Palissy’s Fortress

The Construction of Artisanal Security

“De la ville de forteresse”

Rochelais were the first to see Bernard Palissy’s brief, but prescient, essay “De la ville de forteresse” (“Of the Fortress Town”), which appeared in bookstalls in France’s most powerful fortress in 1563, just two years before Charles IX’s contentious visit, printed at La Rochelle by the fledging Huguenot publisher and propagandist Barthélemy Berton as a chapter of the potter’s *Recepte véritable* (“True Recipe”).

Although Berton’s imprint was founded in March 1563 (immediately after the edict of pacification ending the first civil war of religion was signed), his name was well known in the greatly expanding book trade of international Protestantism by the time of his death, which took place during the first unsuccessful royal siege of La Rochelle in 1572–73. (La Rochelle, like many important Huguenot strongholds, was besieged as a consequence of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572.) Barthélemy Berton was an immigrant to La Rochelle. He was born in Limoges, 100 miles east of Saintes, into a family of printers. During the sixteenth century, this town was famous throughout Europe for painted metal enamelware. Palissy thus worked a short distance from Limoges’s artisans and their products, and he doubtless learned much from them about the technology of translucent enamelware. This would have been valuable in his inventive use of enamels; first on glass (he was apprenticed to a glass stainer) and ultimately on ceramics. Palissy and the Bertons may well have known one another personally, or by reputation, long before their paths cross in the historical record.
After his father, Paul Berton, was arrested and brought before the parlement of Bordeaux (where, in 1551, he was convicted of the heresy of printing forbidden books and sentenced to “faire amende honorable”), Barthélemy Berton wisely fled to the heterodox publishing center of Lyon, where he took refuge and found work among the large Protestant artisan population. In 1561, however, Barthélemy left town abruptly, carrying the tools of his trade and a case of type on his back (the type used in his books after he relocated to La Rochelle in 1563 is characteristic of work from a Lyonnais press). What caused him to return to the troubled southwest after ten years’ of steady employment in Lyon? The utter obscurity of his first destination sheds light on one reason: he headed directly for the remote salt-producing presqu’île of Marennes, which is located in the marais (or salt marshes) that define coastal Saintonge, giving this maritime region its particular geographic character.

Marennes was the property of the ambitious Antoine de Pons (1510–80), hereditary sire of Pons. The town of Pons, near neighbor to Saintes, was the seat of Antoine’s sirerie, a domain that extended to 52 parishes and 250 noble fiefdoms. Pons was also a fortress town, and was later named one of two dubious villes de sûreté in the region in the Edict of Nantes (1598). The other was Saint-Jean d’Angély. La Rochelle remained the only capable fortress in Aunis–Saintonge, however. In Antoine’s time, Pons’s garrison was notoriously weak, and its walls were ineffectual and easily breached. When Louis XIII led his successful military campaign against these two Protestant strongholds in Saintonge in 1620–21, Pons fell in a matter of hours to a small contingent of soldiers diverted from Saint-Jean d’Angély. Hence, the fortress at Pons retained more symbolic than military significance. As long as perceptions of Antoine’s enormous personal and family prestige remained intact, his town’s permeable walls were not tested.

Antoine was also count of Marennes, baron of the Île d’Oléron, and seigneur of several valuable salt-cultivating and trading towns on the Saintonge coast. This was the geographic center of heresy in isolated Saintonge. To confirm his hold over the politics and economy of this region, Antoine also served as governor of Saintes and Saintonge. Scion of an extended household, Antoine inherited family property in Périgord, Quercy, Poitou, and Guienne as well. Most important for our purposes here, Antoine de Pons was best known outside his home region for establishment of a “rustic” Huguenot court with strong northern Italian influence in isolated Saintonge. It was to the religious and artistic patronage—and isolated security—afforded by this Huguenot court and rustic academy that both Berton and his friend and co-religionist Bernard Palissy (among many other Huguenot refugees) were drawn during the early 1560s, when the region’s confessional violence was at its most dangerous.

The centripetal pull of Pons’s court culture originated with the unification of two powerful Saintongeais noble families, both with strong personal links to northern Italy, particularly to the heterodox region around Venice. When Antoine de Pons married
Anne de Parthenay in 1534, he united the house of Pons and its enormous holdings in Saintonge with the family of Anne’s land-rich father, Jean Larsevesque-Parthenay, baron de Soubise, and Michelle de Saubonne, her Brittany-born mother. By the date of his marriage to Anne, Antoine de Pons had already lived for fourteen years in northern Italy, where he acted as a French royal agent in both political and military affairs. Not surprisingly, Antoine was a common presence at the francophile court of Ferrara, just southwest of Venice, on the road to Bologna. But Anne de Parthenay’s mother, Michelle de Saubonne, had even deeper connections to the court of Ferrara, where she lived between 1528 and 1536 as the governess of Renée de France, consort of Hercule II d’Este, duke of Ferrara. Renée became a dedicated patron of the earliest Protestant leaders, especially important during their periods of exile in both France and Italy. Risking Rome’s displeasure, Renée used status and cash resources to create a dazzling refuge at court in Ferrara—in effect, a humanist academy of Huguenot expatriate learning and performance in poetry, the arts (especially music), theology, and natural philosophy. Not just Huguenots came there, however; Paracelsus himself was a guest. In the early sixteenth century, Renée also extended her court’s financial patronage and noble protection to Théodore de Bèze, Jean Calvin, and Clément Marot when they sought refuge in the north of Italy.9

The complementary roles played by the republic of Venice in conjunction with this aristocratic French court at Ferrara were essential to the maintenance of a rich and complex (albeit mostly hidden) Protestant presence, noble and commoner, native and foreign, in northern Italy. As John Martin has pointed out in his study of sixteenth-century Italian heterodoxy, even though the “Jesuit order was gaining sway, and the Inquisition had been established,” it was by no means certain that “all conditions were antithetical to the goals of the spiritual—it especially not in Venice, a republic that occupied a special place between Renaissance and Reformation. For in the context of sixteenth-century Italy, Venice stood out as a survivor.” In a larger sense, Renée’s French academy also survived in Venice’s shadow. Martin elucidates “deep affinities between the ideals of Renaissance republicans and those of the evangelicals.” Yet, because she was under the influence of Venetian republicanism, Florentine civic humanism as articulated by the Protestant Antonio Brucioli in the Rucellai gardens (when Machiavelli and Guicciardini were present), and the charismatic leadership of the French Reformation in exile at her court, “Duchess Renée of Ferrara, though her power was limited,” and standing almost alone among the Italian nobility, “gave her support to the evangelicals.”

Noble support crisscrossed the Alps. The marriage of Antoine de Pons and Anne de Parthenay was not arranged at home in Saintonge, but at Ferrara, where the two first met, and where they returned to celebrate their wedding in 1534.11 This union of noble humanists and spiritual seekers harnessed classical learning to the new evangel-
ical religion. These links ramified in material ways: they expanded their role as patrons of Huguenot artisans of novel “inventions” made in the rustic manner, then fashionable in ceramics, and, above all, the naturalistic (or rustique) gardens and subterranean grottoes of northern Italy and southwestern France in which the first of many Protestant religious conversions were known to take place. After Anne’s death and his remarriage to Marie de Monchenu, Pons renounced his overt association with Protestantism, yet Palissy nonetheless dedicated his Discours admirables to his former patron years later. In his dedication of July 1580 (probably in anticipation of Pons’s death), the potter extolled Antoine as a latitudinarian man of science whose mind had been expanded by his formative sojourn at the academy at Ferrara:

I say it truly and without any flattery: for as much as I had good evidence of the excellence of your mind as early as the time when you returned from Ferrara to your castle of Ponts [that opinion was confirmed] when lately it pleased you to speak to me of various sciences, namely philosophy, astrology, and other arts drawn from mathematics. This, I say, has made me doubly sure of the competence of your marvelous mind, and although age dims the memory of many, yet I have found yours more increased than diminished. This I have learned through your statements to me. And for these reasons I have thought that there is no nobleman in the world to whom my work might [better] be dedicated than to you, knowing well that though it may be esteemed by some as a fable full of lies, by you it will be prized and esteemed a rare thing.

Palissy’s opinion of Pons as a singular “nobleman” championed by Protestant polemicists for his “marvelous mind”—in this case buttressed by the spiritual gift of a strong natural-philosophical memory—was articulated in print for the first time by Théodore de Bèze, Pons’s colleague at the Ferrara academy and a stubborn defender of Calvin’s legacy of authoritarianism. Four years before Antoine renounced his conversion to Calvinism and lifted the protection extended by his court to the Huguenots of Saintonge (he remained a useful intermediary between the state and local Protestants), de Bèze complimented Pons, calling him “an amateur of virtue and truth, who had really profited from reading the sacred Scriptures.” Perhaps Palissy’s call to memory—an arrogant slap from below at noblemen who, unlike Pons, aspired to the status of philosopher yet failed to recognize that Palissy’s “manual” and “unlearned” labors should “be prized and esteemed a rare thing”—also offers reconciliation of past conflict through the transcendent joining of philosophical minds. Among most philosophers however, Anne de Parthenay was more celebrated than her husband. She excelled at classical learning in Latin and Greek and mastery of poetic song and theology. As a refugee at Ferrara, Clément Marot composed a “Lost Epistle au jeu[,]” after the fashion of madame de Pons” as a gift in verse; a “counterfeit” in the style of his Saintongeais patron, the “Dame de Pons, Nymphé de Parthenay / For you who have learn-
ing and sound knowledge.” Antoine de Pons and Anne de Parthenay had earned their bona fides as “sound” evangelical humanists and patrons at Ferrara.

