

HOW THE IMAGE OF WALLS REVERSED

From a physical protection of freedom to a mental barrier to freedom

Thomas van den Brink

"There is no world without Verona walls,
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence-banished is banish'd from the world,
And world's exile is
death." William Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliette* (c. 1595).¹

Walls mostly have a negative image in the current debate where they are invariably symbols of an unfree society. See, for example, the popular BNN program *The Wall* in which the reporter repeatedly responds with amazement to many walls with: "But it's 2018!?"²

This same optic is evident in a publication such as, "The world counts more (senseless) border walls again."³ The opening statements illustrate the author's assessment: "Border barriers do not provide protection. And they do not remove real threats. Yet they are growing in number."⁴

The heated debate over Trump's wall also fits into this picture as does the agitation against walls and wall-builders in popular science stories as shown in the article "Border Walls are Symbols of Failure."⁵

In short, the general view seems to be that welfarists cannot be in favor of walls.

Given the recent past, this negative image of walls should not be surprising. Poignant examples such as the Berlin Wall and the complex situation in Israel do not contribute to a positive image of walls. Rather, they illustrate that this technique is morally and democratically problematic.

Historically and philosophically, however, the question is whether these are atypical cases. Let me therefore ask the question of what a wall actually is or does. To answer this question, this piece contains a historical exploration of city walls in relation to citizenship. The challenge is whether there are also positive aspects to these objects and whether we can still imagine them in 2019. In any case, the great success of this early invention - a success that can be seen not only in the many concrete structures but also in their role in the social imagination - raises a legitimate question in historical terms.⁶

Geographic space

The fundamental characteristic of a wall is that it creates a spatial separation: its construction divides the universe into an inner space and an outer space. This fact, so simple, has far-reaching consequences.

Thereby, first of all, it is true that inside is always smaller than outside. This goes without saying with city walls, but it applies equally well to gigantic walls like the Chinese ones that create an awe-inspiring interior space.

A second related phenomenon is that over the long term, walls were built primarily to keep people out. The Berlin Wall is an exception to this, where the aim was to prevent people from leaving, resulting in a large urban prison of refuge.⁷ This type of wall was introduced more often in the twentieth century by ruthless regimes.

The third characteristic of spatial separation is that the interior space takes on a socio-cultural content. This does not necessarily mean that a homogeneous community exists within the walls but the residents will have some things in common.⁸

In the case of voluntary city foundations, this is understandable because one can interpret concepts such as *freedom* and *equality* in very many different ways and they only acquire meaning and legitimacy within a specific socio-cultural *code of conduct*. Delimitation is a necessary condition for this.

In this regard, delimitation by walls appears to have great appeal in situations where the socio-cultural community coincides with a geographical area.



Image 1 The medieval city wall of Ávila in Spain was built in the late 11th century to protect the population from Moorish attacks. The wall is only 2.4 kilometers long but has eighty towers and nine gates. That amounts to a tower after every 30 meters and a gate every 270 meters or so.⁹ [Source](#).

Defense, shielding and control

Of course, (city) walls have always had a military function as well. For centuries, they prevented an enemy army or other malevolent figures from entering the city just like that. Even today, there are still plenty of military conflicts around the world in which walls primarily have this task. Think of keeping warring factions apart, as was necessary not so long ago in Belfast.¹⁰

This function is closely related to some material characteristics: height, thickness and material must provide the necessary impenetrability. It is therefore more than a question of drawing a social or cultural boundary.

Yet all this presupposes a form of social imagination at work: people see the need to protect vulnerable but valuable interior space from an undesirable but threatening exterior space.

Historical retrospective

The significance of walls in the founding of European cities has a rich and fascinating history. I limit myself here to a brief overview of city foundations and city walls from the Middle Ages.

Although the city wall certainly played a role in the founding of cities, it appears that wall and citizenship were not unambiguously linked. Take for example the word *poorter*, which was used to refer to citizens in the Middle Ages. This emerged in Flanders at the end of the tenth century.¹¹ The term evokes an association of townspeople and city sports but that relationship seems etymologically unlikely.¹²

According to historian Leupen, city foundations emerged because the inhabitants of a place sought "the same legal status, a set of rights and duties applicable to all. City rights gave urban residents certain rights and freedoms vis-à-vis the city lord.¹³ Thus, it was about defining and ordering a political entity.

