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# Soutènements et périboles de Delphes: construits en pierres travaillées

Évangéla Trouki, *Soutènements et périboles de Delphes: construits en pierres travaillées*. Fouilles de Delphes II. Topographie et architecture, 16. Athens: École française d'Athènes, 2023. Pp. 516. ISBN 9782869585553.

## **Review by**

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In this contribution to the *Fouilles de Delphes* series, Evangelia Trouki presents the retaining walls and *periboloi* of the entire site. Most scholarly attention at Delphi has (it seems fair to suggest) gone to topics other than retaining walls—treasuries and temples, sculpture and inscriptions, Herodotean narrative and Homeric *Hymns*—so this journey into “what is called utilitarian architecture” (p. 97) brings welcome insight.<sup>[1]</sup> These walls, after all, are the infrastructure that allows Delphi to cohere by both literally and metaphorically subtending other monuments and activities at the site.

As one would expect from a publication of the French School at Athens (EFA), *Soutènements et périboles de Delphes* is a work of meticulous scholarship, beautifully produced.<sup>[2]</sup> Illustrated with a total of 777 figures (including 15 fold-out plates), the volume includes three sections of main text, a brief recapitulative conclusion, and a detailed catalogue of individual walls. Its overall goal is to “classify the different types of construction techniques [*appareils*] used and, if possible, to date them”; “to understand them, to classify them, to compare them” (pp. 9–10) and thereby to explain what “determined the form of each construction” (p. 97). In other words, this is primarily a positivist and taxonomic enterprise. Beyond its careful descriptions of the walls themselves, Trouki’s work also argues that the second half of the sixth century (into the early fifth) saw a more thoroughgoing elaboration of space around the two sanctuaries than had been previously recognized. In addition to the well-known rebuilding of the temple of Apollo after the fire of 548, this construction work included retaining walls to support a network of roads in and around Delphi: another underlying theme of the volume is thus the history of movement across the site.

The volume originates in a 1993 doctoral thesis and cites no scholarship from after that date. EFA Director Véronique Chankowski explains in a preface that Trouki’s thesis has been routinely consulted by archaeologists working at the French School and “deserved to be published practically as-is” at the time of composition.<sup>[3]</sup> This time lag provides an occasion for reflecting on the changing nature of archaeological study and documentation. It seems likely that a similar volume produced today would include some application of energetics.<sup>[4]</sup> Trouki’s emphases on the economic aspects of wall building (discussed below) already point in that direction but remain couched in qualitative language: frugality in materials, care (or not) in finish. Moreover, Trouki was obviously









unable to deploy contemporary technologies in her research. The volume publishes many new drawings and photographs, but it has no photogrammetry models, no orthorectified drone photos, no XRF analysis of materials. Such tools certainly promise to continue advancing our understanding of Delphi—many researchers associated with the EFA have already, or are currently, engaged in such research—but Trouki’s work perfectly illustrates the continuing value and validity of “traditional” scholarship even as it also highlights how much contemporary approaches have evolved.

[\[5\]](#)

Part A briefly presents the materials used to build walls at Delphi: limestone, conglomerate (or breccia), poros. Nearly all the utilitarian walls at Delphi are in limestone and/or conglomerate, all of local provenience.[\[6\]](#) The most distant quarries providing stones for the site’s retaining walls and *periboloi* are at Logari, just to the east of the sanctuary of Athena, and Profitis Ilias, to the northwest of the modern town. The latter quarries, usually credited with the highest-quality limestone used at Delphi, are often thought to have been opened in the fourth century; Trouki suggests that this moment simply marks an escalation in their exploitation (p. 21).[\[7\]](#)