Ferrara was also the site of the formal conversion of Antoine de Pons and Anne de Parthenay to Calvinism, although it is possible that Anne had been prepared for conversion earlier by her Huguenot cousin Marguerite de Navarre. In both cases, Calvin himself was an agent of change. De Bèze claimed that Calvin had converted secretly in 1532–33, the year he left his birthplace of Noyon to attend the University of Paris. (Calvin, Palissy, Pons, and Berton were all born in or around the year of 1609–10.) However, the key months with regard to his public acknowledgement of heresy were April 1534 and August 1535 respectively, when Calvin openly declared his personal experience of reformation (“God by a sudden conversion subdued my heart to teachableness”), and the subsequent completion of the manuscript of his Institutes of the Christian Religion (the original Latin edition was published in March 1536; Calvin’s French translation appeared in France in 1541). By 1534, Calvin was on the run from the authorities in Paris. He sought refuge in Angoulême (under Marguerite’s protection) and then Poitiers, converting local nobles and their extended households in both places. However, when the Institutes were about to appear, he was forced to flee France under the pseudonym Charles d’Espeville, and claimed refuge in Ferrara. Calvin converted Anne de Parthenay there, then her mother Michelle de Saubonne; and then, finally, following the enthusiastic example of his wife and mother-in-law, Calvinism was embraced, albeit cautiously, by the politically calculating Antoine de Pons. If, as we shall see, Palissy traced the origins of Protestantism among artisans in coastal Saintonge to itinerant “Lutheran” brethren, influenced by some faraway Germanic order to evangelize the isolated maritime islands, then, not very long before, the cream of the Saintongeais nobility had been converted at Ferrara, and carried the Calvinist heresy home to the courts of southwestern France. This confluence of geography, patronage, and evangelism ensured that Saintongeais Huguenot artisanal and natural-philosophical culture was a hybrid of southwestern French, Germanic, and northern Italian influences by the early sixteenth century.

Upon returning to their court in Saintonge, Antoine and Anne strove to replicate the Protestant paradigm of the humanist academy and place of refuge at Ferrara. Throughout the 1540s and early 1550s, however, the region’s maritime islands lacked a printer of any kind, though publishing was considered an essential component of the academy’s intellectual and religious project. To be sure, books were exceptionally rare in Saintonge—both in towns and the countryside—during the earliest years of the Reformation. This absence changed radically in 1553, with the sudden appearance of Philibert Hamelin in Saintes and Arvert. The itinerant Hamelin, a Geneva-trained minister and master printer-publisher, originally from Touraine, is best known to historians as Palissy’s spiritual mentor, and he is the subject of a key martyrological essay.
in the *Recepte*. Hamelin was very open in his dealings and quickly caught the attention of Church authorities for selling bibles and other religious books with his imprint while traveling the coastal region to evangelize artisans and mariners. Hamelin served Geneva (and Antoine) in his dual function of artisan-preacher until 1557, when he was executed. Antoine then recruited Berton from Lyon to fill the void left by Hamelin’s execution. 18

Nothing at all is known of the production of Berton’s press at Marennes, with the exception of its address, prior to the printer’s removal to La Rochelle in 1563. What is known, however, is that he was forced to leave Marennes the same year that Antoine renounced his conversion and drove heretical practice underground. Despite this setback, Berton recruited his first authors for the *imprimerie* of La Rochelle from the talented circle of refugee Huguenot writers and artisans that had gathered at the Pons academy. This included the potter Palissy, to whom Pons extended protection in 1562–63 after he was released from the Conciergerie of Bordeaux when Montmorency and Pons interceded on his behalf, and the minister Yves Rouspeau, for whom Berton published both spiritual and polemical texts. 19 In fact, the first publication printed at Berton’s new press at La Rochelle was a pamphlet by Palissy, dated 1563. This was dedicated to his Catholic savior, the duc de Montmorency, and concerned the potter’s design for a grotto for him. 20 Pons’s renunciation forced Berton to print Palissy’s seminal account of the Constable’s rustic grotto at La Rochelle, rather than in rural Marennes; but the project made Palissy’s name at Paris’s Medician court, because it signified a novel, natural-philosophical fusion of courtly Italian Neoplatonism, Germanic Paracelsism, and the local and above all rustic material culture of Saintonge, which fulfilled the monistic hope of cosmological unification behind the Huguenot academies at Ferrara and Pons. That was one reason why Palissy dedicated the *Discours admirables* to his former rural patron, nearly two decades after Antoine renounced the Huguenots of Saintonge. The aging potter had chosen not to forget that “the excellence of [Antoine’s] mind” and his great memory had been revealed “as early as the time [he] returned from Ferrara to [his] castle of Ponts.”

In 1563, the year Pons banished Berton from Marennes, it was as well known in Saintonge, as in Paris, that La Rochelle was then undergoing a Protestant revolution. The fleeing Huguenot printer loaded the contents of his shop onto a boat and headed north along the coast for the fortress. Berton sought refuge and patronage among the militant factions formed by the same group of polemical Calvinist churchmen and bourgeois merchants that would confront Charles IX two years hence. His imprint was soon valued throughout international Protestantism for its contributions to the Huguenot corpus. Berton’s books were sought after for religious, cultural, and political knowledge about the crucial fortress town and—as a result of the printer’s personal contacts at the Pons academy—La Rochelle’s rustic hinterland as well.
On September 3, 1563, Barthélemy Berton signed a contract with the “merchant and bourgeois” François Barbot (from the same La Rochelle family as the moderate Huguenot historian Amos Barbot), who remained a loyal patron of Palissy’s even after the potter’s removal to Paris, where Barbot continued to lend him money. Their relationship changed for the worse on November 20, 1570, when Barbot took Palissy to court for nonpayment of a loan made in Paris on October 4, 1567. Barbot’s 1563 contract with Berton stipulated, however, that he would employ “Berthon, master printer, [and] resident of this city of La Rochelle, [to] make and print well and satisfactorily to the said Barbot . . . a work made by M. Bernard Palissyz, potter [ouvrier de terre], living at Saintes, titled Recepte veritable, containing three parts, one called Recepte veritable, another called L’un desseing d’un jardin [‘A Design for a Garden’], and the third, Le desseing d’une ville imprenable [‘The Design of an Impregnable Town’].” Berton’s edition of the Recepte had a very respectable run of 1,500 copies.

Nevertheless, if Rochelais were the first audience for the Recepte after it was made available as a printed text, readers were not necessarily the original audience intended for Palissy’s philosophical discourse on the nature of security in Saintonge. Palissy’s “design” for his impregnable “Forteresse,” conceived and written “from experience” while the potter worked among the rural poor, was communicated as part of his evangelical program for illiterate artisans living in La Rochelle’s rustic hinterlands before it appeared in print in the fortress. As Berton’s contract indicated, the potter maintained a ceramic workshop, which included a kiln and alchemic laboratory, in Saintes until shortly before his removal to Paris, two years after publication of the Recepte, where he reinvented himself as Catherine de Médicis’s creature. Indeed, as the third inventory of Anne de Montmorency’s art collections in his Paris house in the rue Sainte-Avoye (now du Temple) indicated, by January 14, 1568, Parisian appraisers called Palissy’s ceramics “de terre cuite esmaillee, ouvrage de Xaintes . . . aussi facon de Xaintes [enameled earthenware, workmanship of Saintes . . . also in the fashion of Saintes].” Among the ten items listed in this “fashion” were “an oval basin, two feet long and one and one half feet deep, . . . with diverse animals inside” and “a tree made in the manner of a rock . . . scattered with shells and many animals of all sorts.” The other forms inventoried included three vases, a “grand chandelier,” one bottle, a ewer, and “two other great basins,” all of which were made “of the same stuff and fashion.”

By the latter part of the sixteenth century, inventory appraisers far from Saintes identified this style with Palissy by name. In 1589, after Catholic liguers had destroyed the great Normandy château of the Huguenot Claude II Le Roux, sieur de Bourgtheroulde and Infreville, a room-by-room inventory was taken to assess the damage. Hidden inside a cabinet within a closet in the “girls’ bedroom,” the appraiser found a “very great number of large basins and vases, [all] vessels of value, of the fashion of messire Bernard Palissy, of diverse exquisite colors, all of these vessels are valued at more than
one hundred fifty escus, these were stolen or broken so that not one whole piece remains.”24 Was this considered to be vandalism of luxury goods or an act of iconoclasm against Huguenot sacred objects?

