

The historical context of the city wall of Messene:

*preconditions, written sources, success balance, and societal impacts**

SILKE MÜTH

In this article I analyse the historical circumstances surrounding the construction of the city wall of Messene in the Peloponnese, the information which can be gathered from ancient written sources about this fortification in general and its success later on in Antiquity, as well as its impact upon the people living within it. Finally I consider in what way the monument itself may be taken as a source for the history of those times.

1. Preconditions for the foundation of Messene and written sources about the construction of the city wall

The foundation of the city of Messene as the capital of Messenia is directly connected to the liberation of Mes-

senia from the Spartan yoke, under which it had suffered for centuries. Conquered by Sparta in the course of two very long wars, one probably towards the end of the 8th, and another around the middle of the 7th century BC, the population had either gone into exile or had been forced into helotism by the Spartans.¹ After the crucial and disastrous blow inflicted by the Theban general Epaminondas on the Spartans at Leuktra in 371 BC, he demoted them even more and secured their permanent loss of power by liberating the Messenians and their land from Spartan dominion, calling back the Messenian exiles and founding a new capital for them at the foot of Mt Ithome (Fig. 1). This new city was also named Ἰθώμη, after the mountain, until around 280 BC, when its name was changed to Μεσσήνη.² Because of its strategic position, Mt Ithome

* This article is largely based on a talk I gave in Frankfurt on the occasion of the fourth meeting of the international network “Fokus Fortifikation: ancient fortifications in the Eastern Mediterranean” (see www.fokusfortifikation.de) and is very much inspired by the discussions that take place throughout this network. The network is funded mainly by the German Research Fund DFG (Bonn) and was formerly run by the Archaeological Institute of the Free University of Berlin and the Excellence Cluster “Topoi” (until August 2010); it is now housed by the Division of Building Archaeology (Architekturreferat) at the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin. The main research on the city walls of ancient Messene has been conducted in the course of a three year project (2005-2008, including four field campaigns of five weeks each) run by the Archaeological Institute of the Free University of Berlin, thanks to the generous cooperation of the director of the Greek excavations in Messene, Petros Themelis, and funding by the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Dusseldorf). This project was coordinated by the author, under the supervision of F. Fless (FU Berlin) and D. Sack (Technical University of Berlin, Institute of Architecture); the author conducted the fieldwork together with J. Giese (University of Bamberg), U. Schwertheim (Bamberg), J.-C. Bessac (CNRS Lattes), and C. Huguenot (FU Berlin). It is presently being prepared for publication. For preliminary results see Müth 2010a; Giese 2010; Schwertheim 2010.

Apart from the persons and institutions mentioned above, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for good suggestions and recommendations for further literature.

- 1 As the sources are scarce, the discussion of early Messenian history, particularly of the dates of the wars against Sparta, is long and does not yield clear and unambiguous results. Nevertheless, the arguments in favour of the more traditional earlier dating of the first war to the last third of the 8th century BC, and of the second to the second half of the 7th century (from around 669), seem to me more convincing: Meyer 1978, 244-53 (with a good summary of the earlier literature); Baltrusch 1998, 37-41; Huxley 1962, 34, 53, 56-8; Cartledge 1979, 113, 119-20; Huxley 2003, 149-50; Nafissi 2009, 120-1 (first war around 700 BC). See also Parker 1991; Meier 1998, 91-9 (both for a later dating of the wars in the 7th century BC). For a very late dating of the wars which poses many problems on different levels see Shaw 2003, 100-45, 244-5, and for an even later dating of Tyrtaios and the second war, see Luther 2004, 59-79. For other aspects of the wars see also Luraghi 2008, 68-106.
- 2 See also Luraghi 2001, 300; Luraghi 2006, 184; Shipley 2004, 550; Grandjean 2003, 92-5 doubts this change of name, but with no convincing arguments. For more detail see Müth 2007, 16-7.



Fig. 1. View of Messene, situated at the foot of Mt. Ithome (photograph by the author)

had played a crucial role as a stronghold in the first war against Sparta and also in a revolt of the Messenian helots in the 460s BC. Furthermore, the old and important Messenian sanctuary of Zeus Ithomatas was situated on its summit; thus the mountain clearly bore a strong symbolic meaning for the Messenians.³

When we approach Messene today, we can still see from afar long stretches of the mighty and impressive city wall, particularly in the northwestern area, in places preserved up to the wall walk and the crenellations or gables of towers (Figs. 2, 4, 5 and 7). Explicit information about the construction of these fortifications is only provided by one ancient written source: Pausanias' *Periegesis of Greece*, written not before the middle of the 2nd century AD. Pausanias is a reliable author in many respects, particularly in topographical matters, but concerning more plain historical subjects, his reliability is sometimes brought into question and has to be scrutinised carefully in every single case. In book 4 (Paus. 4.27.5 & 7) he de-

scribes the construction of the fortifications of Messene in the context of the very foundation of the city:

As Epaminondas considered the spot where the city of the Messenians now stands most convenient for the foundation, [...] he began preparations for the foundation, ordering stone to be brought, and summoning men skilled in laying out streets and in building houses, temples, and ring-walls. [...]