Part B holistically approaches the processes involved in building walls, as well as their architectural statics, proceeding in logical fashion from foundations to surface finishes, from earlier techniques to later ones, from the tools used to dress and place blocks to how walls were protected against water. Building on both earlier Delphi-specific work (particularly that of Erik Hansen and Jean-François Bommelaer) and broader studies of Greek masonry, Trouki presents a more-or-less traditional typology of the site’s wall styles: polygonal (rough, curved, coursed, ...), trapezoidal (irregular, pseudo-isodomic), ashlar (irregular, pseudo-isodomic, true isodomic). The section then covers the crowning of walls, the finishing of blocks, the different ways of reinforcing retaining walls (so important at a sloped site such as Delphi), and joining or abutting walls. Trouki’s interests go well beyond masonry style *per se*; the discussion instead embraces the entire process of construction from the quarry to the finished product. (It may be that the French term “appareil” conveys this holistic approach, by comparison to the more formalist concerns implied by the English “style” or even “technique.”) Particular attention is paid to logistical and financial considerations—assembling a wall out of standardized ashlar blocks is obviously faster than laboriously customizing the joining surfaces of each and every block in curved polygonal, but at

the cost of offloading effort from the worksite to the quarry—and to the actual mechanics of building a wall (including different work teams). A useful conclusion finishes things off with a proposed chronological scheme leavened with synthetic observations like “conservatism and frugality ... characterize Delphi’s utilitarian architecture” (p. 73).

A few things make this chapter stand out. First is Trouki’s deep familiarity with both corpus and comparanda: footnotes bristle with useful references to walls across the ancient Greek world, while the main text effortlessly explores the most minute details (supported by references to the copious illustrations) of walls at Delphi, each lovingly described as “keeping its own individuality” (p. 47). Second is an uneasy coexistence between the project’s taxonomic aims and the author’s recognition of a given structure’s individuality. Trouki routinely notes that one masonry style can sometimes be confused with another (e.g., irregular trapezoidal and regularly coursed polygonal, which might thus give birth to an intermediate stage, p. 53), that one wall might not always clearly or fully belong to just one masonry *Idealtypus*, and that technique is not selected in a vacuum but emerges from the interplay of many factors. Third, as a result, is Trouki’s wise insistence on presenting choice of *appareil* as an outcome of numerous factors rather than a strict function of chronology. Polygonal and trapezoidal, for instance, coexist throughout the fifth century; the choice between them has to do with an area’s slope (and thus anticipated lateral forces on the wall) as much as with period style or an architect’s aesthetic preferences (which is perhaps also why “neo-polygonal” goes on to enjoy a long life at Delphi).

Part C, “Problems of topography and urbanism”, initially seems to depart from the volume’s subject: most of the chapter is about the network of roads and paths in and around the ancient sites. What unites this topic to *soutènements*—aside from the frequent use of retaining walls to support roads—is that ultimately *periboloi*, retaining walls, and roadways are all ways to organize space. For thinking about the broader landscape of Delphi, this segment may be the volume’s most significant. It is also the most difficult to summarize in detail. Fig. 777 distills the basic argument that movement around Delphi in antiquity depended on a network of roads much more complicated than is evident to the modern visitor. It seems only fair to highlight as well, however, that parts of the reconstruction are avowedly uncertain or hypothetical (p. 87); Trouki’s conviction that the pathways of Delphi did not evolve

significantly in antiquity might call for further discussion. The chapter concludes with summaries of the development over time of the two sanctuaries and of the gymnasium. The focus is on assembling coherent phases of terracing and *peribolos* construction and on the interplay between terraces and monuments. (Unfortunately, the illustrations meant to show the development of the Apollo sanctuary, figs. 771–74, are not the easiest to use.)

Occupying the bulk of the text is the catalogue of 106 walls, each cross-referenced (there is also an overall concordance, pp. 243–46), described in a structured fashion, dated, given a bibliography, and otherwise commented upon. Space does not permit discussion of individual walls or further details, so I close with a few broader thoughts.