Artisanal Sûreté

Although ostensibly concerned with innovation and reform of the technology of Huguenot fortress design and construction for a medieval place de sûreté, Palissy’s “De la ville de forteresse” is significant precisely because of what it failed to deliver outright. Palissy reneged on his promise to provide the expected architectural drawings for the “dessin et pourtrait” of a modern fortress capable of repelling a long siege. This is not to say that readers were left without hope of protection. Instead of providing straightforward plans useful to a military engineer, Palissy recounted a socially constituted, natural-philosophical allegory that elucidated the dissimulating practice of artisanal sûreté, based on observation of natural modes of protection, which was arguably more advantageous to “common” Saintongeais Huguenots than to professional soldiers. He formulated sûreté as a Paracelsian artisan’s local response to chronic religious violence; it leveled the old walls of distinction and social distance and opposed exposure and vulnerability to warfare in the open countryside, which Palissy identified with “ancient” martial strategies that simultaneously promoted the gloire of the noblesse d’épée and invited overt confrontation with powerful enemies, while accepting the sacrifice of impoverished rural Huguenots without regret.

Noble (that is to say, noblesse d’épée) military strategies based on such theatrical displays of knightly honor and overt use of armored protection for individual bodies and towns had always centered on security provided those soldiers, citizens, or refugees locked safely inside the walled-in enceinte of the fortress town. Following Palissy’s comprehensive framework, these “ancient” yet immobile modes of protection were inadequate over the long term for the majority menu peuple of Saintes and its rural countryside—mostly heretical farmers, artisans, and mariners—who, like Palissy himself, were suddenly exposed to the fluid and entropic violence of religious civil war, far from the protective shadow of the “impregnable fortress” of La Rochelle. The civil wars focused on southwestern France in large part because the fortress was sited there, confronting the monarchy with both an ominous threat and an irresistible invitation to respond with force to its challenge. This dangerous invitation had been taken up many times during Palissy’s lifetime, and his “De la ville de forteresse” posited a new paradigm of regional security that would give skilled artisans means of providing new, domestic modes of protection for dispersed Huguenot refugees made vulnerable by what Palissy perceived to be the inevitable destruction—and ultimately the complete absence—of the regional fortress town. In analyzing the destruction of Saintes and its
countryside by enemies of the Huguenots, Palissy effectively predicted the catastrophic events of 1627–28, the resulting fragmentation of the southwest’s medieval fortress culture, and the broad material and metaphysical outlines of the new terms of Protestantism’s struggle for refuge and survival. As a consequence, the atomized Huguenot communities of Saintonge were to be abandoned to compensate for the lost unity and walled communal protection of the medieval *place de sûreté*. Artisans would now construct rustic and “subterranean” inversions of the fortress town: mobile, hidden, secret places of security, disguised as if made by “natural,” not human, artisans.

“*De la ville de forteresse*” was published during the period in which the most militant Protestant factions in La Rochelle consolidated their growing power and resistance to the state, based on unshakable belief in the “impregnability” of the artificial structures of the old fortress itself, and it is hard to imagine that the “humble” potter from Saintes—and his Rochelais publisher—could have introduced a more quietly subversive thesis from the “rustic” periphery.

Palissy understood this move from the frontality of walled-in protection to the subtlety of artisanal security as simultaneously a metaphysical and a material shift—strikingly reminiscent of Luther’s reactivation of medieval themes of man’s “twofold nature” and the carnal body in his famous vernacular *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (1520)—that privileged the hidden inner world of the purified Holy Spirit over the corrupted and exposed outer world of fallen material bodies. To be sure, this was a contradictory and binary conceptual framework, but in context, such thought was neither static nor represented unchanging oppositions. Both Luther and Palissy experienced the fragmentation of the spiritual and material as part of a monistic whole; that is, the oppositions were, in fact, interdependent, permeable, and even “married” by a primitive Christian synthesis of violence and the sacred identified with the exquisite pain of Christ’s suffering for the redemption of mankind. Change was constant; death and growth were synonymous. Channeled by self-mastery and driven by ceaseless labor and self-mortification, Christ’s pure spirit emerged despite the presence of the corrupted body, through the holy mediation of pious suffering. In turn, this focused the inner labor of the industrious artisan’s creative soul. In this context, physical pain was purposeful and, in the larger sense, cleansing and providential.

More disturbing, therefore, than the threat to Palissy’s bodily self was the spiritual insecurity of being surprised by physical violence and, ultimately, death. In an unprepared condition of body and soul, that is to say, in a chaotic state of disequilibrium between macrocosm and microcosm (spirit and matter), the artisanal benefits caused by the carnal reduction produced by sacred suffering were ultimately disordered, anarchic, and hence unmastered. The animating spirit was thus agitated rather than focused in its God-directed, creative movement between heaven and earth—this meant an ability to pierce through permeable bodily matter—by the chaos and *esmotions* that Palissy
and his followers experienced in civil war Saintonge. Théodore Agrippa d’Aubigné, author of a much-quoted martyrology of Palissy—and a leading Protestant theologian, poet, historian, and polemicist, as well as being a military strategist, Henri de Navarre’s vice-admiral of Saintonge, and a Huguenot field marshal during the civil wars—defined the complex word *esmotions* as a pejorative. It represented a highly combustible and dangerously visible mixture of the spiritual “motion of the soul,” corrupted by its corrosive combination with the carnal matter produced by “public unrest.” According to Randle Cotgrave’s *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611), this led to “emotion, commotion, sudden, or turbulent stirring; an agitation of the spirit, violent motion of the thoughts,” causing “a vehement inclination of the mind.”

In this suddenly disturbed psychological state, the secrets of craft knowledge still had potential to act as invisible, portable containers of the soul hidden inside the self-mastered body. The justified artisan possessed an internal compass to pinpoint motions of the aspiring spirit searching for openings of light in the midst of occlusion. Discipline was a fire wall against the dark, willful chaos of fallen, fleshy matter. If man’s *esmotions* raised internal boundaries to quiet spiritual movement through matter, then metaphysical foundations for artisanal security were effectively raised by a Huguenot artisan’s pious self-mastery. Skillful manipulation of the junction of spirit and matter as they intersected in a master artisan’s body allowed for the hidden, internal construction of security to begin, based on the subtle, fluid armature of soulish motion.

Throughout the *Recepte* and his later *Discours*, though Palissy represented himself as being in grave personal jeopardy on more than one occasion, he also used language to place himself in self-conscious harmony with the Stoic tradition and, as such, unmoved internally in the face of danger, chaos, and death. Death happened all around him, an everyday occurrence in the violent world of the Saintongeais countryside during the civil wars of religion. Still, the potter dwells on the horror of facing death unprepared—like an unarmed soldier unprepared for battle—to achieve mastery over the turbulent personal *esmotions* that violent historical events had instilled as threats to the calm of his immortal soul. A dialectic between appropriate contexts for legitimate “animation” and stoical suppression of bodily pain—considered an indication of the health of the aspiring soul—emerged powerfully among religious women, in monastic culture, and during the ritual of pilgrimage in the later Middle Ages. These practices provided sixteenth-century neo-Stoic Protestants, martyrologists, and natural philosophers with a long history of sacred precedents. Personal stoicism vis-à-vis worldly insecurity and the expectation of impending death was a common theme in Renaissance art. In late antiquity and early Christianity, humanists found ample precedents for the virtuous endurance of pain and the veneration of martyrdom as important components of the political performance of resistance. Norbert Elias has claimed, moreover, that beginning in the fifteenth century, stoicism among elites
served as an important aspect of “the civilizing process.” By extension, stoicism finds its place in Philippe Ariès’s general category of “tamed death.” Specific to the primitive Calvinist experience, however, was Palissy’s deep personal investment in the possession of interior security through arduous preparation of the soul. To be successful, as a mode both of Christian self-protection and social self-identity, this mystical practice had to remain hidden from the weakening effects of corruption spread by outer bodies that operated in the fallen matter of the world. In the white-hot emotional contexts of confessional violence that incubated early modern millennialism, reformed, Platonic, classical, and neo-Stoic texts were commonly read together by commentators. The fundamental connections between such texts were intuited by quietly enthusiastic (albeit unlearned) autodidacts like Palissy and others, who read copiously while living through anarchic experiences of war and suffering.

John Winthrop the Elder’s “Experiencia” of 1616—18—turbulent diary entries written in Groton, England, where the future governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was mourning the untimely death of his second wife, Thomasine Clopton Winthrop (1583–1616)—contemplated the covert ways he “prepared with a peaceable conscience” for God’s “trials,” lest they “harm me.” Despite the intense “grief” and personal “affliction” that he experienced as a result of Thomasine’s death, Winthrop’s trials, though eliciting real psychological pain, were contested “not in any grosse manner outwardly, yet seacreatly, togither with a seacrit desire . . . to forsake my first love [of God], whence came much troble and danger.”