For that day they were engaged in sacrifice and prayer, but on the following days they raised the circuit of the walls, and within built houses and the temples. They worked to the sound of music, but only from Boeotian and Argive flutes, and the tunes of Sacadas and Pronomus were brought into keen competition.⁴

This depiction suggests that experts from elsewhere had been employed to construct the walls, and that, after a day of sacrifices and prayer, the whole impressive wall circuit of roughly nine kilometres in length (Fig. 3) was built up in a few very easy, even picturesque, days to the accompani-

3 For the importance of Mt. Ithome for the Messenians and the sanctuary of Zeus Ithomatas see Müth 2007, 13-4, 218-25. See also Luraghi 2008, 210 ("If there was a monument of Messenian resistance, it was Mount Ithome"); 2009, 116.

4 Translation by Jones & Ormerod 1926.



Fig. 2. Northern part of western fortifications of Messene with towers 10 and 11 in the foreground (photograph by the author)

ment of good music (which was of course meant to encourage and support the people engaged in the hard work); and then we have not even considered all the sanctuaries and houses for some tens of thousands of inhabitants, which are also supposed to have been built contemporaneously.

It has been deduced from the florid quality of this description that it cannot be based on early and trustworthy sources, but is to be seen as a later elaboration by the author.⁵ In general it is not easy to trace back the different parts of Pausanias' history of Messenia (Paus. 4.1-29). The earlier parts about the wars against Sparta are, as Pausanias states himself (Paus. 4.6.1-2), based partly on the prose work of Myron of Priene and an epos of Rhianos of Bene,

both from Hellenistic times, while it is not possible to determine precisely which sources he used for his description of the liberation of Messenia and the foundation of Messene.⁶ However, the vivacity and the minuteness of practical details given in the report in question might also be taken as a hint at the contrary, which in my opinion seems much more convincing: that the depiction goes back to an early and immediate source, involving perhaps even eye-witnessed information. There is no doubt that this source would have had the obvious intention of glorifying the process of the foundation of Messene.⁷ If we deduct, however, the idyllic and glorifying elements of this report, the practical details still remain, e.g. that skilled

⁵ Meyer 1978, 265.

⁶ Habicht 1985, 93-6, 135-45; Luraghi 2008, 83-8. For a summary of the older research see Meyer 1978, 240-4. One may only generally say that Pausanias knew and used Herodotos, Thucydides, Xenophon, Hieronymos of Cardia, Polybios, and Plutarch. Against a former assumption that Paus. 4.26-27 together with other passages was derived from Plutarch's lost *Vita* of Epaminondas, see Tuplin 1984.

⁷ I would like to thank Hans-Joachim Gehrke for indicating this possibility of an early, intentional source to me. For 4th-century historiography as regards the Messenians, see Luraghi 2008, 79-83, 219-30.

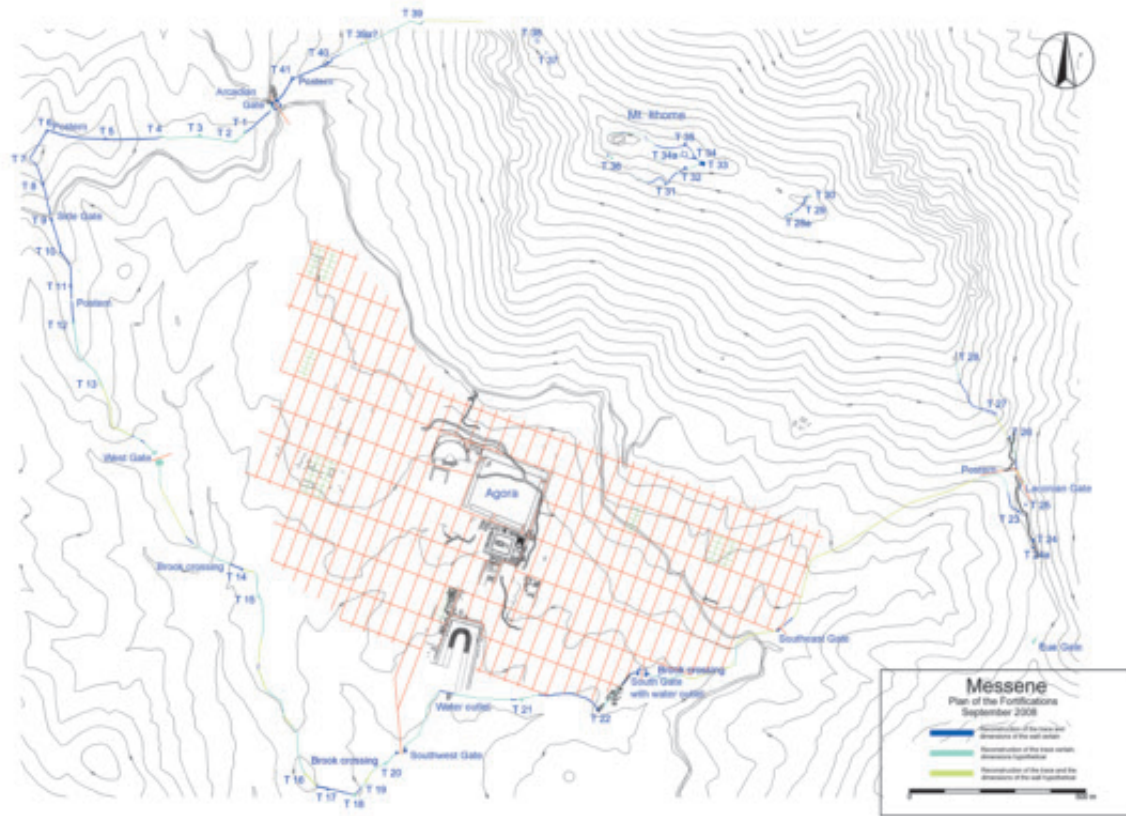


Fig. 3. Plan of ancient Messene with monuments, street grid and fortifications (topographical plan with streets and monuments: P. Themelis; plan of street grid and fortifications: S. Mûth)

manpower was employed to construct the walls, and the matter of fact information that they were built in the very first days – or let us be more realistic and say years – of existence of the town, i.e. right after its foundation in 369 BC. And this information becomes more trustworthy the older we estimate the underlying source to be.

