

Trans-Isthmian Walls in the Age of Justinian

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IN *De Aedificiis* 4.2.27–28,¹ Procopius speaks in detail of the implementation of Justinian’s defense plan for central Greece in the 550’s, conceived and enacted in response to deteriorating conditions in the Balkans.² Justinian restored the defenses at Thermopylae and the fortifications of walled cities, such as Athens, above the Isthmus.³ Realizing the vulnerability of the unwalled cities of the Peloponnesus and the time required to fortify each separately, the emperor decided to block access to southern Greece by fortifying the Isthmus itself with a wall. In this regard, Procopius states that this decision was necessary because “a great extent of the old wall had already collapsed there.”

This restored wall, long known as the Hexamilion or Justinian’s Wall, can be seen in ruins at several locations throughout Corinthia. It has been correctly associated with *Aed.* 4.2.27–28 and has received considerable mention in modern accounts.⁴ The earlier trans-Isthmian wall has not.

At *BP* 2.4.11,⁵ Procopius implies that this ‘old wall’ was in existence

¹In the text of H. B. Dewing (LCL 1940) the passage runs as follows: *Ταῦτα διαπεπραγμένους Ἰουστινιανός βασιλεύς, ἐπεὶ τὰς ἐν Πελοποννήσῳ πόλεις ἀπάσας ἀτειχίστους ἐμάνθανεν εἶναι, λογισάμενος ὅτι δὴ οἱ πολλοὶ τετρίψεται χρόνος, εἰ κατὰ μιᾶς ἐπιμελοῖτο, τὸν Ἴσθμόν ὅλον ἐν τῷ ἀσφαλεῖ ἐτειχίσατο, ἐπεὶ αὐτοῦ καταπεπτώκει τὰ πολλὰ ἤδη. φρούριά τε ταύτη ἐδείματο καὶ φυλακτῆρια κατεστήσατο. τούτῳ δὲ τῷ τρόπῳ ἄβαστα τοῖς πολεμίοις ἅπαντα πεποίηκεν εἶναι τὰ ἐν Πελοποννήσῳ χωρία, εἰ καὶ τι ἐς τὸ ἐν Θερμοπύλαις ὀχύρωμα κακουργήσκειν.*

²Ernst Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire* II (Paris 1949) 305–10; Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (London 1971) 42ff.

³Justinian’s efforts at Thermopylae proved effective against the Bulgars during the invasion of A.D. 559 (see *infra* n.26) but did not deter the Avaro-Slavic incursions at the end of the century (see *infra*). Justinian also renewed the walls of Corinth within the Isthmus fortifications at this time (*Aed.* 4.2.24).

⁴R. J. H. Jenkins and H. Megaw, “Researches at Isthmia,” *BSA* 32 (1931–32) 68–89, particularly pp.78–79 “the trans-Isthmian wall . . . is the work of Justinian”; H. N. Fowler, *Corinth I: Introduction, Topography, Architecture* (Princeton 1932) 55; for references to the various trans-Isthmian walls, see Paul A. Clement, “The Date of the Hexamilion,” *Studies in Memory of Basil Laourdas* (Thessaloniki 1975) 159 n.1.

⁵οὕτω τε σχεδὸν ἅπαντας Ἑλληνας πλὴν Πελοποννησίων διεργασάμενοι ἀπεχώρησαν (ed. Dewing).

earlier in Justinian's reign. Following his accession, the emperor, whose primary concerns were drawn simultaneously to the east and west but not to the north, paid too little attention to the volatile Danubian region and its weakened defenses. The price paid for this neglect and the denuding of the frontier for other military theaters was paid in A.D. 540 when Kutrigur Bulgars swept into the Balkans. They attacked Illyricum, plundered Thessaly, captured Cassandrea (ancient Potidaea), whose fall according to Procopius (*Aed.* 4.3.22) marked the first time these barbarians had taken a walled city, ravaged the Thracian Chersonesus, and even reached the fortifications of Constantinople. The defenses at Thermopylae, which had saved much of central Greece from the Getae in A.D. 517,⁶ proved to be no obstacle to this new incursion and were surmounted (*BP* 2.4.10), probably by use of the same path employed by Xerxes in the fifth century B.C. (*Hdt.* 7.216–18).⁷ Apparently the Bulgarian penetration stalled in Corinthia. The implication in this passage of Procopius, if not the explicit statement, is that the fortifications of the Isthmus, the keystone of which would have been a trans-Isthmian wall, had held.