What the founders of a city wanted was autonomy and, according to Leupen, this was expressed pre-eminently in the right to assert one's own territory.¹⁴ "Indeed, a citizen is essentially similar to a castle dweller, who also possesses autonomy within the walls of his fortification. "¹⁵ The founding of a city, the demarcation of a space and the erection of a physical defense is thus a creative act.¹⁶

In some cities of the Low Countries, the relationship between the city wall and the city residents took on a more specific character. For example, this relationship was financial in nature. According to Leupen, there were cases in the early period where full gatekeepers helped pay city taxes that were regularly intended for the city walls and moats, in short for defending the city.¹⁷ Another example is the city rights of Utrecht from 1122, in which

those who had contributed to the reinforcement of the city wall were granted toll freedom.¹⁸ In some cases, such as at Leiden, it was even the case that citizens were required to deliver stones for the city wall as punishment for an offense.¹⁹

Yet it is incorrect to conclude on this basis that city residents and citizens were always the same group. There were indeed differences and by no means everyone had civil rights.²⁰ Moreover, some rural inhabitants also had city rights. Therefore, a physical wall was not a necessary condition in this regard.²¹

Moreover, people did not always use a territorial definition of the city. Often, in the first phase of city formation, there was mainly talk of an oath society. However, the main component of the oath was the duty to '...defend and uphold the rights of the city and its inhabitants unreservedly against third parties.'²²

What these examples illustrate is that the wall, the ramparts and moats, and the city's defenses were related to citizenship in a general sense. Thus, during this period, the image of city walls was decidedly positive.

Imagination, symbol and ideology

Leupen notes something else beyond the utility value of walls. Many towns that received city rights provided the charter that included those rights with seals with a symbolic representation of their walls, castle or gate. 'The coat of arms depicted is not a representation of reality but represents the consciousness of one's identity.' (The seal symbolizes a legitimacy beyond the feudal order).' This '...also expressed the possessor's sense of independence.'²³ Even today there are coats of arms in which the city wall figures prominently, as in the coat of arms of Alkmaar. See Figure 2.

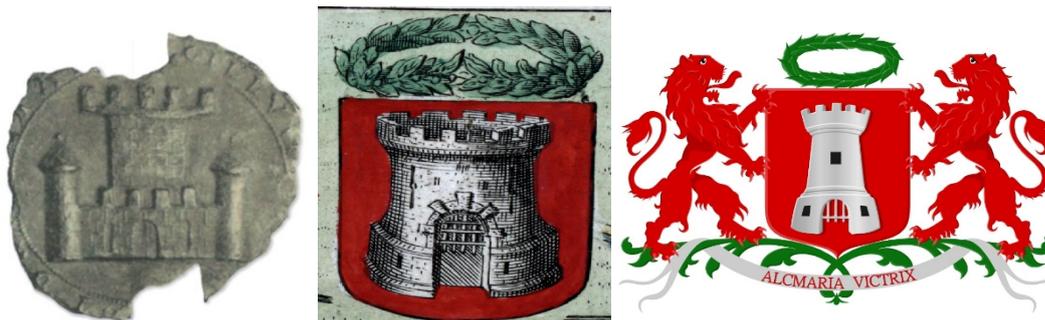


Figure 2 Left: the oldest preserved seal print of the Alkmaar city coat of arms from 1299. Inscription: 'the seal of the free city of Alkmaar'.²⁴ [Source](#). In the middle, the city arms of Alkmaar on Joannes Blaeu's city map from: *Toonneel der steden van de Vereenighde Nederlanden, met hare beschrijvingen*, (Amsterdam 1652), Library of Congress, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, (G1851 .B52 1652). Washington D.C. At right the present city arms of Alkmaar. [Source](#).²⁵

In other words. The (real) enclosure/enclosure was not a decisive criterion for

cityhood.²⁶ But in a sense the "wall" functioned,

conceptually or physically, as an emancipator: by defining oneself socio-spatially one affirmed one's own autonomy. With this, the city that initially conceived of itself as a sworn group by building a city wall could, in time, indeed have a spatial effect. Thus, for centuries the city wall became one of the most tangible symbols of the medieval city and the clearest visible distinction between city and surrounding countryside.

That the urban elite attached great symbolic value to city walls is further evidenced by the fact that they prominently displayed their city walls on city maps in the seventeenth century. See, for example, the excerpt below of Maastricht showing the city wall from Blaeu's city atlas. This was also done in cases where the wall was no longer able to guarantee the full protection of the city. This use of walls on maps shows how the symbols of military power and urban freedom were related.



Image 3 Full version Excerpt of Maastricht on Joannes Blaeu's city map from: *Tooneel der steden van de Vereenighde Nederlanden, met hare beschrijvingen*, (Amsterdam 1652), Library of Congress, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, (G1851 .B52 1652). Washington D.C.

Ritual dimension

The spatial separation of an "inner space" and an "outer space" combined with the often imposing wall size will have made entering the city through the city gate a ritual at the time. Anyone who has ever walked through an old city gate of a historic wall can imagine how the city positions itself through this imposing spatial-physical barrier. See Figure 4.