From the archaeological and architectural point of view, there is no real need to doubt this information, as we found out while conducting our field research on the city walls of Messene: the details of typology, construction, and stonemasonry as well as excavation material all point to such a time frame. This perspective is unable to tell us, however, the precise date in the middle of the 4th century BC when the walls were built. Thus, concerning the time of construction of the fortifications of Messene, Pausanias does not contradict the archaeological results,

but in fact supplies our information with additional precision, though we should refrain from believing that the construction was a matter of a few days work.

Further information may be teased out from Diodoros of Sicily as an implicit source, who – after describing the founding and construction of Messene and giving a short summary of the Messenian–Spartan conflict (Diod. Sic. 15.66) – says (Diod. Sic. 15.67.1):

The Thebans, having accomplished in eighty-five days all that is narrated above, and having left a considerable garrison for Messenê, returned to their own land.⁸

It is not quite clear if Diodoros means that the Thebans accomplished the founding and construction of the build-



Fig. 4. Tower 41 and curtain east of the Arcadian Gate from the field side (photograph by the author)

ings of Messene in 85 days, or if he mentions this time frame with regards to their whole campaign in the Peloponnese.⁹ A similar period of time is given by Plutarch, (*Vit. Ages.* 32.8), who reports that the Thebans had stayed in Laconia for three months, robbing most of the country. Here it cannot be determined whether the foundation of Messene, to which he refers shortly afterwards (*Vit. Ages.* 34.1) is included or not. However, it might be concluded that these authors meant to say that the process of foundation and construction of the new town did not take longer than that. We can only take this as a piece of information concerning the city wall of Messene if, however, we presume that these authors understood a for-

tification to be a necessary element of the foundation of a polis, and particularly *this* new polis, which might well be implied in the given situation. For a polis of those times a fortification was indeed generally considered an indispensable element, a fact which has been made clear with sufficient conviction in the research of the last decades, particularly by the Copenhagen Polis Centre.¹⁰ Diodoros and Plutarch, it follows, may well imply that the fortifications of Messene were built within three months, together with the rest of the buildings necessary for a new town.

Of course we do not need to discuss how realistic this is. Even if Dieter Mertens was able to demonstrate that with the utmost effort it would have been possible for the

9 It was Nino Luraghi who pointed out to me that with “all that is narrated above”, Diodoros could also mean the whole campaign of the Thebans in the Peloponnese.

10 Hansen 2004, 135-7. Cf. also Ducrey 1986, 135-7; 1995 particularly pages 246 and 254. Also very illuminating on this point is Cobet 1997, 249-53.

Syracusans to erect the walls of the Epipolai above their town over a length of 5.7 km within the six weeks given by Diodoros (Diod. Sic. 14.18.1-8),¹¹ and if we may deduct that with comparable exertion the city wall of Messene could have been erected within three months, we would still have to explain how the remainder of the town with all that is necessary for a considerable population could have been built in the same time – but there is no need for such a strain. Like Pausanias' gilded account of the city's birth and its first days, we must not take these reports and numbers as realistic accounts of the construction of the city wall, but as laudatory exaggerations.¹² Nevertheless they may serve as hints that the construction of the town and its walls started immediately after the foundation and progressed fairly quickly, whenever they were concluded.

Coming back to the question of whether a strong fortification wall was a fundamental necessity for Messene at its foundation, we have to state that indeed it was an indispensable element. This becomes very clear when we look at the political situation at the time. There were very urgent defensive needs in this special situation: first of all because of the continuing threat from the Spartans, who, already having suffered heavy losses of warriors, power, moral, and esteem in the Greek world through their terrible defeat at Leuktra, were not particularly happy with the loss of their most fertile land in Messenia, and the loss of the cheap manpower in the shape of the former helots.¹³ One might claim that Sparta was in a very weak position at this particular time and thus could not have constituted a severe threat to the Messenians, which is

certainly true to some extent. It is important, however, to remember that this point of view is strongly influenced by our present-day knowledge of Sparta's ultimate inability to recover from that heavy blow the Thebans inflicted on her. Sparta had been one of the two strongest powers in Greece for many centuries, had conquered Athens in the Peloponnesian War, and had practically been the lords of all Greece less than forty years before. The old myth of Spartan invincibility had only recently been severely damaged. Sparta *was* clearly only waiting for the next opportunity to lay hands on the Messenian land and people again, and no one could divine that she would never again be able to do so.¹⁴ Also of significance is the fact that the rest of the Greeks were anything but convinced that the new Messenian community was legitimate and had a right to be independent, mostly because the Spartans claimed their historical right to the region, but also because of the fact that part of the Messenian population was formed by newly freed helots, which meant slaves in the reasoning of Sparta.¹⁵ This line of argumentation was formulated in Isocrates' fictive speech of the Spartan king Archidamos, in which the liberation of Messenia is marked as an illegal act, precisely for these reasons.¹⁶ Discussion on this point entailed the failure of several attempts at a koine eirene in Greece after the battle of Leuktra and its aftermath, and went on at least until the peace treaty after the battle of Mantinea 362 BC, where the Messenians finally signed on the Theban side as a free state, a fact which was of course heavily opposed by Sparta.¹⁷

11 Mertens 1999, 146-9.

12 See also Cooper 2000, 184-5 who nevertheless thinks that the city wall of Messene could have been erected within four to six months, which still seems rather optimistic to me.

