

[Davies on Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 'Castrum to Castle: Classical to Medieval Fortifications in the Lands of the Western Roman Empire'](#)

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J. E. Kaufmann, H. W. Kaufmann. *Castrum to Castle: Classical to Medieval Fortifications in the Lands of the Western Roman Empire*. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2018. 288 pp. ISBN 978-1-4738-9582-9; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4738-9580-5.

Reviewed by Gwyn Davies (Florida International University) **Published on** H-War (February, 2023)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

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A Confusion of Castles

This book is certainly ambitious in its aims. In a relatively modest number of pages, the authors intend to cover “the history of the fortifications in the lands that were part of the Western Roman Empire and its successors from the first century to the fourteenth century” (p. 8), albeit that they set out to emphasize the experiences of “England” and “France” (*sic*) in particular, with a further volume (now out) covering Iberia and later developments after the adoption of gunpowder.[1] On this broad canvas, the intention is to provide the “historical background associated with the fortifications in addition to their descriptions” (p. 8) even if such laudable objectives would require a bravura performance to pull off successfully. Unfortunately, this book comes nowhere near achieving either the requisite degree of synthesis or overarching analytical argument.

The authors offer their readers a series of “what happened next” narratives providing potted digests of western European history accentuated by what appear to be randomly selected “dialog boxes.” These in-text digressions so favored by the producers of modern textbooks should add to the reader’s understanding, but here, their inclusion only obfuscates the narrative flow and far too often includes information that could be safely discarded (for example, a partial listing of Roman emperors, pp. 20-22, serves little purpose). If it is argued that these interjections are necessary because this is a work aimed at the general public, it could be countered that a popular readership should neither be patronized nor misled. And it is this latter objection that strikes at the very heart of this book.

It may be just about acceptable to provide a series of episodic narratives at the expense of formulating any meaningful train of causative analysis (even if a general readership would, for example, be better served reading Robert Graves’s *Count Belisarius* [1938] than the plodding and relentless listing of events that comprises the authorial treatment of Justinian’s invasion of Italy, pp. 56-71), but it is wholly inexcusable when these narratives are riddled with errors, inconsistencies, syntactical embarrassments, and painful generalizing. Indeed, this reviewer has never read a published work that contains so many egregious mistakes and the question that immediately springs to mind is, What on earth was the press doing at the copyediting stage? In most reviews, it is helpful to point out these sorts of mistakes or misconceptions so that if a text is to be reprinted such matters

can then be addressed: sadly, there are simply far too many errors here to provide anything more than a sampling of the same.

Some of these mistakes can be attributed to sloppiness and a failure of proofreading, as this random selection from across the book suggests: “Cordbridge” for “Corbridge” (p. 27); “Nod Hill” for “Hod Hil” (p. 51); Ragnar “Lobrok” for “Lodbrok” (p. 94); Petit “Andleys” for “Andely” (p. 150); March “2004” for “1204” (p. 154); and Arnaud “Armory” for “Amaury” (p. 178). Indeed, the entire segment on castellation in Wales (pp. 193-211), necessarily involving the deployment of Welsh proper nouns, requires radical overhaul. Welsh, admittedly, may be a tricky proposition for Anglophones, but surely this would suggest that the orthography should be checked a little more carefully (then again, the authors are equal-opportunity misspellers, managing to render Isabella, the wife of Edward II, as “Isabela” throughout the same section!). At other times, the error lies in fact, as this representative sample again indicates: Roman “bridgehead forts” on the eastern bank of the Rhine were to act as debouchment points for transfluvial operations, not “to protect ships while unloading” (p. 7); Hyginus never mentions the fort at Gelligaer as claimed (p. 10); Carausius was succeeded by Allectus, not Constantius I (p. 34); Aurelian not Marcus Aurelius ordered the construction of Rome’s Aurelian circuit (p. 37); Procopius was a contemporary eyewitness to Belisarius, not “a medieval scholar” (p. 57); Chinon is on the north bank of the Vienne, not the Loire (p. 145); Roger Bigod (not “Bigo”) was the great-grandson of William Marshal, not his son-in-law (p. 193); and Robert Fitzhamon defeated Rhys ap Tewdwr not Rhys ap Gruffydd, and that in 1090, not “later” than 1192 (p. 196).

These sorts of errors (with this reviewer compiling five densely packed pages of corrigenda) render the book unsafe for the unwary reader and such gross inaccuracies are further compounded by the tendency to indulge in questionable generalization across the board. A typical example can be found in the claim that because the “expansion of the (Roman) empire ended early in the second century ...fortifications became necessary as the empire went on the defensive” (p. 12), which amounts to a shocking simplification. Not only does this disregard future Roman adventurism (such as the campaigns of Septimius Severus), but, more importantly, it fails to take account of the imperial mindset, which certainly did not consider itself on the defensive. Indeed, given that this is a book about fortification one might imagine that the material record might be deployed in support of such a position but there is no acknowledgement that Roman forts remained operating bases for the forward projection of military power (the enemy were still to be engaged in the field) until the adoption of more overtly defensive provisions such as projecting towers and artillery bastions and wide fronting ditches in the later third century. Given his relevance to the whole debate, it is strange that Edward Luttwak makes no appearance in the discussion nor the bibliography![2]

These issues over fact and argument are further exacerbated by the deployment of infelicitous or nonsensical phraseology, which adds further fuel to skepticism as to the role played by the press in the production process. Again, a handful of examples should serve as cases in point. “The greatest bone of contention between the two nations extended from Normandy to Aquitaine” (p. 130), which is quite some “bone!” Meanwhile, statements such as “the siege (of Montségur) was beginning to last longer than most of the crusade” (p. 189) and Frederick II building Castel del Monte “in a location where it is constantly exposed to the sun” (p. 215) add little to our understanding of anything. And although it may be redundant to heap on yet more criticism at this stage, the illustrations are too often packed with excess information via the insertion of photographic thumbnails, are sometimes wrongly labeled (e.g., “Galla Lugunensis” for “Gallia Lugdunensis” and “Retia” for “Raetia” (pp. 2 and

36), and occasionally employ a kaleidoscope of different type fonts (as on p. 121).

In brief segments there is some light at the end of the tunnel. For example, in discussing the form and composition of motte and bailey castles and “classic castles” (pp. 111-127), the authors offer a more reliable guide with a useful overview of the architectural configuration of such structures (something that their helpful glossary of terminology, pp. 259-269, also reinforces). Unfortunately, however, these illuminating moments are far too often overshadowed by the weaknesses already outlined, and it remains very difficult to conclude that the book comes anywhere close to fulfilling its stated aims.

Notes

[1]. J. K. Kaufmann and K. W. Kaufmann, *Castle to Fortress: Medieval to Post-Modern Fortifications in the Lands of the Former Roman Empire* (Yorkshire and Philadelphia: Pen & Sword Military, 2019).

[2]. Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century AD to the Third* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976).

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