The stranger who enters through the gate will have to conform to the way an urban community defines itself and its city: he or she is a guest there. Thus, apart from being a line of defense in times of war, the city also uses its wall and gates to exercise socio-cultural control. Thus, individuals cannot enter or leave the city on their own authority or base their own views on their own.

A reversal of image

Although interest in the symbolic, rhetorical and practical pluses of walls seems to be growing again recently, the negative image of walls is unlikely to disappear any time soon. The foregoing may provide some answers to the question of how to explain this imaginary reversal.

In particular, the history of city foundations suggests that the positive or negative image has little to do with the wall *an sich*. Therefore, the real question seems to be whether the wall affirms or deprives certain rights.

At this point, the imagination that makes walls so controversial today seems strongly related to more general debates. In particular, the clash concerns the extent to which "we" (the interior space) and "they" (the exterior space) are equal or unequal and the extent to which the occupants of those spaces have equal rights.

In doing so, the wall touches on a fundamental question of our time: do we imagine an undivided world community, or is there nevertheless a certain maximum size in which some form of division for guaranteeing specific freedoms and equalities in the inner space is necessary.

That this now focuses on the level of continents and state borders fits into a longer trend. The close relationship between city and citizenship was broken from and partly thanks to Enlightenment thinking.²⁷ Since then, we have defined citizens as members of a nation and therefore at a higher level of scale. Imagining equality therefore has a certain expansion in which territory and community gradually expand. In that process, a new phase is now emerging in which some people see themselves as part of a world community with the result that they consider walls inappropriate.

However, this clashes with the beliefs of others who place great value on the package of specific freedoms and equalities obtained over a long period of time.

In short, the perspective now seems to have turned 180 degrees: from a wall that physically guarantees and symbolizes the protection of an interior space to one where it is a barrier to outsiders. It is also a shift from self-interest to empathy for a community that includes people outside one's own circle.



Figure 4 Detail of the medieval city wall of Ávila. [Source](#)

This trend has many causes. I will only mention: a perceived closeness through increased media coverage of the outsiders, the collective traumas of refugees and genocide in the twentieth century, a general increase in the level of security and finally: a general liberalization in which people celebrate their individual freedom as the highest good and express it en masse through the possibility of travel, for example.

It would be naïve to believe that all this is proceeding without downsides or risks. This is not just a question of whether we are dealing with real risks. The city wall was always more than a mere physical structure. It was a structure that also captured the imagination with its symbolic and ideological power.

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Nuts

¹ This verse is placed today on the *Bra gate* in Verona, the most important gate at the time this tragedy is said to have taken place. [Source](#).

² [The Wall](#), BNN, 2014-2018.

³ Dick Wittenberg, "The world counts more (senseless) border walls again," *The Correspondent*, May 30, 2016. [Source](#).

⁴ Ditto.

⁵ Eric Schewe, "Border Walls are Symbols of Failure," *JSTOR Daily*, February 28, 2019. [Link](#).

⁶ Simon Worrall, "Building walls may have allowed civilization to flourish," Interview with David Frye, author of: *Walls: A History of Civilization in Blood and Brick*, National Geographic, October 5, 2018, [Link](#).

⁷ Ditto.

⁸ By the way, this certainly does not necessarily mean that all sorts of socio-cultural differences will always exist within the walls as well. Marc Boone, "'Cette frivole, dampnable et desraisonnable bourgeoisie': the many faces of the late medieval bourgeois bourgeoisie in the Southern Netherlands," in: *Burger, A History of the Concept of the Citizen in the Netherlands from the Middle Ages to the 21st century*, Kloek, J. and Tilmans, K., (Amsterdam, 2002), 34.

⁹ Medieval Walls of Ávila, Atlas Obscura, September 2019. [Link](#).

¹⁰ [The Wall](#), BNN, 2014-2018.

¹¹ Marc Boone, 34.

¹² Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans, *Burger, Een geschiedenis van het begrip "burger" in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21^{ste} eeuw*, Kloek, J. and Tilmans, K., (Amsterdam, 2002), 4.

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¹⁴ Idem, 20-21.

¹⁵ Ditto, 20.

¹⁶ Reinout Rutte, "New Towns in the Netherlands (1270-1450)," *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2018 (2), 96.

¹⁷ Leupen, 20.

¹⁸ Ditto, 21.

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²⁰ Boone, 34.

²¹ Leupen, 20-21.

²² Ditto, 20.

²³ Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans, 2.

²⁴ Joost Cox, 32.

²⁵ Leupen, 21.

²⁶ Leupen, 21.

²⁷ Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans, 9.



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