13 The vexation of the Spartans and their strong claims on the Messenian land in reaction to its loss are well reflected in Isoc. *Archidamos* 16-32. See also Cartledge 1979, 299.

14 See also Roebuck 1941, 27; Buckler 1980, 87; Luraghi 2008, 218; 2009, 116. That they were still able to muster at least some strength at rare occasions was shown for instance by the so-called "Tearless Battle" against the Arcadians in 368 BC (Diod. Sic. 15.72; Plut. *Vit. Ages.* 33.5-8). That ancient authors believed Sparta to be a very serious threat to the new foundation is shown by Paus. 4.26.6 and Diod. Sic. 15.66.1, where Epaminondas' difficulties in finding a suitable place and bringing about the foundation of a city which would be able to withstand the Spartans are described. Further Polyb. 4.32 states that later on, the Messenians generally were not able to withstand on their own behalf when the Spartans attacked them with their whole force.

15 See Grandjean 2003, 55; 65-7.

16 Isoc. *Archidamos* 8.16-28.

17 Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.27, 36, 4.9; Diod. Sic. 15.81.3; Plut. *Vit. Pel.* 30.5; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 15.27-8. See also Roebuck 1941, 41-3; Meyer 1978, 266 with further sources; Cartledge 1979, 302; Cartledge & Spawforth 1989, 6-8. For the details of the different efforts of peace treaties after the battle of Leuktra, their failures, and the peace treaty after the battle of Mantinea, see Jehne 1994, 79-115.

Given this historical context it is obvious that without a strong military protection like the fortifications we can still see today, which at the same time constituted a strong symbol of autonomy,¹⁸ the new foundation of Messene would have had no chance of survival. The point of view of historical circumstances at the time of the foundation therefore also supports the idea that the city wall must have been built with the foundation of the city.

Concerning the appearance of the walls, the only source is Pausanias (Paus. 4.31.5), who describes them thus:

Round Messene is a wall, the whole circuit of which is built of stone, with towers and battlements upon it. I have not seen the walls at Babylon or the walls of Memnon at Susa in Persia, nor have I heard the account of any eye-witness; but the walls at Ambrossos in Phocis, at Byzantium and at Rhodes, all of them the most strongly fortified places, are not so strong as the Messenian wall.¹⁹

As for the fortification walls of Ambrossos in Phokis, which Pausanias dates to the beginning of the war against Philip of Macedon and describes later in book 10.36.3-4, his statement might be true, even though we do not know very much about these walls from excavations.²⁰ The walls of Byzantium are only known to us from ancient written sources and seem to have been stronger and more elaborate than those of Messene, but running over a much shorter distance.²¹ That Pausanias estimates the walls of Rhodes to be weaker than the Messenian ones only shows that he was not really aware of the former strength of the Rhodian walls.²²

His emphasising the construction of Messene's city wall as entirely of stone has to be interpreted in the light

of the fact that most fortifications in those times consisted only of a stone socle with a mudbrick superstructure, as for example in the case of the two important walls of Mantinea and Megalopolis which were built in the same years, also in the central Peloponnese.²³ It was in fact at that time, during those decades around the middle of the 4th century BC, that walls made entirely of stone from their foundations up to the battlements started to be common in mainland Greece, so this fact absolutely deserved to be mentioned.

Pausanias' description perfectly corresponds with our material evidence: the fortifications of Messene consist of two faces of stone – mostly a hard limestone in the northern half, and psammitis, a softer stone, in the southern parts – from bottom to top, with an earth and rubble filling in between. Pausanias' remark that they had towers and battlements upon them is also true: we could still identify over forty towers and crenellated battlements all around the circuit.²⁴ Although Pausanias' description of the city wall of Messene might be exaggerated in his comparison with other walls and rather scanty in details, at least in the few ones he gives he is right.

Altogether, the contribution of the literary sources to our knowledge of the circumstances of the erection as well as the appearance of the city wall of Messene, in addition to what we know from the archaeological and architectural examination, is rather limited. Nevertheless, these sources are able to afford our interpretations further precision, add some interesting details, and confirm some conclusions that have been deduced from the material evidence.

18 For the correlation of city walls and autonomy, see e.g. Cobet 1997, 249-51.

19 Translation by Jones & Ormerod 1926.

20 Nikopoulou 1968; Komninou 1978; Baziotopoulou 1981; Kyriazopoulou 1982; Fossey 1986. Lawrence's theory (1979, 447 note 11) on the construction technique of the fortification of Ambrossos is outdated by these excavations.

21 I.a. Xen. *An.* 7.1.12-20, *Hell.* 1.3.14-20; Cass. Dio 74.10.3-5, 14.4-75.1.1; Herodian 3.1.6-7; Zos. 2.30.2-3; *Suda* s.v. Byzantium. See Müller-Wiener 1961.