While it is safe to deduce the existence of a trans-Isthmian wall in A.D. 540, it is equally possible to say that this defensive system had not been constructed by Justinian in the first years of his reign in response to earlier penetrations of the Balkan peninsula by the Antes, the Sclavini and the 'Huns' (Bulgars).⁸ Procopius' failure to assign the wall specifically to the emperor, given the panegyric dimension of *De Aedificiis*, is a convincing *argumentum ex silentio*.⁹ It is most unlikely that he would have missed the opportunity to comment on imperial foresight in constructing a fortification that helped save the Peloponnesus from the ravages of the Bulgars.¹⁰ But if the wall was standing in 540 but was not built by Justinian, when was it constructed?

⁶ The 'Getae', mentioned in Marcellinus Comes, *s.a.* 517, have been associated with the 'Antae' mentioned in Procop. *BG* 3.14.2 and *Anec.* 18.20 by Stein, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 105–06. (All references to Marcellinus Comes in this paper are to his *Chronicon*, Mommsen, *Chronica Minora* II). A. A. Vasiliev, *Justin the First* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1950) 308, suggests that the Getae probably were Slavs.

⁷ I follow here H. B. Dewing (LCL) *ad* Procop. *BP* 2.4.10.

⁸ Procop. *Anec.* 18.20.

⁹ On *Aed.* as panegyric see G. Downey, 'Procopius on Antioch: A Study of Method in the *De aedificiis*,' *Byzantion* 14 (1939) 361–78.

¹⁰ At the very least, one would expect some account of repairs to the wall following the great earthquake of A.D. 522, which according to Procopius destroyed the circuit wall of Corinth (*Aed.* 4.2.24 and *Anec.* 18.42). Robert L. Scranton, *Corinth XVI: Mediaeval Architecture*

Recent excavations conducted at Isthmia by Paul A. Clement have provided interesting data which offer a solution to this question.¹¹ Professor Clement excavated two graves in 1967, dug next to the so-called Justinianic Wall near the Northeast Gate. Only three of the eight coins found in these excavations were datable, the latest being an issue of Marcian.¹² Since archaeological evidence suggests that the wall was already in existence when the graves were dug, these coins eliminate the possibility of its construction in the sixth century. In commenting on these finds, Clement stated that "This is a puzzle, for it is anomalous to find evidence for the abandoning of a stairway [to a fighting platform of the trans-Isthmian wall] almost a century before supposedly it was built."¹³ The anomaly disappears if one accepts the wall as the earlier one mentioned in *Aed.* 4.2.27–28.

Also in 1967, Professor Clement cleared the roadway through the Northeast Gate with meticulous care, cleaning out the joints, clamp-cuttings and dowel holes of the re-used stones which formed the pavement blocks.¹⁴ His excavations produced 18 coins, the latest of which he assigned to Arcadius or Honorius. At least one of these coins, however, and perhaps another as well seems to be of a later date in the fifth century, probably from the reign of Theodosius II.¹⁵ In a subsequent campaign in 1969, one other pertinent numismatic datum was uncovered: clearing operations on the roadway through the Northeast Gate produced one coin of Leo I.¹⁶

This numismatic evidence from Isthmia suggests that the earlier wall of *Aed.* 4.2.27–28 was constructed sometime in the middle of the fifth century, probably late in the reign of Theodosius II. Two other dates for its construction, however, have been offered. In an early interpretation of the new evidence, Oscar Broneer suggested that the

(Princeton 1957) 8, states without further comment that the trans-Isthmian wall was re-conditioned after this catastrophe. If there is any archaeological evidence for restoration, perhaps, given Procopius' silence, we have here testimony to local repairs of fortifications as mandated by imperial edict (*Cod.Theod.* 15.1.34).

