

WRITING ON THE WALL: LATE-THIRD CENTURY URBAN DEFENSES IN SOUTH LANGUEDOC

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The movement from the Roman to the medieval world is one of the most significant transitional moments of Western history. One of the most visible aspects of that transition is the installation of circuit walls that transform urban landscape. The first major wave of fortification in western Europe was carried out in the late Roman empire during the late third and early fourth century. These urban defenses, especially those in Roman Gaul, provide important information regarding late Roman urbanism and the state of the empire in the late third century. Earlier scholarship has seen all the Gallic enceintes built during the third century as hastily constructed and enclosing only the core of a city. This thesis takes the three largest cities in Roman south Languedoc—Narbonne, Carcassonne and Toulouse—and reexamines the evidence, both archaeological and literary, about the city walls. I conclude that these walls, indeed built in the late third or early fourth century, were not hastily constructed and did not only enclose a small portion of the city. Further, the construction of monumental walls at this date shows a level of economic vitality. This argues against the commonly assumed dismal situation and suggests that the problems of the “third-century crisis” did not affect south Gaul in ways previously thought.