22 This statement most probably originates in Pausanias' own judgement and is not taken from an earlier source, as it implies that he had seen the walls of Ambrossos, Byzantium, and Rhodes himself or at least knows them from the accounts of eye-witnesses. He cannot refer to the Rhodian walls of Classical times (which were much weaker indeed: Filimonos 1994, 53; Filimonos-Tsopotou 2004, 34-45) because these could on no account have counted as strong in his times, so he must refer to the ones erected around 300. These walls belonged to or actually were the strongest and most impressive fortifications in Greece at their time (Filimonos-Tsopotou 2004), but were severely damaged by a heavy earthquake in 142 AD (see Aristid. *Or.* 25.7-53), so Pausanias must have seen them (if ever he did) afterwards.

23 Lawrence 1979, 35; Karlsson 1992, 73-4; cf. Cooper 2000; for Megalopolis see also Gardner *et al.* 1892, 108; for Mantinea: Winter 1971, 113; Winter 1989; Adam 1982, 176-8.

24 Müth 2010a, 63-74; 78-80.



Fig. 5. *Stepped joint at the outer face of the curtain between Towers 6 and 7, the arrows marking the start and the end of the steps in the layers (photograph by the author)*

2. The city wall of Messene as a source for the history of its time

Having argued that the Messenian city wall most likely dates to around the middle of the 4th century BC, we might try to use its appearance and features as a source for the political and social history of its time.

Different observations can be made. In the analysis of its remains, the wall indeed turns out to be a strong defence, conceived and built with the most up-to-date knowledge.²⁵ The powerful character of the wall reflects the city's urgent need for an efficient military defence. This does not come as a surprise, as the same has already been concluded from the study of the contemporary political situation, nor can the strength of the fortification be seen as direct proof of this theory; nevertheless it may still add much to its probability.

Furthermore, there are relatively strong variations in masonry types and construction details of curtains, towers, and gates (Figs. 2, 4, 5, and 8) that have often been mentioned in earlier scholarly literature and used to suggest various building periods for different sections of the wall.²⁶ Our study, however, shows that they are

due rather to varying building materials with different geological characteristics for extraction and working, to the respective levels of representativeness of the parts in question, and to the use of many different workshops with varying knowledge, skills, and styles.²⁷ The last point is also documented by stepped joints that can be observed frequently in the curtains, showing how two building sections have been united (Fig. 5). The fact that several workshops were occupied with the construction of different parts of the wall at the same time and that a variety of stone material was used for the monument not only provides us with further details about the practical building process of the city wall, but also shows clearly that it was erected as quickly as possible. Even if we already assumed the same from the literary sources, we could not be sure how reliable they were. The material facts add even more weight to the urgency of the defensive needs of the Messenians, and the determination with which the allies and the Messenians wanted to build up massive evidence for their independence against the Spartan desire to reconquer their very fertile and only recently lost occupation zone, and against the arguments of some Greek states in favour of Sparta's right to it.

²⁵ Müth 2010a, 80-2; Giese 2010.

²⁶ For further details see Müth 2010a, 58 with note 5 and pages 67-77; Giese 2010; Schwertheim 2010.

²⁷ Of these results many go back to Jean-Claude Bessac's research. See Müth 2010a, 78-83; Giese 2010; Schwertheim 2010.



Fig. 6. The Arcadian Gate with its round courtyard, the tilted middle pier of the double entrance, and the decorative consoles facing the town (photograph by the author)

But the Messenian fortifications also show a lot of representative elements: the fine and beautiful stonemasonry of the Arcadian gate and the decorative consoles on its townward side (Fig. 6); impressive double entrances at the Arcadian and the South Gate that even thwart the safety of the gates; the door lintels of some towers decorated with vertical grooves like the blocks of the Arcadian Gate (Fig. 2); the ornamental consoles supporting the lintels of water passages in the southern parts of the city wall; the high quality of the stone masonry in many places; and the fact that particularly visible parts of the fortifications – e.g. the highest structures on Mt Ithome and on the lower wall circuit (T₃₄ and T₇, Figs. 3 and 7)²⁸ as well as the section around the Arcadian Gate (Figs. 4 and 6), the South Gate etc. – are built in an orthogonal and nearly isodomic masonry style, i.e. much more regularly than many other parts with their trapezoidal masonry.²⁹ As this level of representation is far higher than the

standard of the time, we can deduce a specific ambition or simply a particular need for it in this case. Here, the special situation of the founding of the city comes into play again: certainly, the Thebans, Arcadians, Argives, and not least the Messenians not only wanted to send a signal of the strength of the new city to Sparta, but were also very proud of their new foundation and wanted to adorn it with a beautiful monument which was the first thing every visitor saw when approaching and entering the area of the town. But if we take a closer look at this newly founded community, something else has to be taken into account. The population of the newborn state and its capital was composed of many different groups of people with a wide variety of origins, in geographic as well as in social terms: the Messenian helots, only just freed from slavery, formed one of them,³⁰ and, as mentioned before, the Messenian exiles were called back and may have come from other parts of Greece, from

28 The fact that the highest structures on Mt Ithome and the lower circuit respectively are built in strictly orthogonal masonry was first noticed by Jean-Claude Bessac.

29 Giese 2010; Müth 2010a, 78, 82; Schwertheim 2010. P. Cartledge in Cartledge & Spawforth 1989, 5 calls it “the finest enceinte walling then known in the entire Greek world”.