While Trouki states that her theme is utilitarian architecture, we can also think of the volume's subjects as tied together by the concept of "infrastructure": infrastructures are "matter that enable the movement of other matter" but are also "semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees."<sup>[8]</sup> At the same time, *periboloi* and retaining walls do, of course, form a unified subject in traditional terms: they are the utilitarian scaffolding around which a sanctuary site literally develops. Monuments need to be supported on solid ground, sloped sites require terracing, sacred space calls for a limit. A considerable merit of Trouki's work, then, is to help visualize how Delphi grows over time like an organism. As infrastructure, the material she discusses also enables the site to function in human terms. Recognition that paths, *periboloi*, and even retaining walls are not solely utilitarian but also semiotic deconstructs that very binary. After all, perhaps everything is infrastructure for something else; a terrace wall might keep a temple in place, but the temple is, infrastructurally, a place to store divine offerings. The walls Trouki studies in such detail here, conversely, were not just means to some further architectural end, but also themselves spoke to the sanctuary's ancient visitor and shaped their experience of the site. Further thinking about Delphi as a space might seek to consider these walls as infrastructure, rather than solely as utilitarian architecture. How, for instance, do the political decisions to shape space and movement relate or compare to those authorizing the construction of treasuries and other monuments? What happens to the aesthetic and semiotic orientation of, say, the *grand mur polygonal* supporting Apollo's temple terrace when it becomes partly obscured by the Athenians' stoa? Not all such questions are, of course, remotely new, but Trouki's volume should bring renewed

attention to the less flashy side of Delphi's architectural remains.

In the end, this excellent volume will serve as an important resource for understanding the retaining walls and *periboloi* of ancient Delphi. My only substantive regret is that Trouki did not compose a synthetic chapter on the history of study of her walls nor any kind of coda reflecting on what has changed since 1993. While this is neither the most up-to-date nor the most thorough study of Greek masonry as such, Trouki's keen sense for architectural dialectics and the mechanics of construction makes it well worth reading.

## Notes

[1] Quotations are translated from French for the reader's convenience.

[2] I saw only one misprint worth mentioning, "IV<sup>e</sup> s." for "VI<sup>e</sup> s." on p. 87 (start of 3.1), and two irrelevancies: an erroneously capitalized *eta* on p. 13 and a misplaced comma in the caption for fig. 217.

[3] Also see Jean-François Bommelaer, "Delphica 2," *Pallas* 87 (2011), 13–38.

[4] Cf., e.g., Maud Devolder, *Construire en Crète minoenne. Une approche énergétique de l'architecture néopalatiale* (Aegeum 35).

[5] For a list of research projects underway at Delphi, see [www.efa.gr/section-categorie/grece-delphes](http://www.efa.gr/section-categorie/grece-delphes); also see following note. The EFA's current research priorities ([www.efa.gr/axes-et-objectifs-de-recherche-2022-2026](http://www.efa.gr/axes-et-objectifs-de-recherche-2022-2026)) encourage digital humanities and analysis of primary data.

[6] For an up-to-date scientific discussion of Delphi's building stones and their quarries, see M. de Vals et al., "The stones of the Sanctuary of Delphi — Northern shore of the Corinth Gulf — Greece," *Bulletin de la Société géologique de France* 191 (2020), online; A. Perrier and M. de Vals, "La pierre à Delphes: matériaux et carriers (2022)," *Bulletin archéologique des Écoles françaises à l'étranger* (2023), online; and the other ongoing results of the "Environnement, matériaux et construction à Delphes" project headed by Amélie Perrier (former *directrice des études antiques et byzantines* at the EFA).

[7] Moreover, the *Guide de Delphes* (J.-F. Bommelaer, with drawings by D. Laroche, *Guide de Delphes: Le Site*, 1991, p. 247; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2015, p. 293) notes that the Logari quarries can also supply a similar grey limestone, an important reminder that old-school methods of

visually identifying stone provenience are always tentative.

[8] Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013), 327–43.