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The 15th c. Venetian Fortifications of Nafpaktos (Lepanto), Greece
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Abstract

The aim of this paper is a preliminary study of the Venetian fortifications of Nafpaktos (Lepanto) within the context of the 15th century defensive architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. Throughout the 15th century the Most Serene Republic of Venice strived continuously to reinforce the fortifications of the Lepanto, a Venetian holding from 1407 to 1499. Apart from some interventions carried out for the reinforcement of the walls of the medieval Upper City, the building from the ground up of the Lower City’s fortified enclosure, intended to protect part of the older suburbs and the extremely important for the Venetian State city’s port, are dated to this era. The enclosure was built in phases, in a typical 15th century manner, a period marked by the continuous improvements of artillery and the corresponding improvements of fortifications in response to them. The earlier parts of the fortifications had the typical form of medieval fortifications, with a rather thin wall, with vertical faces, reinforced with rectangular towers. The subsequent phase consisted of parts of the walls and bastions that have an inclined outer face (scarpa) and a thick parapet with the serrated crenellations, often equipped with early type cannon-ports. The later parts of the defenses with bastions (bastioni) with a distinctive truncated cone shape, crowned with thick parapets (parapetti) over a rounded cornice (cordone), and vaulted cannon port on the lower levels, belong to the last development phase of fortifications around 1500, right before the final adoption of the “bastion system” (fronte bastionato) in the second quarter of the 16th century.

Keywords: Nafpaktos (Lepanto), 15th century defensive architecture, fortifications of the early artillery era, Venetian fortifications

1. Introduction

The impressive and undeniably well-preserved monumental complex of medieval and early modern fortifications of Nafpaktos has not yet been subjected to a serious and comprehensive study that would examine the architecture of the fortifications within the framework of the defensive architecture in the greater area of East Mediterranean. It is only during the last decades that the walls of the small historic city attracted the scholarly attention they deserve1.

2. Description of the city of Nafpaktos and its fortifications

The city of Nafpaktos (Lepanto) is located at the base of an outcrop of the Nafpaktian Mountains (Figs.1,2). The fortified city stands on the southern slope of a steep, 200 meter tall hill. The fortified enclosure (Fig.3) has an oblong, irregular shape, whose overall dimensions are 750 x 350 m. and is comprised of two distinct sections / enclosures, each separated further into smaller enclosures by walls. The first of them, the Upper Enclosure (Fig. 3, A1, A2, A3) covers the hilltop (Figs. 1, 2) and has a triangular layout shape, with overall dimensions 180 x 250 m. and a total area of 24,000 sq.m. The second and larger Lower Enclosure (Figs. 3, B1, B2) covers
the slope of the hill (Figs. 1, 2) and has a horseshoe-shaped layout with overall dimensions 550 x 350 m. and a total area of 140,000 sq. m.

Fig. 1- Nafpaktos. General aerial view from the SW (1932) OKHE (Mamaloukos, St. (2014-2015). fig.1)

The enclosure is surrounded on the north, east and west by two walls, reinforced with towers and bastions, which extend like arms from the two ends of the south side of the Upper Enclosure, descend the slopes of the hill along the natural gradient of the land, and angle inwards towards the sea, enclosing the small horseshoe-shaped port of the city².

Fig. 2- Nafpaktos. Partial view from the S. (Fred Boissonas (1920) (Mamaloukos, St. (2014-2015). fig.8)

3. Nafpaktos and its fortifications up to the beginning of 15th c.

Nafpaktos was an important city during ancient Greek and Roman times, and flourished during Late Antiquity, according to relevant sources and the fragmentary archaeological research up to this date. It appears that the city originally covered a large expanse that included the area enclosed by the medieval walls, and the flat area towards the east, up to the hill of Hagios Georgios and the Grimbovo beach. The remains of parts of the ancient fortification wall that have been identified in several spots confirm that the western end of ancient Nafpaktos was almost the same as that of the medieval city, and that its Acropolis once stood in the area of the subsequent Upper Enclosure of the medieval fortifications.

There is limited and fragmentary historical data concerning the history of Nafpaktos during the times of transition from the ancient to the medieval world. Despite the damage the city undoubtedly suffered due to natural disasters and raids, it nevertheless appears to have survived, though diminished in size and somewhat deurbanized. During the early 10th century it was designated as the capital of the theme of
Nikopolis. During mid-Byzantine times it rose as an important transit center in the trade routes between East and West. After 1204 Naupaktos was briefly held by the Venetians, and then, from 1210 to 1294, was part of the Despotate of Epirus. Later, during the 14th century the city swapped hands numerous times.