¹¹ Paul A. Clement, "Isthmia," *ArchDelt* 23 (1968) *Chronika*, 137–43; "Isthmia Excavations," *ArchDelt* 25 (1970) *Chronika*, 161–67; "Isthmia Excavations," *ArchDelt* 26 (1971) *Chronika*, 100–11; and *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 159–64.

¹² Clement, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 163–64. He does not identify the monogram type.

¹³ Clement, *op.cit.* 1968 (*supra* n.11) 140.

¹⁴ Clement, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 160–63.

¹⁵ *ibid.* Clement's coin 17, with a facing bust and an anepigraphic reverse featuring a cross as type, seems later than the first decade of the fifth century; so too his no.15.

¹⁶ Clement, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 163.

wall might date to the late fourth century.¹⁷ This assignment seems unlikely, since Zosimus (5.6) reports that Alaric moved easily through Corinthia. The Zosimus account might permit another interpretation, namely that any trans-Isthmian defenses in existence—possibly dating back to the reign of Valerian (Zos. 1.29)—were simply insufficiently manned at the time of Alaric's attack.¹⁸ Clement's suggestion, however, of a slightly later date for the wall, the early years of the fifth century but posterior to the fall of Rome to Alaric in A.D. 410, seems more probable.¹⁹

While Professor Clement is quite right in linking the fifth-century fortification of the Isthmus to the traumatic years following the fall of Rome, his association of the trans-Isthmian wall and the building of the land fortifications of Constantinople (A.D. 413) as "a reaction to Alaric's sack of Rome" seems less secure.²⁰ The Isthmia coin finds point to a later date in the fifth century when the fear of Attila would have been more immediate and compelling than the memory of Alaric. For A.D. 422 Marcellinus Comes (*s.a.* 422) tersely comments: *Hunni Thraciam vastaverunt*. This incursion was simply a prelude to the more savage attacks that began in the decade of the 440's. In 441/2 and again in 447 Attila was at war with the Roman Empire with the Balkans as the major battlefield.²¹ One Hunnic foray even reached as far south as Thermopylae in 447.²² It was during these times of uncertainty and under the cloud of Attila that the walls of Thessalonica were constructed.²³ It seems equally probable that the building of the

¹⁷ Broneer follows the early date offered by Clement, *op.cit.* 1968 (*supra* n.11) 139–40: see Oscar Broneer, *Isthmia II: Topography and Architecture* (Princeton 1973) 2 n.5.

¹⁸ Zos. 1.29 (Bonn ed. p.254): ἐνδόντος δὲ αὐτῷ Γερωντίου τὸν Ἴσθμὸν διαβῆναι, πάντα λοιπὸν ἦν αὐτῷ δίχα πόνου καὶ μάχης ἀλώσιμα, τῶν πόλεων διὰ τὴν ἀσφάλειαν ἣν ὁ Ἴσθμὸς παρεῖχεν αὐταῖς ἀπειχίστων οὐκῶν.

¹⁹ Clement, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 163.

²⁰ *ibid.* J. B. Bury, *Selected Essays* (Cambridge 1930) 234–35, noted that Anthemius planned the new walls of Constantinople "for the Hunnic war which he foresaw."

²¹ See J. Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture* (Berkeley 1973) 108ff; also E. A. Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns* (Oxford 1948) 78ff.

²² Marcellinus Comes, *s.a.* 447: *Attila rex usque ad Thermopolim infestus advenit*. The suggestion of David J. Blackman in H. Schläger, D. J. Blackman and J. Schäfer, "Der Hafen von Anhedon mit Beiträgen zur Topographie und Geschichte der Stadt," *AA* 83 (1968) 92 n.120, that this Thermopylae was nearer the Danube must be rejected.