30 Isoc. *Archidamos* 16-28; Xen. *Hell.* 7.4.9; see also Dipersia 1974, 59 who considers them to be the core of the new population, and Grandjean 2003, 56.



Fig. 7. Tower 34 at the highest point of the ring wall on Mt. Ithome with its rectangular masonry (photograph by the author)

Southern Italy, Sicily, and the Cyrenaica to join into the foundation, even if we do not know if they constituted more than just a minor part of the new population.³¹ There is also evidence that non-Messenian helots and *perioikoi* took part,³² and other people willing to settle with them.³³ It is obvious that this motley folk were crucially lacking a common identity. Even if some of them may still have called themselves “Messenians”, the ones “returning” from exile were only descendants of people that lived in Messenia many generations ago, and those

who had just been freed from helotism could only have kept their Messenian identity as a kind of mythical tale since they would have had little opportunity to uphold many of their cultural traditions. Therefore a very strong need for both a common identity and substantial symbols for it must have arisen. Many features of the city’s other remains show this strive for materialised identity,³⁴ so we would probably not be wrong to see the fortifications in a similar light: with their representative appearance they were a very strong symbol of the common identity of

31 Paus. 4.26.5; Diod. Sic. 15.66.1; Plut. *Vit. Pel.* 24.5, *Ages.* 34.1. On the propagandistic element in this tradition (which nevertheless does not affect its veracity), see Dipersia 1974 who also points out that the returned Messenian exiles must have formed “un’ estrema minoranza” (Dipersia 1974, 59).

32 Isoc. *Archidamos* 16-28; Plut. *Vit. Ages.* 32.7; Paus. 4.27.8; see also Luraghi 2008, 224-30, who considers them the largest part of the new population.

33 Diod. Sic. 15.66.1. See also Dipersia 1974, 59. Concerning the question of the composition of the population of Messene, see in detail Müth 2010b, 138-40. A different position, against the notion that Messenian helots and exiles were part of the new population, is held by Luraghi 2008, 195; 220-30; see also Luraghi 2009, 118-23.

34 Luraghi 2008, 230-9; 245-8; Müth 2010b, 142-5.



Fig. 8. Tower 6 with small catapault windows and postern at its eastern side (photograph by the author)

the new Messenians which showed not only their new independence and power, but also their unity.

All these observations concern the time around the construction of the walls. But there is also at least one feature which tells us something about much later times: in the Augustan or Tiberian period, the walls at the south of the stadium, functioning both as the southern limit and retaining wall of this monument, were torn down to the lowermost courses to include the podium of a very illustrious grave monument in the form of a prostyle temple. The monument was thus inserted into a grandiose scenery.³⁵ This testifies first of all to the fact that the owner

of the grave monument must have been one of the most important and influential inhabitants of the town,³⁶ but also that at this time, in the early Imperial period, the fortifications were no longer necessary as a defensive device and had become purely representative.

3. Success balance

The Messenian city wall experienced several opportunities to prove its efficiency.³⁷ Our known reports in this respect begin with the Diadochian wars, in which Messene was the target of various commanders: according

³⁵ Themelis 2000, 102-13; Müth 2007, 119-24.

³⁶ Themelis 2000, 112.

³⁷ Concerning the historical events discussed in this paragraph and for a fuller account of the historical development of Messene, see Müth 2007, 13-26. More detailed information also in Grandjean 2003, 65-83.

to Diodorus (Diod. Sic. 19.54.4), Cassander “won over the cities of Messenia except Ithôme”,³⁸ as Messene was called at the time. Here we cannot tell whether Cassander attacked the city in vain or did not even make an attempt. Either way, the fortifications may well have affected whatever happened, either by frightening Cassander off, or by withstanding an assault by him. Later on, Cassander decided *not* to lay siege to Messene because of its Macedonian garrison under Polyperchon, as Diodorus states (Diod. Sic. 19.64.1).

Plutarch (*Vit. Demetr.* 33. 2-3) reports an unsuccessful siege of Messene by Demetrios Poliorcetes, which took place after the battle at Ipsos in 301 BC:

[...] he himself passed on into Peloponnesus and laid siege to Messene. Here, in an attack upon the walls, he came near losing his life; for a missile from a catapult struck him in the face and passed through his jaw into his mouth. But he recovered [...]³⁹

This episode not only shows that the city must have been efficiently fortified at this time to be able to withstand the famous Poliorcetes, but also that catapults for shooting arrows were used, a hint that the towers were designed for early first-generation catapults which were in use in the first half of the 4th century BC.⁴⁰

The next sources of interest for the efficiency of our fortifications concern the year 214/3 BC, when Philip V of Macedon prompted Demetrios of Pharos to attack Messene,⁴¹ as related by Pausanias (Paus. 4.29.2):

With an advance guard consisting of all the light-armed troops who knew the road to Ithome, he [Demetrios of Pharos] succeeded just before dawn in scaling the wall unnoticed at a point where it lay between the city and the peak of Ithome.⁴²

When day dawned, the inhabitants first thought the Spartans had entered the city and they attacked the intruders in wild hatred. Realising, however, with whom they were fighting, they became very scared, as Pausanias narrates (Paus. 4.29.3-5). They fought on, nevertheless, with great courage, the garrison on Mt Ithome attacking from above, and women joining in the battle by bombarding the enemy with tiles and stones; finally the Macedonians took flight in disorderly manner, the majority being pushed down the precipices of Mt Ithome and killed.