Little is known of the size, structure and urban planning of Naupaktos during this long time period. The data available to us today suggest that Naupaktos during Late Antiquity was not much different from the ancient city in terms of location, size and structure. However, the fortified city of the Dark Ages and mid-Byzantine period was quite likely limited to the Upper Enclosure of the city’s fortifications, that is, the ancient acropolis, where the cathedral church, that was recently unearthed, the episcopal palace, mentioned by the bishop Ioannis Apokafkos, and the acropolis-like small fortress that served as the ruler’s and his guard’s residence and overall seat of power were located. As conditions improved during the course of the mid-Byzantine period, it appears that unfortified or scantily fortified suburbs developed around the fortified city, according to the relevant sources. Thus, medieval Naupaktos exhibited the typical structure of Byzantine cities, consisting of a fortified acropolis / the kastro, the fortified city / the chora and an (initially, at least) unfortified suburb / the exochoro.

4. Naupaktos and its fortifications during the first Venetian Occupation of the city (1407-1499)

Throughout the course of the 15th century, from 1407 to 1499, Naupaktos remained a Venetian holding. After the mid-15th century “this most fortified bastion of the Christian world” suffered a number of attacks by the Turks that had already captured Epirus and the Peloponnese. Apart from the constant pressure of the Ottoman threat, three failed attempts by the Ottomans at capturing the city are recorded, in the years 1462, 1488 and 1485, until, on August 26th 1499, the city was eventually conquered by the Ottoman army of Sultan Bayezid II.

Surviving documents in the Archives of Venice reveal the continuous efforts of the Serenissima to reinforce the defenses of Naupaktos (Fig. 4).

As was natural, within this context, some major interventions were executed on the fortifications of the city. Apart from the interventions that were undoubtedly undertaken in order to reinforce the initial medieval fortified enclosure of the Upper Enclosure, the Kastro, during this period, other construction works must be apparently dated to this period, such as the building from the ground up of the defenses of the Lower Enclosure in order to protect part of the unfortified or rudimentarily fortified older suburbs, as well as, in the manner of a long wall, the port, which was vital to not only the financial wellbeing of the city, but also its very survival.

In terms of the overall form of this fortified enclosure (Fig. 5), this was undoubtedly related to the layout of the land, but potentially also to the requirement of protecting some important buildings in the older, unfortified suburbs. Hence, such requirements might be accountable, for example, for the expansion of the Lower Enclosure towards the east, past the extension of the northernmost part of the east walls, which might have been dictated by the need to enclose within the fortifications some important church that is reasonable to assume to have occupied the place of the subsequent Mosque of the Great Gate, nowadays occupied by the cathedral dedicated to St. Demetrios.
The building material for these new fortification walls was primarily ashlar stone-blocks from the walls and other prominent buildings of the ancient city, which undoubtedly suffered significant damage at the time.

The lower city was fortified in phases, namely through successive local reinforcements and upgrades, in a manner typical of the 15th century, a period marked by the continuous improvements of artillery and the corresponding improvements of fortifications in response to them. Such interventions appear to have been carried out not only in distinct, large-scale building projects, but also through relatively small-scale efforts of a somewhat experimental and improvisational character.

A characteristic case of this process seems to be the sea walls (Fig. 6), which, according to the findings that came to light during recent restoration works, assumed its present form with the construction of a uniform wall / battlefront in front of a series of older barricades and barrier walls. It is, after all, known through sources that a little before 1418 a new tower had been erected to protect the port, and that in 1463-1465 the walls that had been damaged during the 1450 earthquake we reinforced at considerable expense6.