²³ Michael Vickers employs epigraphical evidence as his primary source to date the fortifications of Thessalonica to ca 448 and links their construction to the threat of the Huns. See "The Late Roman Walls of Thessalonika," *Roman Frontier Studies* 1969, ed. E. Birley *et al.*

trans-Isthmian wall can be understood best in this historical context. It may well represent another major defensive project executed late in the reign of Theodosius II after the engagement at Thermopylae and motivated by the fear of further Hunnic onslaughts against central Greece.

As the threat of the Huns subsided in the late fifth century, the wall may have fallen into disrepair or may have been maintained through local efforts as required by imperial law (*Cod.Theod.* 15.1.34). But whatever its condition, it was adequate to meet the exigency of A.D. 540. Shortly after this date, however, it can be assumed that the fortifications were damaged severely, most likely by an earthquake. The earthquake of 551, which Procopius mentions in another context as particularly destructive to central Greece (*BG* 4.25.16–23), is the most likely candidate.²⁴ Moreover, archaeological evidence from the excavations at Corinth offers testimony to the destructiveness of a tectonic disturbance at about the same time.²⁵ It seems that the earlier wall may have been sufficiently destroyed in the earthquake of 551, or another one in the same period but not reported in our literary sources, to necessitate extensive rehabilitation by Justinian.

Procopius notes that time was a consideration for Justinian in deciding his plans for the defense of this region of Greece, allowing the interpretation that the rebuilding of the wall was undertaken with a sense of urgency provoked by the continuing unsettled conditions along the Danubian frontier and the possibility of renewed Bulgar attacks.²⁶ Certainly the restoration was carried out quickly and was completed by the end of the decade of the 550's at the latest.²⁷

(Cardiff 1974) 253–54, and his other studies there cited. Brian Croke, in his unpublished Oxford dissertation *The Chronicle of Marcellinus in its Contemporary and Historiographical Context*, suggests an earlier date *ca* 442/3, associating the construction of the walls directly with the removal of the Prefecture of Illyricum from Sirmium in 441 and before the great Hunnic invasion of 447.

²⁴ Also Evagrius, *Hist.Eccl.* 4.23 (ed. Bidez, p.171).

²⁵ Scranton, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.10) 8, and James Wiseman, "Excavations in Corinth, The Gymnasium Area, 1967–1968," *Hesperia* 38 (1969) 87.

²⁶ In A.D. 559 another Bulgarian attack penetrated Greece to Thermopylae, where the defenses held (*Agathias* 5.23, Bonn ed. p.330). See Obolensky, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 45. The restoration of the trans-Isthmian wall probably had just been completed at the time of this incursion by Zabergan and his Kutrigurs.

²⁷ Either the traditional date for the publication of *Aed.*, 558–60, or the revised date, 553–55, would place its appearance after the earthquake of 551 and provide a *terminus ante quem* for the reconstruction of the trans-Isthmian wall in the decade of the 550's but after 551. See J. A. S. Evans, "The Dates of the *Anecdota* and the *De Aedificiis* of Procopius," *CP*

Materials from various ruined structures including pagan shrines were employed in the repairs and reconstruction in accordance with long-standing official policy.²⁸ Such was the ultimate fate of the Temple of Poseidon and the Theater of Isthmia.²⁹

The restored trans-Isthmian wall with its many fortresses (*φρούρια*) and towers (*φυλακτήρια*) was one of several important Justinianic constructions in Greece.³⁰ By itself, it provides sufficient evidence to belie as erroneous slander the charge in *Anecdota* 26.33 that no public construction was undertaken in all of Greece by Justinian.³¹ It was this trans-Isthmian wall which survived in some state of preservation with possible restorations by Theodore, despot of Mistra, in the late fourteenth century to serve Manuel II in 1415 as the wall of the Theodosian age had served Justinian.³²

Procopius ends *Aed.* 4.2.28 by claiming that the restored wall would protect the Peloponnesus from attack even if the defenses at Thermopylae were forced. Events in subsequent decades around 580, when the first raids of Avars and Slavs reached central Greece, would prove the fallacy of his judgement.³³ Although neither literary nor archaeo-

64 (1969) 29–30 (A.D. 558 or earlier), and G. Downey, "The Composition of Procopius, *De Aedificiis*," *TAPA* 78 (1947) 171–83 (559/560). Stein, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 837, argues for a date earlier in the decade between 553–55. Stein's dating is accepted by B. Rubin, *Das Zeitalter Justinians* (Berlin 1960) 174–75. John H. Finley's dating of *Aed.* to A.D. 550 is unlikely: "Corinth in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 7 (1932) 478 n.4.