Winthrop’s fear of seduction by “Worldly cares,” exhaustion from inner conflicts with “mine owne rebellious wicked hearte yieldinge itselde to the slavereye of sinne,” and survivor’s guilt at outliving his pious, “plaine hearted” wife, caused him to contemplate the “desire” for an immediate death, and the option of releasing himself from arduous interior preparations for soulish security. Whether this meant that suicide was considered a viable option or a subject for overt, serious theological debate among predestinarians is very difficult to say. There is good evidence, however, that such morbid desire was discussed quietly on the local level, in both congregations and guild halls. Seventeenth-century English Calvinists like Paul Seaver’s morose, deeply pious turner Nehemiah Wallington are known to have attempted suicide to destroy the physical source of spiritual corruption. “Experiencia” may have considered the self-destructive impulses Winthrop knew in himself and saw in others, from the perspective of bitter experience with the emotional effects of death and despair. “It is a better and more safe estate to be prepared to die then to desire death,” he concluded stoically. “For this commonly hath more selfe love with it than pure love of God: And,” he reasoned, “it is a signe of more strength of faithe, and Christian courage, to resolve to fight it out, than to wishe for the victory.” How did the pious artisan “prepare to die” and achieve a “more safe estate”? 
Luther’s “good workman”

The militant Luther of *Christian Liberty* resonated deeply in Winthrop’s Calvinist “Experiencia,” though the German’s ideas about death, law, and liberty were expressed with greater confidence than the bereaved and conflicted Englishman mustered from the vantage point of Reformation England at the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War. “So,” Luther wrote in 1520, “the heart learns to scoff at death and sin,

and to say with the Apostle, “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 Cor. 15:55–57]. Death is swallowed up not only in the victory of Christ but also by our victory, because through faith his victory has become ours and in that faith we are also conquerors.33

Luther’s widely read and audited *Christian Liberty* echoed most powerfully in the eclectic discourse of the “unlearned artisans” who found their voices in the mid-sixteenth century. This would include Palissy, of course, as well as Protestant “hidden enemies” in Venice, and Menocchio, the overtalkative Friulian miller and woodworker chronicled by Carlo Ginzburg, whose life ended in Rome by decree of the Inquisition. *Christian Liberty* was written in a simple and straightforward manner, in both Latin and German, and was soon published in French, English, and Italian translations: “To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them I serve . . .; and I hope that I can discuss it, if not more elegantly, certainly more to the point, than those literalists and subtile disputants have previously done [emphasis added], who have not even understood what they have written.”34

That is why the central analogy Luther uses for “unlearned” readers of his influential text, to illustrate his theme that man cannot be justified by works but only by interior faith in soulish communion with the Holy Spirit—an analogy that would also become crucial to Palissy’s own contemporaneous concept of skilled labor—was that of the pious artisan and his work. Luther’s inside-out formulation of the relationship between faith and works allowed that artisanry may be pious, but only if proven to be an outward manifestation—a material extension—of a workman’s hidden, inner purity. Inquiry into the metaphysical value of material culture necessarily began with the interior experience of the artisan.

This mystical inquiry into the nature of material culture was fraught with potential for satanic deception for Lutherans, just as the question of postlapsarian justification was deeply problematic for Calvinist predestinarians, including the Huguenot artisans of Saintonge. “A man must first be good or wicked before he does a good or wicked work,” Luther explained to his “unlearned” audience, “and his works do not make him
good or wicked, but he himself makes his works good or wicked. Illustrations of the same truth can be seen in all trades:

A good or a bad house does not make a good or a bad builder; but a good or a bad builder makes a good or a bad house. And in general, the work never makes the workman like himself, but the workman makes the work like himself. So it is with the works of man. As the man is, whether believer or unbeliever, so also is his work—good if it was done in faith, wicked if it was done in unbelief. . . .

. . . It is indeed true that in the sight of men a man is made good or evil by his works; . . . all this remains on the surface, however, and very many have been deceived by this outward appearance. . . . They go their way, always being deceived and deceiving [2 Tim. 3:13], progressing, indeed, but into a worse state, blind leaders of the blind.35

If the good “workman makes the work like himself,” then the artisan-alchemist’s task became to invent processes by which he could see through the blindness and deception of outward appearance for this proof of purity hidden in the interior of animate material bodies. (This problem, fundamental to the history of perception, is discussed at length in chapters 14, 15, and 16.)

Though Calvinist, Palissy, like Luther, posed rhetorically as “unlearned,” while attacking the “elegant,” “subtile disputants” of scholasticism with “simple” prose that got to “the point.” Palissy freely incorporated knowledge of some of the German’s texts into his work, due, in part, to local historical context. In his essay “History of the Church of Saintes,” the chapter just preceding “De la ville de forteresse” in the Recepte, Palissy writes that the Reformation in Saintonge had originated with the appearance of a group of Lutheran “monks.” This cell of four “returned” mysteriously from “the east” in the mid 1540s and began to evangelize the coastal islands. Luther and Calvin blended easily in Palissy’s work and personal experience. In the same essay, he celebrated the pastoral life and martyrdom of his great friend and mentor Philibert Hamelin, a Calvinist artisan and minister who was the first itinerant to bring Genevan discipline into the region. Palissy’s natural philosophy was based on the work of Paracelsus, a German-Swiss and a nominal Catholic whose writings on alchemic medicine and material processes were deeply indebted to Lutheran discourse. So the potter also internalized Germanic theology indirectly.

Palissy habitually conflated Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic doctrines, as he combined those aspects of theology that promoted the reformation of “primitive” Christianity. Palissy’s primitivism was shared by Luther and Calvin, as well as Paracelsus. All were concerned with mastery of the corrupted body, so that the soul could channel unencumbered through the flesh. Palissy and Winthrop both understood, as Caroline Walker Bynum reminds us in her work on the continuity of the medieval practice of piety that preceded the Protestant project to reconstruct the primitive Church on
the foundation of Christ’s ecstatic suffering, how “control, discipline, even torture of the flesh” was “not so much a rejection of physicality as the elevation of it—a horrible yet delicious elevation—into a means of access to the divine.”

St. Paul built bridges of textual continuity between the painful pleasures of medieval asceticism, and the Reformation discourse of bodily discipline and self-mastery preached by Luther and Calvin and their disciples. “In this life [a man] must control his own body,” wrote Luther:

Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline to subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and faith, and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man, as it is the nature of the body to do if it is not held in check. . . . While he is doing this, behold, he meets a contrary will in his own flesh which strives to serve the world and seeks its own advantage. This the spirit of faith cannot tolerate, but with joyful zeal it attempts to put the body under control and hold it in check, as Paul says in Rom. 7 [22–23], “For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin,” and in another place, “But I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” [1 Cor. 9:27], and in Galatians [5:24], “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Luther argued that “man has a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one,” which were inseparable until “the last day, the day of the resurrection of the dead,” when “we [shall become] wholly inner and perfectly spiritual men.” Luther’s interactive formulation of the play of opposites posited:

According to the spiritual nature, which men refer to as the soul, he is called a spiritual, inner, new man. According to the bodily nature, which men refer to as flesh, he is called a carnal, outward, or old man, of whom the Apostle writes in II Cor. 4 [16], “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.”

This “ecstatic” process of spiritual renewal as our “outer nature is wasting away” from violent mortification of the metaphorically worn and aging body (whether by self-inflicted “pommeling” or the historical violence of religious war and oppression), is perceived through the filter of an intensely sexual Neoplatonic language of soulish intercourse, marriage, and monistic unification:

in that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery . . . Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since
human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own . . . for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers? . . . the soul which clings . . . with a firm faith will be so closely united . . . and altogether absorbed . . . that it . . . will be saturated and intoxicated. 39

Paracelsians reinterpreted Luther’s admonition that “as long as we live in the flesh we only begin to make some progress in that which shall be perfected in the future life” in alchemical terms. This presumed that materials of “our outer nature” could be “wasted away” in the laboratory or workshop, to renew “our inner nature” in the present by replicating natural processes of “the last day,” when the dead are resurrected to become “wholly inner.” Palissy’s task—to discipline his body, emotional disorder, and physical pain—also contextualized specific natural-philosophical problems basic to his artisanal work and his science. Palissy repeated the word *esmotions* in particular situations that signified the corrupt passage of human history and hence superficial change. Superficial change occurred as part of what he called *ondoyant* time, which “surged” like a “wave.” The serpentine conceptualization of historical or “diachronic” time snaked in and out, negotiating the boundaries between macrocosm and microcosm. The territory of the former was principally synchronic, calm, and unaccidental; and as the experience of the wave of time moved “down” into the fallen chaos of the microcosm, the perceptual confusion of history and of *esmotions* followed. The simultaneity of historical experience was understood as a Stoic balance between the waves of time.

Palissy’s spiritual preparation for *esmotions* was silence and motionlessness. This state signified contained inward motion, so it also signified scientific preparedness for achieving the monistic status intrinsic to the practice of Paracelsian and Neoplatonic artisanry. Deep interiority was preparation for scientific inquiry into the unity behind diverse earth materials. Pious artisans thus conceptualized their immortal souls in the process of astral travel. The soul flowed directly into and between macrocosm and microcosm by means of its vehicle, a “chariot”: the sidereal but still mortal astral body. 40 At these mystical moments of harmonic convergence, at the axis of violent history and sacred time, the inner artisan and natural scientist prepared for elevation to divine knowledge of the essential nature of materials perceived empirically in the microcosm.

Channeling the entropy of civil war through the self-contained, God-directed motion of a natural-philosophical pilgrimage—where the artisan-scientist sought soulish refuge and essential truths hidden beneath the corrupted “outer body” of natural
materials—was propaedeutic to Palissy’s discourses. These personal pilgrimages formed patterns in which several elements interacted: (1) physical movement over geographic space, signifying experience; (2) related fortuitous accidents crucial to Paracelsian experimental science; and (3) unexpected—from the perspective of scholastic Neoplatonism—faith, even joy in the empirical materiality of the natural world. Like his fallen body, natural matter laid bare by its inner spirit was also man’s potential instrument of personal transformation and salvation amid the apocalyptic rubble. These pilgrimages were ordered and functioned like self-contained, centripetal artifacts, each with a life of its own, yet simultaneously connected to a universal spirit active in the natural world.