Fig. 6- Nafpaktos. Lower Enclosure B2. Sea Wall between 23 and 25

The west gate of the Lower Enclosure (position 22) (Fig. 7) is a characteristic example of the successive interventions that were carried out on the city’s fortifications during that time. In it initial form, the gate belonged to the common medieval fortification type of a tower-like gate (tour-porte / gate-tower)7, usually had the shape of a rectangular tower, with two gates on its outer and inner façades, in an arrangement that set the main access corridor towards the interior of the enclosure on the main tower axis.
The tower’s floor-plan was slightly trapezoidal with a width of 8.30 m. on the west side, and 9.30 m on the east side that was adjacent to the walls, and a length of about 7.0 extending outwards from the face of the enclosure walls. Its exact height and the form of its crown are not known. Two cannon-ports opened up on its two lateral sides, at the level of the space over the vaulted passageway of the gate; the two cannon-ports faced the north and south respectively, allowing a line of fire along the length of the walls, thus covering the portions of the walls between successive towers. As for the chronology of this first construction phase, it could be placed, though rather apprehensively at the time, around the mid-15th century or a little later, based on the form of the fortification elements, that present some typical medieval characteristics. These characteristics are the vertical faces of the walls and tower, the square floor-plan of the tower and the simple initial arrangement of the gate. Some interventions that were aimed at remodeling the gate, that were recently noticed in our investigation, belong to a remodeling project of the fortification of unknown scale, probably intended either to repair damage incurred during one of the reported Turkish attacks, or to modernize them as dictated by the rapid advances in artillery technology during the second half of the 15th century. These interventions are the filling of the gate on the main facade of the tower, and its replacement with a cannon-port, as well as the opening of a new gateway on the north side of the tower, in the place of the old northern cannon-port, intended at effectively protecting it from head-on shots aimed directly at it.

A definitive distinction and thorough study of the various phases of construction of the 15th century fortifications of Nafpaktos is not yet possible. That would require systematic documentation, thorough examination and comparative study of the surviving portions of this fortification.

The earlier fortifications of the Lower Enclosure, which could date back to the first half or the mid-15th century, appear to have consisted of a rather thin wall, with vertical faces and a rampart protected with a thin parapet with crenellations, reinforced every 40 to 80 m. with rectangular towers (Fig. 8). This is the typical form of medieval fortifications, which, with only slight changes, was retained during the early stages of development of the transitional 15th century fortifications that evolved in parallel with the advances on artillery. Some characteristic specimens of this latter--form of fortifications can be found in a part of the east walls between positions 30 and 39 that included rectangular towers, as well as the part of the west walls in the area of the west gate between positions 20 and 23, with the first phase of the tower of this gate.
The subsequent phase of the fortifications consisted of parts of the walls and bastions that have an inclined outer face (scarpa), and a thick parapet with the serrated crenellations, often equipped with early type cannon-ports. Some characteristic specimens of this phase of fortifications are the sea walls between positions 23 and 27 (Fig. 6, 9), the east wall between position 29 and 30 (Fig. 10a,b) and the bastions of positions 20 (Fig. 11), 23 (Fig. 12) and possibly 27.
These sections of the fortifications can, by comparison to parts of the fortifications of Nafrplion – such as Bourtzi (1471) and the so-called Gambello Wall (1473), as well as the western part of the Toron Castle at Akronafplia – be dated to the third quarter of the 15th century, and associated with some of the fortification repairs mentioned in the city at the time.

The later phases of the fortifications, dated to around the year 1500, belong to the last phase of fortification evolution, before the consolidation of the “bastion system” (fronte bastionato) in the second quarter of the 16th century, with its distinctive geometric layouts and five-sided bastions. A common characteristic of this phase is the replacements of the older, medieval-type towers and the torrioni of the second half of the 15th century with their characteristic truncated cone shape, usually with a semicircular cornice (cordone), thick, artillery parapets (parapetti), and vaulted cannon-ports in the lower levels.

The fortifications of Nafraptos include a series of excellent specimens of this type of bastions (positions 29 (Figs. 13, 14), 30a and 39 (Figs. 15, 16, 17), which present certain similarities with comparably shaped bastion in the fortifications of the city of Korcula in Croatia (Velika Kneževa Kula (1483) and Kula Svih Svetih (1493), the bastions of the first two 16th century decades of the Old Fortress of Kerkyra (Corfu), the three bastions of the Kastro of Zakynthos (Zante), the western bastion of the Castle of Toron and the older bastions of the Venetian fortifications of the lower city of Nafrplion (Napoli di Romania), the southwestern bastion (bastion Del Caretto (1514) of the Neratzia Fortress at Kos, the bastions of the fortifications of the city of Ammochostos (Famagusta), Cyprus, the bastions of the Fortress of Keryneia Castle, also in Cyprus, etc.
The aforementioned bastions of the fortifications of Nafpaktos, based on their characteristic form and the 1491 (MCCCCXXXI) inscription still preserved on the Faltsoporti bastion (position 39), must be dated towards the last years of the 15th century and be associated with the last improvements that, according to written sources, the Venetians managed to carry out on the fortifications of Nafpaktos before the Ottoman Occupation.

1 Mamaloukos, St. (2014-2015) with previous bibliography.

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Bibliography