Demetrios himself was not only unsuccessful in taking Messene, but paid for his attempt with his own life, as Polybios (Polyb. 3.19.11) reports:

For having, with the approval of Philip, made a foolhardy and ill-managed attempt to seize Messene, he perished in the action [...].⁴³

What is interesting for us here is that Demetrios *had* managed to get over the walls in some hidden place between Mt Ithome and the lower city, which shows that the fortifications must have been weak or unguarded in at least one place. Closer scrutiny of the monument shows that there were some posterns (e.g. those near T 6 and T 41, Figs. 3 and 8) that were not equipped with any permanent closing mechanism.⁴⁴ Even the famous Arcadian Gate which guarded the road to Arcadia is not proved ever to have been furnished with a proper closing facility, i.e. doors.⁴⁵ On the steep upper parts of Mt Ithome, below the ring wall around the summit, the line of the wall was interrupted where natural rock formations were considered sufficient protection (Fig. 3).⁴⁶ We have to ascribe much self-confidence to the Messenians in their capacity to guard and defend such gaps in their wall, which was

38 Translation by Sherman 1952.

39 Translation by Perrin 1920.

40 Ober 1987, 569-77, 596-600; Ober 1992, 147-52.

41 In this context (4.29.1), Pausanias confuses Demetrios of Pharos with Demetrios of Macedon, son of Philip V; see Meyer 1978, 272.

42 Translation by Jones & Ormerod 1926.

43 Translation by Paton 1922.

44 Indeed, no traces of such a mechanism have been found on any of the preserved posterns, although some of them are not well enough preserved to exclude their existence with certainty.

45 In the course of his architectural study of the Arcadian Gate, Juergen Giese could not find any positive proof that doors ever existed at the inward openings of the gate. The outer entrance to the gate courtyard was not closed anyway. For a preliminary report on the architectural studies of the Arcadian gate see Giese 2010, 85-8.

46 For the trace and topography of the whole wall, see Müth 2010a, 63-7.

obviously unrealistic in some situations – and thus weighs down our success balance to some degree.

Shortly afterwards, probably in spring 213 BC, Philip V of Macedon himself set out for another attack on Messene in order to get hold of Messenia. In the words of Plutarch (*Vit. Arat.* 51.2):

Here he [Philip] tried once more to hoodwink the Messenians, and after being detected in this, wronged them openly and ravaged their territory.⁴⁷

The same incident is mentioned by Polybios (Polyb. 8.8(10).1, 12(14).1):⁴⁸

Upon arriving at Messene Philip proceeded to devastate the country like an enemy acting from passion rather than from reason. [...] The Messenians had now become Philip's enemies, but he was unable to inflict any serious damage on them, although he made an attempt to devastate their territory.⁴⁹

The fortifications of Messene, it seems, were able to prove again their efficiency in one way or another, since Philip would certainly have taken Messene if he could. They most probably withstood an attack or even a siege, or alternatively deterred Philip from such a scheme by their apparent strength, thus forcing him to devastate the country and in this way to do the Messenians as much harm as possible.

In 201 BC, however, Nabis of Sparta succeeded in overcoming the walls, as Polybios (Polyb. 16.13.3, 16-7), Plutarch (*Vit. Phil.* 12.4-6), Livy (Livy 34.32.16), and Pausanias (Paus. 4.29.10, 8.50.5) tell us, though not those of the separately walled citadel of Mt Ithome. Plutarch (*Vit. Phil.* 12.4-5) reports:

And once again, when Nabis [...] suddenly seized Messene, [...] Philopoemen himself went to their rescue, taking with him his fellow-citizens of Megalopolis [...]. And when Nabis heard that Philopoemen was already close at hand, he did not wait for him to come up, although he was encamped in the city,

but stole out by an opposite gate and led his forces off as fast as he could [...]; and Messene was set free.⁵⁰

This story is the second piece of evidence for the fortifications having been successfully overcome, but even this time Mt Ithome remained impregnable and could be kept, and Nabis was thrown out by the mere intelligence of the approach of Philopoemen and the Megalopolitans.

Around 191 BC, Messene experienced serious conflicts with the Achaean League because the Messenians refused to join it, in spite of being “invited” very insistently, and continued to sympathise with the Aetolian League. According to Livy (Livy 36.31.1-9), the Achaean troops invaded Messenia, devastated the land, and laid siege to Messene, obviously without being able to conquer it. The Messenians asked the Roman legate Flaminius for help, but he tricked them by making the Achaean troops leave Messenia and afterwards forcing the Messenians to join the league anyway. This situation was not really conducive to securing permanent peace, and it was only natural that even more serious conflicts followed, culminating in the Achaean–Messenian war in the spring of 182 BC. We have no explicit information about any attack on Messene itself at this time, though there are some detailed reports about the war by Polybios (Polyb. 23.12-17, 24.9), Plutarch (*Vit. Phil.* 18-21), Pausanias (Paus. 4.29.11-2, 8.51.5-7), and Livy (Livy 39.49.1-10). Battles took place at the Arcadian border and in the south of Messenia, and the Messenians were quite successful at first. In the end, however, one of the Messenian parties made a severe mistake by poisoning the famous Achaean *strategos* Philopoemen, who until then had been beloved by the Messenians but who had been made a prisoner of war shortly before. In wild fury, the Achaeans under Lykortas devastated the Messenian land and the Romans stopped delivering weapons and grain to Messenia, forcing the Messenians to surrender. Messene had to join the Achaean League, an Achaean garrison was imposed on them on Mt Ithome, and finally the rest of the Messenian towns were split off from it and became independent members of the Achaean League,

⁴⁷ Translation by Perrin 1926.