Security in Palissy’s “De la ville de forteresse” was measured by such mystical standards of artisanal competence in achieving the material-holiness synthesis. These represented basic sociocultural rules, expectations, and behavior that Palissy established in the Recepte to characterize local standards for how something was made. Thus, comprehending a builder’s competence depended on the outside-in “deconstruction” (or, from the alchemist’s perspective, “decay” and “destruction”) of an artifact made by a predecessor’s “hand” in order to emulate its system of inner rules and procedures. This approximation of original performance facilitated appropriation, interpretation, and ultimately mimesis.

Yet one artisan’s deconstruction of another’s competence is inevitably confused by the process of creative misreading that has always accompanied interpretation of artifacts of experience over time and in changing sociocultural contexts. Such misreading is an extraordinarily intricate problem, but a useful critical framework has been argued with great subtlety for the study of poetics by Harold Bloom, whose work has implications for the study of historiography, as well as of the reproduction of material life in the pre-“mechanical” era.41

This sort of critical analysis implies the convergence of written text and hand-wrought artifact with (for Bloom) the violent “death” of the maker (father) at the hands of the influenced (son). As we shall see in chapter 15, in the Boston leather chair’s emulation by Huguenots in New York City during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, an artifact’s intrinsic systems of communication were transformed by the capricious effects of its dissemination (as commodity, booty, or baggage), over which makers or sellers might have little control. Retrospective appropriation of the inferred logic of another artisan’s competence to emulate a specific product did not necessarily carry with it complete understanding of the intentionality of either the prototype’s maker or the original society and culture that determined his standards of competence.42

These daunting problems in retrospective logic represent the creative tension between theory and practice that animated so much Paracelsian thought about artisanry
during the early modern period. For Palissy, the faithful student (and emulator) of God in Nature, much was at stake: the artisan whose competence (and intention) was deconstructed, “decayed”—or, to use an appropriately biblical term borrowed from Frank Kermode, “decreated”—in rustic artisanry and empirical natural philosophy was the Genesis (or artisan) God; the context remained entropy associated with the civil wars of religion in Aunis-Saintonge; and the natural “artifacts” of anxious mimetic desire—the pious potter’s “art of the earth”—were automatically limited, and in a very real sense defined, by local, personal, and spiritual interaction with natural and man-made materials. Palissy believed that though these things “accidentally” fell into his path on walks, such accidents resulted from the providential interaction of God with human experience during each artisan’s personal pilgrimage through the serpentine waves of time.

The Critique of Stone Walls:

“One cannot understand the one who knows how to die”

Palissy began “De la ville de forteresse” by questioning the effectiveness of stone walls per se. The young Palissy had made a reputation for himself drawing maps and architectural “pourtraits”—a flexible term that could connote both the “image” of an individual and a “counterfeit” of landscape and architecture “drafted” with compass and ruler. Yet, by 1563, Palissy had subverted the received wisdom that an archetypal Huguenot fortress town must be designed in the manner of La Rochelle (exemplar of the traditional paradigm of sûreté undermined in “De la ville de forteresse”). This was one reason why permanent (“drawn”) plans of a singular military structure, such as La Rochelle, were never provided, as advertised, to accompany the written text of Palissy’s essay.

Religious motives supplied another powerful argument for the absence of a reified plan. Luther’s critique of Roman Catholic ritual and ceremony devalued human plans as inessential, transitory, and ephemeral. At best, they were merely preliminary. He asserted by analogy that “ceremonies are to be given the same place in the life of a Christian as models and plans have among builders and artisans.”

They are prepared, not as a permanent structure, but because without them nothing could be built or made . . . what we despise is the false estimate of them since no one holds them to be the real and permanent structure. If any man were so flagrantly foolish as to care for nothing all his life long except the most costly, careful, and persistent preparation of plans and models and never to think of the structure itself, and were satisfied with his work in producing such plans as mere aids to work, and boasted of it, would not all men pity his insanity and think that something great might have been built with what he has wasted?
... [Such men] seem to wish to build, they make their preparations, and yet they never build. Thus they remain caught in the form ... and do not attain unto its power [2 Tim. 3:5].

Essential structure versus superficial form and flexibility of natural experience opposed to rigid scholastic plan were also at the core of Palissy’s natural philosophy. Hence, Palissy identified the traditional fortress’s main design flaw as its inflexible and rigidly artificial surrounding walls, which were based on a standard plan with too simplistic an understanding of geometry’s potential to emulate the complexity and adaptability of natural defenses. Walls in medieval fortresses were detached from and extrinsic to the domestic housing and inhabitants (“with houses separated from the walls”) they were ostensibly built to protect. To reform the place de sûreté, a term structurally synonymous with the detached, walled-in fortress in Huguenot political and military discourse, walls and boundaries had to be made intrinsic to the social and material fabric; indeed, to the fluid experience of everyday life.

“And why?” the potter asked rhetorically. Palissy offered two specific “proofs,” which he claimed, insincerely, were not drawn from plans of prior authorities, or the scholastics, but from the more reliable evidence of his own practical experience: (1) “in times of Peace the walls are useless [and yet] great treasure and labor are expended to build and maintain them”; and, more important, (2) “when the walls are overtaken, the town has no choice but to surrender. It is truly a defective town body [un pauvre corps de Ville] when the parts [les membres] are unable to unify [consolider] and help one another. In brief, all such [fortress] towns are designed badly, considering that their parts are unable to link up with [the whole; that is] the principal body. It is a simple matter to defeat the body if the members do not come to its aid.” Given what we know about the events of 1565, the hypothesis that Palissy makes double reference here to the factionalism that afflicted La Rochelle’s Corps de ville in the early 1560s makes sense. At the time, a “defective” Corps did lapse into weakness and near “death” as a governing body. The divided Huguenot members were unable to unify to protect the town’s privileges from attack by the monarchy. Other recurring themes also emerge here that were central to Palissy’s discourse on security. The critique of fragmentation and disunity that prevented “concatenation” of the “principal body” of the town with its outer extremities resonates strongly with both medical and religious discourse of the period. Palissy, a follower of Paracelsus and his reformed model of medical therapy, subscribed to the “new,” systemic treatment of illness. Paracelsus argued for the cosmological approach to treatment, whereby the patient’s body and spirit were conceptualized as a single unified entity. Instead of fragmenting the body into specific therapy zones in order to act on symptoms alone, Paracelsus and his followers sought “principal” (or “elemental”) causes hidden beneath the corrupted flesh. These were always connected
in both spiritual and material ways. Linking macrocosm and microcosm formed the fundamental concatenation with pathology of the spirit—or carnal occlusion of spiritual purity—usually an animating cause of illness in the body. This resonated strongly with the Reformation’s reactivation of Augustine’s popular analogy of a primitive Christian community united in the suffering body of Christ despite fragmentation of its “members” by warfare and forced migration.

Palissy’s remarks are an indication of the religious and political tension that separated the protected core of urban Huguenots living in the fortress of La Rochelle from their vulnerable rural counterparts (or membres) struggling to survive the civil wars in its Saintongeais hinterland. Palissy internalized and ultimately inverted this historical and geographic relationship by redefining security from the rustic perspective in “De la ville de forteresse.” In so doing, he cast serious doubt on the status, identity, and finally even the spatial location of the new “principal body.”

Despite Palissy’s rhetorical rejection of all prior textual authorities in the formulation of an unlearned rustic’s “natural” critique of the medieval fortress town, he did adapt ideas from a lively international debate on the modern values and strategies of fortification inspired by Machiavelli (1469–1527), which emerged after publication of The Prince in 1513. Subsequently, in The Art of War (1520), Machiavelli drew up detailed plans to improve the technology of fortress design, applying specific knowledge of the sieges of Pisa and Padua (ca. 1509) to his designs for modern fortifications, which were adjusted, in part, to meet the challenge of gunpowder (the complex geometry of architectural form being less vulnerable to decisive bombardment than the simple inertia of massed stone).

