. It walled in the countryside because it marked and defended private ownership on which agricultural production was based; it unwallled the exploited because control of labor was regulated not by the master's rod but by the purse strings of the wage packet.

Walls play their part in the negotiation of the everyday cycle of human existence which continually recreates the social relations which are human society. The dialectics of how that daily individual existence creates the totality of social relations is the essence of historical analysis. To dwell on the rare active roles played by walls when the social actors attempted to alter the social relations which the walls reinforced can only lead to the unbalanced view of walls as fortifications and to the belief that walls themselves can be the object of study and thus can have a history of their own.

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