⁴⁸ See also Polyb. 9.30.2 and Livy 32.21.23.

⁴⁹ Translation by Paton 1923.

⁵⁰ Translation by Perrin 1921.

which dealt a serious blow to the freedom, independence, and power of the city of Messene.⁵¹

The fact that this last great war only took place *around* the capital, that no one tried again to attack or besiege Messene as the centre of power and the leading town of the Messenians, speaks for itself: the fortifications must have been regarded as strong enough to render any attack pointless. It is important to note that the efficiency of a fortification also has to be evaluated according to attacks that were not ventured because of the apparent strength of the fortification in question. It is of course impossible to prove such an effect of a fortification without written sources explicitly referring to it. On the other hand, if we see for example that many battles or continuous devastation took place around a stronghold without it ever having been directly attacked, we may at least hazard a guess that the stronghold or fortification had a certain capacity to scare its potential attackers off. As Pierre Ducrey proposed some years ago, the main effect of a fortification was in most cases the mere deterral of enemies.⁵²

When Rome took power in the region in 146 BC, Messene finally regained its independence from the Achaeans, but from that time onwards the defensive function of the fortifications became obsolete since there were no more wars or battles in the region.

To sum up, in spite of the two incidences when the walls of Messene were overcome, they altogether proved to be highly successful defences for the city in most situations, either by withstanding real attacks or sieges, or by frightening off the enemy before he even ventured on such an undertaking. The citadel of Mt Ithome was obviously never successfully stormed.⁵³ The fortifications were indeed crucial to the Messenians' ability to keep their independence until they were forced to enter the Achaean League as late as 182 BC. Other helpful factors were of course the citizens' eagerness and courage to drive out enemies who had managed to get over the walls, like Demetrios of Pharos, as well as their support from Philopoimen from Megalopolis when Nabis of Sparta

entered the city. Without their fortifications, the Messenians would have fallen prey much earlier to conquerors like Demetrios Poliorcetes, and their history would have been totally different. Messene would not have been able to keep its freedom for long; it probably would not even have survived its first few months of existence, as Sparta certainly would have tried to regain power over the region as soon as possible. Thus the fortifications of the Messenian capital provided the most important guarantee for the liberation of Messenia and the foundation of Messene to become a success story.

4. Impacts of the city wall on the population of Messene and the history of the Messenians

To conclude, I would like to present some ideas about the implications the fortifications of Messene had in addition to their evident military functions and effects and their providing the autonomy of the city. As I mentioned earlier in this article, one obvious intention behind their representative aspects must have been to make a monument of common identity to the population of the newly founded town. Obviously this effort was very successful, as we can deduce from the fact that in the historical and epigraphic record there is absolutely no trace left of the heterogeneous character of the Messenians after the foundation of the city. The population of Messene and of all Messenia shows itself from the very beginning in all written sources, contracts and inscriptions as a corporate unit, called the Μεσσηνιοί or Μεσσανίοι. But from the 3rd century BC on, there is another observation to be made in such epigraphical contracts: now Messene starts to sign these contracts as πόλις τῶν Μεσσηνίων, in the name of all Messenians.⁵⁴ Thus a very obvious domination of the capital over the rest of Messenia may be observed.⁵⁵ This might also be reflected in the change of name: as has already been mentioned, the town of Messene was called Ἰθώμη until the end of the 4th century BC, when it took over the name

⁵¹ Concerning this conflict and the war against the Achaean League, see Grandjean 2003, 80-3, 225-9.

⁵² Ducrey 1986, 135-42.

⁵³ See Grandjean 2003, 264.

⁵⁴ Roebuck 1941, 37; 116; Meyer 1978, 158-60, 264-5; Grandjean 2003, 21-48, 91-105; see also Müth 2007, 16-7, 23-5.

⁵⁵ This has already been pointed out by Luraghi 2006, 170-1; Luraghi 2008, 268-9; see also Roebuck 1941, 109-11; Shipley 2004, 562.

of Μεσσηνία from the whole land. The latter in turn was now named Μεσσηνία. Although no one will of course ever be able to prove that this domination of Messene had anything to do with the fortifications, I think Nino Luraghi is right in conjecturing that because of its mighty ring of walls and its vast territory, Messene as a capital simply played in a different league from all the other Messenian settlements.⁵⁶ The fortifications of Messene not only guaranteed its permanent independence from Sparta, but also seem to have implied dominance over the other Messenian towns. That this domination obviously caused internal strain and dissatisfaction and might finally have provoked the other Messenians to movements of

secession which culminated in their defection and their incorporation in the Achaean League as independent members in 182 BC is the other side of the coin.⁵⁷ If this is true, it was – ironically enough – in the end the very strength of its city wall that contributed later on to the curtailment of much of the power of Messene.

SILKE MÜTH

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens Department

Fidiou 1

10678 Athens

Greece

silke.mueth@gmx.de

⁵⁶ Luraghi 2006, 170-1.

⁵⁷ Roebuck 1941, 116-7; Meyer 1978, 283-4; Grandjean 2003, 99.

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