In The Prince (and the Discourses), however, Machiavelli reconsidered fortification as a total psychological and geopolitical problem rather than a matter of the deployment of stone and mortar as a physical barrier. In so doing, he set plans aside, and questioned the viability of the walled fortress per se, both as an effective instrument of military power and, from the perspective of a prince, as a dominant symbol of noble territorial mastery. Machiavelli’s detailed plans for improvement of internal and external defenses of the fortress in The Art of War were the most comprehensive ever to appear in print. However, this straightforward technical account of modern siege warfare elicited an astonishingly meager published response. Conversely, his brief theoretical essay in The Prince—a harsh critique of the social psychology of fortified walls, and, by extension, of the effect of fortification on a total culture of state security—engaged a wide spectrum of commentary. Machiavelli had redefined the subject and made it hotly contested among political theorists, military engineers, theologians, alchemists, and natural philosophers during the wars of religion.47

The Machiavellian critique originated with a famous maxim in The Prince: “[T]he best fortress that exists is [for the prince] to avoid being hated by the people.” Dis-
advantages of fortifications were enumerated further in the *Discourses*, where J. R. Hale sees “an unyielding prejudice against” them. Thus, Machiavelli claimed that fortifications could be overcome by both violence and famine. And, while a well-defended fortress might buy time for negotiation at the beginning of an invasion, this temporary advantage was lost by two strategic weaknesses that could never be overcome by delay: plain visibility and immobility. “Even if they are so strong that the enemy cannot take them,” Machiavelli wrote, “he will march by with his army and leave them in the rear.”48 Far better to depend on human skill and the mobility of a loyal army. In this instance, the lessons of Spartan experience were seen as more compelling than the Roman, as Machiavelli parsed the flawed relation between stone walls and security in classical sources. Spartans rejected both the fortress and the common walled town, “to rely solely upon the valor of their men for their defence, and upon no other means.”49 Security was a matter of natural inner fortitude, not artificial external barriers.

New theories of mobile security extended to extraterritorial theaters as well. Here, Machiavellians followed the model of Roman colonization. It was preferable to insinuate the inner strength of expanding imperial culture by planting colonies as means of foreign conquest, rather than to wall in the natural diffusion of dominance in the form of sedentary marchland fortresses. By the time of the advent of the Commons debates of 1628 following the failure of the English invasion of the Île de Ré, an alarmed Calvinist faction blamed the weakening subversion of a “Machiavellian” “Praetorian Guard” hidden among the kingdom’s Catholic and foreign population for the catastrophic defeat.50 Hence, the effect of an invading colony was viral and poisonous; functioning, as it were, in the Machiavellian shadows of baneful insinuation, interiority, and dissimulation.

Inasmuch as Palissy’s reading of the Stoics was refracted through the soulish lens of the Saintongeais Reformation, he could comfortably collapse the Machiavellian critique into that of Pliny the Younger, who argued dismissively: “[T]he unassailable fortress is to have no need for protection. In vain he encircles himself with terror who is not surrounded with love, for arms are roused up by arms.”51 The protective power of fortress walls was relocated to the hidden security of the loving heart. This discursive tradition emerged powerfully in late sixteenth-century Saintonge in the work of Agrippa d’Aubigné, Palissy’s co-religionist and contemporary at Pons. In the epic poem *Les Tragiques* (ca. 1574–1600, published in 1616), d’Aubigné’s most influential text, a case was made for this act of inner relocation of protection. Interior fortification is represented here as both a reformation of security and a return to primitive virtue lost in the “declining age” of man.

In the section “Misères,” d’Aubigné chastises the “shameful, degenerate French” of his age for depending on fortifications, a corruption of the crude protective barriers that “used to be light in the old days,” yet had provided better security. In that earlier
time, “the foreigner overstepped [these small] barriers / [and the French defenders] disdaining the fortress and frontier bastion: / [so that only after] the enemy entered and fought / [did these French of old] test their courage in the campaign.” Now, in witness of “the declining age/... our cold hearts need to see themselves walled in / like old people bundled up in [protective] layers / of ramparts, bastions, moats and buttresses.” Thus, “our excellent [fortress] designs are nothing but [superficial] ornaments / from which our forefathers would flee as if they were prisons.” To subtract these bastions of ornament—and the protective walls that reduced bodily risk but yielded to the greater risk of shielding an aging, cold heart from the rejuvenation of God’s light—appealed to d’Aubigné’s unmediated, reformed sensibility.

D’Aubigné and Palissy were, moreover, linked inextricably in Reformation historiography by the former’s martyrlogical narrative of Palissy’s final hours imprisoned in the Bastille (appropriately, “small fortress”). Here readers encountered the textual origin of the old potter’s mythic refusal to abjure heresy and undergo conversion to save himself from execution at the last moment, despite personal pleas from his king, who failed to understand why Palissy would not abjure. D’Aubigné merged this construction of Palissy’s stoic performance in his apocryphal final moments with that of a Huguenot Seneca who faced death prepared by his hidden fortitude (a warm heart) and skillful self-mastery. At the end of the story, d’Aubigné’s Palissy famously switches roles with the king, assuming the position of spiritual and political dominance, while taking pity on the monarch for his incomprehension of the secret, inner life of martyrs. “You would say,” d’Aubigné concludes in a didactic tone, “that [Palissy] had read the verse of Seneca, *Qui mori scit, cogi nescit*: One cannot understand the one who knows how to die.” Indeed, Seneca was among the few philosophers “of the ancients,” whom Calvin apparently respected in the *Institutes*. “In his own conception very shrewdly,” Calvin wrote in chapter 13, Seneca (in *Quaestiones naturales* 1) “said that whatever we see, and whatever we do not see, is God,” as “he imagined that the Deity was diffused through every part of the world.”

Although a line of discursive inheritance may be drawn between Machiavelli and the Saintongeais Huguenots d’Aubigné and Palissy on the subject of the debate over fortification, Palissy’s influences were never wholly clear, linear, or, for that matter, textual. The language of doubt over the effectiveness of walls when contrasted with the security of the human spirit predated Machiavelli. Only after publication of *The Prince* did such language ramify in learned political, military, and scientific discourse. Indeed, so enduring and deep-seated was the pre-Machiavellian mistrust of mortar that Hale prudently admonishes historians to remember, “there are some ideas whose neatness conceals so complex a suggestiveness that the study of their transmission is the province of the folklorist rather than the historian.” It was in the nexus between folklore and history—between the folkloric “oral culture” of the “rustic” yet literate Huguenot
master artisan and learned culture extended by the proliferation of printed texts in the sixteenth century—that Palissy stood. A confluence of influences vied for his attention, demanding innovation in response to the challenge of a culture of horrific religious violence in Saintonge. Palissy constructed the practice of artisanal security in this nexus of orality and literacy.

So Palissy had more at stake in “De la ville de forteresse” than could be understood within the framework of the Machiavellian critique of fortification. To begin, Palissy’s critique of the modern fortress town emerged from the potter’s clear attempt to assume the humble perspective, despite frequent recourse to the rhetoric of patronage to demonstrate, “the uses and secrets of the said fortress” to “le Roy,” and, in a transparently Machiavellian gesture, “le Prince.” His agenda was to provide security for the pious if lowly artisan or farmer. Palissy’s concern was their self-preservation and the protection of local towns, country farms, artisan shops, families, and churches, rather than the interests of a dominant prince whose concerns were maintenance of political power and construction of his glory through imperial statecraft. The potter was thoroughly engaged in a struggle, common to his entire oeuvre, to discover a practical, even instrumental, middle ground where form, natural philosophy, local folklore, and historical context functioned in reciprocal relation with popular religious belief to achieve the protective power of authentic sûreté.

Hence, Palissy’s claim that fortress walls, deployed in an enceinte artificially detached from a town’s corps—its human and natural environments—constituted a financial liability in peacetime that was also dangerously one-dimensional in war. Given the perpetual cycle of warfare, punctuated by brief moments of exhausted calm, that was endemic to confessional violence in Saintonge, Palissy argued that modes of protection must function proportionally, for both individuals and communities, as integral, autochthonous parts of the domestic setting of bodies, houses, and towns. Palissy insisted, it will be recalled, on the bodily analogy serving as the theoretical foundation for secure places: “its members . . . assist each other,” he wrote, arguing above all, that members of the corps must always “concatenate with the main body.” Artisanal production of sûreté must create a built environment capable of overcoming the double weaknesses of visibility and immobility, both flaws of the old-style stone fortress. Creating designs for security based on the experience of natural bodies living without recourse to artificial fortresses, artisanal security encouraged the development of skills and strategies to become unobtrusive and mobile—to repeat, structurally invisible (or perceptually natural)—parts of the domestic setting.

But where to find an innovative natural design upon which to base the new, truly impregnable “ville de forteresse”? Palissy’s argument held that designs inspired by existing fortresses, such as (indeed, especially) La Rochelle’s, were inadequate—in effect, dead to the world. So were preexisting plans on paper conceived for other his-
historical moments and contexts. Yet evidence suggests that these were consulted closely by Palissy, including some “made by master Jaques [Androuet] du Cerceau, and many other designers.” The potter knew du Cerceau’s spiral plans (ca. 1550) for his Ideal Fortified City and the Tower of Babel. He also consulted “plans and drawings of Vitruvius and Sebastian, and other architects,” probably including Leonardo da Vinci and Francesco di Giorgio. These “were of no use, for invention of the said fortress town: it was never possible to find a single image, that was helpful in this job.” Palissy’s visits to “all the most excellent gardens” were just as disappointing as the works of these modern and classical fortress designers. “Some plans based on the labyrinth invented by Dedalus” for Minos in Greece were equally unimpressive. All this revealed the negative information that “it was impossible for me to find anything that contained my spirit [qui contenast mon esprit]” (emphasis added).59 No existing plan had “attain[ed] unto [the] power of the “spirit” (also “soul,” “heart”) of Palissy’s “inner nature,” under pressure from the emotions of war. The potter’s insecurity over the falseness of a received, ossified plan that did not contain his spirit seemed to signal the pious presence of “the workman [who] makes the work like himself,” as an extension of “a spiritual, inner, new man.”