²⁸ *Cod.Theod.* 15.1.36 and 16.10.25.

²⁹ Oscar Broneer, *Isthmia I: Temple of Poseidon* (Princeton 1971) 2, and Elizabeth R. Gebhard, *The Theater at Isthmia* (Chicago 1973) 135. The Temple of Poseidon appears to have been first damaged during the attack of Alaric in 396. It was then used as a source of construction materials in the following decades until its ultimate destruction in the age of Justinian. Ann E. Beaton and Paul A. Clement, "The Date of the Destruction of the Sanctuary of Poseidon on the Isthmus of Corinth," *Hesperia* 45 (1976) 267–79.

³⁰ Megaw, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 69, quoting Phrantzes (Bonn ed. p.108) on repairs of the Hexamilion in the reign of Manuel II, A.D. 1415, states that the wall consisted of a series of fortresses and 153 towers which Megaw assumes represents the configuration of the Justinianic wall. Phrantzes (Bonn ed. p.96) offers a romantic and idealized vision of the age of Justinian in saying that Justinian, as emperor of almost the entire world, fortified the Isthmus *οὐκ ὑπὲρ ἀνάγκης ἀλλὰ μόνον ἐφάνη αὐτῷ καλόν.*

³¹ Another important construction during the age of Justinian was the harbor complex at Anthedon: see Blackman, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.22), who also cites other fortifications built in Greece by Justinian. Also Lloyd W. Daly, "Echinos and Justinian's Fortifications in Greece," *AJA* 46 (1942) 500–08.

³² William Miller, *Essays on the Latin Orient* (Cambridge 1921) 98ff.

³³ The literature on this topic is formidable. For an introductory bibliography see Robert L. Hohlfelder, "Migratory Peoples' Incursions into Central Greece in the Late Sixth Century: New Evidence from Kenchreai," *Actes du XIV^e Congrès international des Études*

logical evidence exists to indicate how Justinian's trans-Isthmian wall was breached or bypassed, it most certainly was. The excavations at Isthmia, Corinth, Nemea, Kenchreai and perhaps Phlius have produced incontrovertible archaeological proof of massive destruction at about this time.³⁴ The Avars and the Slavs demonstrated again that a trans-Isthmian wall was never an ultimate defense. The same lesson had been taught earlier by the Dorians at the end of the Bronze Age; it would be confirmed once more by Murad in the fifteenth century.³⁵

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byzantines, III (Bucharest 1976) 334 n.5, and Denis A. Zakythinos, 'H βυζαντινή 'Ελλάς (Athens 1965) 50 n.1. For an introduction to the problems involved in the coming of the Slavs and Avars to Greece, one should begin with the collected writings of Peter Charanis on this subject now available in the Variorum Reprints, *Studies on the Demography of the Byzantine Empire* (London 1972), and Vladislav Popović, "Les témoins archéologiques des invasions avaro-slaves dans l'Illyricum byzantin," *MelRome* 87 (1975) 445-504.

³⁴ I plan to present this evidence in detail in my study "The End of the Roman Empire in Central Greece: A Numismatic Perspective," to be published in vol. III, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*.

³⁵ Oscar Broneer, "The Cyclopean Wall on the Isthmus of Corinth and its Bearing on Late Bronze Age Chronology," *Hesperia* 35 (1966) 346-62, and "The Cyclopean Wall on the Isthmus of Corinth, *Addendum*," *Hesperia* 37 (1968) 23-35; for the last Turkish assault on the Hexamilion, see the account in Miller, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.32).

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