

Dey, Hendrick W., *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome AD 271-855*.

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Exploring the concept of an object as agent, Hendrick Dey charts the refashioning of Rome from an imperial city in 275 to a holy city in 855 through the physical and symbolic development of its “container”, the Aurelian Wall.

Dey begins by describing the architectural history of the Aurelian Wall. Drawing on traditional sources and some original insights, the author brings his own interpretation to the physical development of the Wall. In doing so, he posits five distinct phases: (1) a phase begun by the Emperor Aurelian in 271 and lasting 10 years; (2) a reconstruction in the fourth century attributed to Emperor Maxentius; (3) a phase that radically enhanced the defensive attributes under the Emperor Honorius from 401-403; (4) a repair phase placed in the fifth and sixth centuries; (5) a forgotten epoch in the Wall's history in the eighth century, an epoch, he argues, that created a new chapter in papal government. These phases of construction and subsequent maintenance, in turn, evolved the civic structures of the city. Dey charts the subsequent political evolution of the city as the emperors gradually shifted the management and costs of the wall from the imperium to civic authorities, as well as the lasting impact of the mobilisation of compulsory corporate labour on public building in Rome herself.

Switching from the material, Dey explores the role of the wall as a successful psychological defensive structure and its role in the creation of a symbolic and ideological capital. Charting the evolution of the military strategy of “defence in depth” begun under the Emperor Aurelian and realised under the Emperor Diocletian, Dey posits that the Aurelian Wall not only functioned as a defensive structure to assuage fears when the standing armies were otherwise engaged, but also served the purpose of occupying potential dissenters, either military or civilian, through the active control of

movement and supplies. These multiple functions developed the city wall from a drably functional object to something that defined the place as a city. With Rome, of course, the wall became firstly connected to imperial authority, and subsequently, with the establishment of Christianity as the state religion, as an analogue of the heavenly city of Jerusalem, a highly influential concept reinforced by Honorius's monumentalising of the wall and subsequent *adventus* in 404.

The wall established as the physical and spiritual "container" of Rome, Dey explores the subsequent development of intramural/extramural and urban/suburban as definers of the city space. At the height of Rome's influence, the wall attracted settlement inside and created a "no-man's land" outside, given over to intensive agriculture and burial sites with associated religious attachments. The wall became the autonomous mechanism of spatial definition: slaves were unable to move outside the wall; dress was dictated by the wall; and the wall demarcated the duties of priests. As the city and population declined in the fifth and sixth century, the wall became more isolated. Christian sites of significance outside the wall led to a development of streetscapes external to the city. By the eighth century, secular Rome was no longer physically described with reference to the wall but by the concept of urban identity. The wall as a definer of holy space, however, continued. The devolvement of maintenance from imperial to civic authorities placed responsibility for the wall in the hands of the rising civic power of the papacy. By the end of the seventh century and for the next 150 years or so, Rome became a "papal bastion". The Aurelian Wall became the dividing line between two spheres, the clerical and the lay: outside the wall, an international suburb of Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Frisians, and Lombards; inside the Wall, the papacy as "gatekeeper" to the "City of Jerusalem". However, as the civic control of Rome devolved to the nobility in the late ninth century, competing interests could not mobilise the effort needed to maintain the wall, and its subsequent physical and cultural decline as a "container" was ensured.

Through the methodology of "object as agent", Dey has constructed a fascinating narrative both for the Aurelian Wall and for Rome herself. Whilst defence was clearly the necessary pretext for construction, Dey has shown that the wall, once established,

developed a complex range of uses, both practical and symbolic. The author has also added, through this methodology, fresh and original insights to the history of Rome and the role of its wall in our evolving conception of the city. Most tellingly, his dating of the monumentalising of the Aurelian Wall to 401-403 and the subsequent creation of Rome as an analogue of the heavenly city of Jerusalem emphasises the suddenness of the shock that arguably reshaped the West, the Sack of Rome in 410.

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