Readers were shuttled here and there on the Huguenot artisan’s pilgrimage in search of available, if inappropriate, artificial prototypes. This was a device that allowed the narrator—now in the pilgrim’s obligatory pose of being “nearly beyond all hope” (esperance—a play on esprit)—to finally reject the products of mere human theory, design, and false labor altogether. Having exhausted all man-made possibilities, and facing the earth beneath his feet with “head lowered,” Palissy activated a Paracelsian code that signified that fatigue and mortification born of expérience—sloughing off of bits of his “old” carnal outer body—had shifted his empirical perspective “down” to elemental earth. Uncovering authentic paradigms at last, Palissy discovered where to clarify his confusion of influences. If Nature’s genesis is read together exegetically with the Word to provide insight into the competence of God as Nature’s creator, then so, too, Nature’s production must logically signify the perfect marriage of the theory and practice of artisanal security. Process in Palissy’s empirical discourse was paradoxical in ways that made perfect sense from the monistic perspective of integrated connections. While looking “down” at the rustic earth of Nature and working to emulate and improve it, the pilgrim-researcher simultaneously focused his own internal vision vertically, toward a more perfect understanding of God the artisan. Protestant emblemata that depicted the pious rustic exploited this terrestrial rhetoric. Best known in the transatlantic context was the emblem on the title page of Tieleman Janszoon van Brachts’s Martyrer Spiegel [Martyrs’ Mirror] (fig. 2.1). Originally published in Dutch in 1660, this martyrology was translated into German for a new edition published in 1748, by the press at the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania. Its motto was “Urbeite und
“Then I began to journey through the woods, mountains and valleys,” Palissy wrote urgently, “to see if I could discover some industrious animal, who had constructed an ingenious house of some sort.” The text, now disguised further in the potter’s rustic style of on-the-road empiricism, proceeds with various descriptions of the domestic arrangements of promising species discovered, as if by accident, while on solitary walks to different geographical and natural contexts, mostly in Saintonge. Newfound rustic creatures were examined scientifically on these peregrinations to decipher the mechanism by which they implemented their innate, inside-out, natural strategies of sûreté.
Most early modern French artisans were mobile and traveled in gangs of compagnons for security; but Palissy walked privately in search of secure things to contemplate, alone with his artisan God.\(^62\) Representation of solitude in heroic quest of new experiences removed from the burden of man’s venerable traditions of slavish repetition—whether scholastic or artisanal—was both the necessary precondition for Palissy’s personal reformation in the crucible of religious violence and fundamental to his transmutation of ceramic materials in the “art of the earth.”

**The Snail and Its Enemies**

Given Palissy’s coastal habitat in Saintonge and historical status as a Huguenot refugee, it should come as no surprise that he focused on tiny, overlooked, and apparently defenseless molluscan “artisans” on these walks. Attentive to the attributes of protection given to such humble species by God, the potter posited that their survival depended on a sort of domestic body armor (the shell) generated of the creatures’ own volition and then self-fashioned, seamlessly, from materials brought inside-out from within their soft inner bodies. That is, each animal’s “fortress” emerged from and functioned as a hidden, primordial element of its own being. Neoplatonic elements in Palissy’s natural philosophy were embodied by behavior exhibited by the diminutive artisans he observed for “De la ville de forteresse.”\(^63\)

Palissy conceptualized these secreted molluscan fortresses as portable wonders. They held the code to life-saving “inventions” of natural artisanry. He thus came to the conclusion that molluscan bastions were generated in a kind of matrix built on the spiritual and material foundations of a snail’s primordial nature, which reached its final material form through interaction with its specific domestic history. The snail’s natural defenses are not “opposed” to culture in “De la ville de forteresse,” since its domestic domain, although constructed, was simultaneously natural.\(^64\) As a prime example of this dual domestic-defensive capacity in nature, Palissy cited “une jeune limace [a young snail], who built his house and fortress of his own saliva [emphasis added].” True to the method of Paracelsian alchemy, this inside-out building process was not achieved immediately but rather as a ripening of slow, steady, organic craftsmanship. As the outside shell of the snail grew, it transmuted imperceptibly from one elemental state (liquid) to another (solid). “And so it was made, little by little,” Palissy observed of the formation of the snail’s external skeleton, as the result of a subtle process that occurred “over the course of many days.” “Once I captured the snail” and examined it closely to master the secrets of its craftsmanship, “I found that the inside edge of his building was still liquid, and the rest hard, and so I learned that it took some time to harden the saliva that the snail had used to build his fort.”\(^65\)

Palissy’s elucidation of the natural artisanry of molluscan fortress construction in
terms of a gradual metamorphosis from liquid to solid material states evokes the hardening of ceramic clay and mineral glazes in the potter’s kiln. This analogy is reinforced by philology. The French word for snail (limace) is associated with the word for clay (limon). The Latin word for snail is limax, but the common Latin root is most probably limus, meaning mud. This relationship makes sense in terms of the natural history of snails. Since classical times, most mollusks have been classified as filter-feeders, or mud-ingesters. Most snail species are also mud-dwelling burrowers that hide from enemies by digging down into the subterranean mire. The Latin usage of limax and limus reflected the classical belief that all snails were gestated, born, protected, and matured in the bowels of the earth, in a womb of mud.

Consider, as well, the obscure but provocative connection in Latin philology to limen, or “threshold.” Both words come into play with some degree of frequency both in the historiography of French Calvinist diasporic culture and in Reformation theology generally. Philologists posit that limen is connected to both limus and limes, with limus referring simultaneously to mud and, in the abstract sense, a setting out toward a new beginning. (Is this analogous, perhaps, to the alchemist’s mudlike negrido, resulting from putrefaction and a material matrix for rebirth?) Limes has been interpreted, moreover, not only as a cross path (another sort of threshold), but also as a riverbed (a muddy home for snails) and, indeed, as a fortified boundary path.

Snail shells were famously ubiquitous throughout Palissy’s “rustic” pottery production—“scattered,” as the appraiser of Anne de Montmorency’s Paris collection noted, across the surface of all his oeuvre in the “façon de Xaintes.” Ubiquitousness provided its own natural cover—the camouflage of banality—that was associated with the humble, overlooked thing of little power or significance; like the mud itself, or rocks (recall that Montmorency owned Palissy’s “tree made in the manner of a rock,” scattered with shells). Made of elemental earth, both stones and mud are trodden thoughtlessly underfoot. Yet snails are also hard to find if camouflaged, even when sought out—especially if settled in between water and earth on the murky edges of riverbeds. Snails sometimes lie hidden in shadow in the watery grottoes of Palissy’s pottery, under a leaf or blade of grass (perhaps the same color as their shell)—natural habitats for the limace in the Charente River Valley. And inasmuch as the vast majority of mollusks live beneath the surface of the visible world, a scattering of shells represents only the outer skin of a subaquatic and subterranean world teeming with invisible life.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, limace connoted the spiral form as well. Cotgrave reports that while the primary definition was “A Snaile,” limace was “also, as Volute; anything that winds, or turnes like a Snaile-shell.” The verb limazonner, therefore, meant “To twirle, turne, or wind about, like the shell of a Snaile, or as souldiers that cast themselves into a ring.” Furniture historians will similarly recognize in this definition, the well-known association of refugee Huguenot turners with the diffusion
of so-called spiral or twist turning in baroque woodworking. New York was, in fact, the only settlement in colonial British America that adapted this turning form for commercial use during the late seventeenth century. An arboreal spiral is commonly formed when trees or parasitical woody vines spiral around the immobile limbs of a larger tree, using it as a host to climb to the light.

Modern naturalists also reconstruct the process of molluscan shell formation in formal terms of the coiled development of the exoskeleton into a remarkably specific spiral architecture. The snail’s building materials consist of a laminate of thin layers of the mineral calcium carbonate, which is secreted like “saliva” in an organic protein matrix by a cluster of cells located along the growing edge of the shell mantle. The calcium carbonate hardens to protect the animal’s soft internal organs from predators. Mollusks of many varieties also build shells covered with a thick, glossy transparent glaze. This intensified underlying colors in ways that gave exotic varieties a prominent place in humanists’ cabinets of curiosities and inspired emulation by both alchemists and ceramic artisans during the later Renaissance. As the appraiser in the Normandy château sadly noted of what remained of Palissy’s pottery destroyed by liguers in 1589, the broken shards were glazed with “diverse colors, most exquisitely.” Palissy’s “De la ville de forteresse” was not a natural history of the architecture of molluscan shells written simply for the sake of classification. The defensive strategies of the tiny, mostly subterranean life forms were the primary subject of inquiry.

Palissy’s empathetic and analogical approach to the life of snails is surprisingly relevant to the sorts of inquiry that some naturalists now make in modern laboratory science. “We can think of shells as houses,” writes the influential zoologist and natural historian Geerat J. Vermeij, whose research and fieldwork into the life of snails, like Palissy’s inquiry four hundred years ago, considers molluscan building practices from the perspective of the inner and outer lives of the mollusks themselves. Palissy and Vermeij both characterize snails as prey living circumspectly in the dangerous and highly contingent world of marauding predators. As a result, “the shell,” Vermeij argues, is best understood as “a complete archive of the builder’s life and times.” Vermeij’s material archive of molluscan domesticity resonates with Palissy’s dark and violent—yet also intensely beautiful and deeply creative—world of Huguenot artisanal security. To quote Vermeij:

Shells are built by animals that live in a world of multiple dangers, limitations, and opportunities. Divorced from their natural surroundings, they are objects of abstract architectural beauty in which form takes precedence over function. Only when we observe shells and their makers in nature do we gain some appreciation for the ecological factors that effect the well-being and reproductive success of molluscs. Shells . . . reflect the ways in which the animals that build shells are adapted to and limited by their surroundings.
Environments and functions vary from place to place. Temperature, water flow, food, predators, [and] competitors . . . vary along gradients of geography and habitat. Shells that work well in one situation may be quite ill-suited to another. The way shells work is, in short, a question of ecology and the adaptive responses of molluscs to it.70

Above all, snail shells “reveal just how important enemies are in controlling the lives of molluscs.”71

The sort of interactive life that necessitated the spiral domestic fortress of the diminutive snail “house,” is inextricably entwined with the lives and predatory habits of the builder’s many aggressive enemies. Most enemies of mollusks seek their armored prey over great distances. Either visual or chemical “cues” or the faint resonance of a faraway movement can be detectable. Mammalian predators of snails (including humans), birds, octopuses, and most fish use vision exclusively. Sight “works well as long as habitats are exposed to light,” Vermeij reasons. Hence, “shallow clear-water habitats such as reefs, sand flats, rocky shores, and lakes are ideal for the use of vision,” while “turbid rivers, mud flats, and deep-water environments are not.”72 Palissy’s “rustiques figulines” encrusted with snail shells are often contextualized in and around the turbid rivers or the ubiquitous tidal mud flats that occlude the watery environments of the Charente River near Saintes, and the marais along the Saintongeais coast. Therefore, the first line of defense for mollusks against mammalian predators is either to inhabit occluded places or camouflage themselves in well-lit environments with cryptic, chameleonlike coloration of the shell, to blend in with the surrounding space and be invisible. Both of these molluscan environments appear in pottery made “in the fashion of Xaintes.”

Once detected, a snail has four basic options for self-defense: (1) silent, rapid burrowing; (2) reliance on its shell as a stationary fortress, depending on its thickness, corrugations, and buttresses to resist external pressure; (3) retraction of its vital soft parts deep into the coil and away from the rim of the shell’s aperture (or “door”); and (4) help from “intimate associations,” or symbiotic relationships with powerful hosts (ecological “patrons,” as it were)—including corals, sea anemones, sea fans, jellyfishes, and other creatures equipped with stinging cells (“nematocysts”)—that attack predators. Many types of snail survive by hiding in the fronds of certain toxic plants, including varieties of seaweed. Plants also provide camouflage. Snails thus benefit from double protection by “others,” obtaining both concealment and “patronage.”73

By the time readers completed “Forteresse,” Palissy had also elucidated these four forms of protection as basic elements of artisanal security, observed in the natural “house and fortress” built by his rustic limace, the paradigmatic Saintongeais artisan surrounded by predatory enemies. But Palissy took these analogies generated by experiments with the limace and his close observation of molluscan building practices
further than Vermeij, as a modern scientist, could sanction. Palissy’s personal experience (unlike Vermeij’s) revealed that like the snail, dangerous “enemies” had become such an “important” factor in his everyday life and the lives of the Huguenots of Saintonge during the first civil war that, in effect, they constituted a “controlling” influence in Saintongeais Huguenot culture. Here, Palissy’s empathy created an identity between his natural analogy and his inner and outer selves under pressure.

For Palissy, the essence of the artisanal security revealed by the limace’s self-defense structures was the infinite flexibility of spiral forms to contain and channel the motions of inner and outer bodies in a chaotic world controlled by enemies. The experience of the snail’s industrious, self-mastered life, contained in its spiral “house and fortress,” gave form to the natural interweaving of symmetries of inner and outer experience. The resulting spiral formed a sort of twisting, mutual conduit between the two bodies, facilitating the contingent motions of the protective and creative spirit through old matter in the “new man,” while maintaining tight control over the emotions that corrupted the mystical intercourse of macrocosm and microcosm. This integrated serpentine theater of soulish revelation and concealment was also the place where the potter cultivated noble patronage (“intimate associations”) from allies in competing confessions (Antoine de Pons, Montmorency, and Catherine de Médicis). Powerful hosts provided a sort of temporary inoculation against his enemies, just as the spiral hid Palissy’s inner self from these same hosts when necessary, camouflaging it behind the coded matter of a courtier’s artisanry and theatrical self-fashioning. Still, that this option became available to him clearly resulted from noble demand for his extraordinary artisanal talents. At the same time, however, most Huguenot artisans could rely on the general strategies of artisanal security learned from Palissy himself—or, later, from his book—in which he documented experimental encounters with the dual nature of the simultaneously obfuscating and armored limace.

Palissy devoted the final section of “Forteresse” to these armored structures of the limace. Here, he proposed guidelines for a “new,” flexible fortress, based on the natural “house and fortress” of the limace. This “natural” portrait depended on the amorphous snail’s inner, mutable flesh, and a mollusk’s unique ability, depending on the actions of its enemies, to retreat into the hidden recesses of its spiral outer body. The outer body (or exoskeleton) varied somewhat in the form it revealed to the outside world, but the basic construction of the interior space was always spiral, so an enemy that made its way beyond the shell’s aperture would fail to reach its soft inner body by taking a straight route. Palissy discovered that many of the snail’s predators, and the garfish in particular, had straight-pointed jawbones. With these they could force their way into the spiral so far as the first turn, but there they were stymied and obliged to extract themselves. In theory, since the limace spiraled back to its innermost core by
turning its “subtle” inner body in a reverse serpentine motion, presumably only a spiritual creature with a similarly subtle and fluid nature could locate it there.

The exceptions were satanic “demons.” In his controversial, widely read book of plates and commentary on the multiple spiritual and material meanings of deformity in Nature On Monsters and Marvels (1575), Ambroise Paré (1510–1590), Palissy’s acquaintance, fellow Paracelsian writer and researcher, and exact contemporary (they were born and died in the same years), who had been a military surgeon during the civil wars before becoming a highly successful Huguenot courtier and surgeon-physician at the courts of Charles IX and Henri III (and personal physician to the two kings), claimed: “Demons can, in many manners and fashions deceive our earthbound heaviness, by reason of the subtlety of their essence and malice of their will.” Having reached the deepest room in the molluscan spiral—the most private epicenter of the little artisan’s fortress—shape-shifting creatures with pure inner bodies, free from corruption, entered the sanctum sanctorum in Christian fellowship to share in its protection. But the greatest threat to the construction of artisanal security came from the malicious will of demonic forces. The demon’s subtle essence enabled it to enter the hidden heart of protected space (an earthly container of soulish power received from the macrocosm) to corrupt the inner body of the spirit. This effectively sullied the deeply pious, Neoplatonic intercourse between God and weakness that crafted the fortress of faith, and so its material body could not converge, form into being, or maintain coherence. Christians knew that in the human anatomy, this absolute interior—this inviolable space of serpentine protection and convergence—was hidden deeply inside the microcosmic heart of man. Man’s heart was a place of secret testing, where spirit and matter flowed together continuously in purity or corruption.

Consider how these forms of security may be signified in the “great oval basins . . . scattered with shells and many animals of all sorts . . . inside” made “in the fashion of Xaintes.” Thanks mostly to recent archeological discoveries, several of these works can now be safely attributed to Palissy or his workshop. The art historian Leonard N. Amico, who has done an admirable job of classifying the authenticity of the surviving artifacts based on the new archeological record, takes a particular interest in the form and function of the “oval basins” (fig. 2.2) that are the most famous of Palissy’s surviving works. Unfortunately, after this promising start, Amico falls back on conventional iconographical readings to interpret the meaning of both the material and spiritual experiments represented in the works of his anti-conventional subject: “One wonders if Palissy’s art, which concentrated almost exclusively on the image of a serpent invading an island and causing fish and other creatures to flee, may have codified for him and his followers the image of ‘snakelike traitors’ attacking the Elect, represented by the fish, that ancient symbol of Christianity.”
From Palissy's experiential perspective, this art-historical language of iconography would probably represent a scholastic—that is, superficial or “dead letter”—reading. It diverts attention away from the natural-philosophical and artisanal traditions and languages with which he identified and communicated both in print and through his ceramics. Amico, then, reads only the “outer body” of the basin. More appropriate to Palissy’s scientific framework was the cosmological tradition, from Ptolemy to Paracelsus to Robert Fludd (fig. 2.3), representing the relationship of man’s arts to Nature. *Integrae naturae*—nature imaged whole—was the conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm conceptualized on paper in two dimensions. Cosmologies were common in the natural-philosophical books known to Palissy. From the perspective of the alchemists, Palissy basins were part of a tradition of concentric representations that would invariably include elemental earth and water—with the snake (*anguis*) a part of a standard code from the zodiac that signified elemental earth; snails (*limax*), elemental earth and water; and fish (*pisces*), elemental earth and water alone.76

That this snake was “invading an island and causing fish and other creatures to flee” cannot be supported by a Palissian reading of these ceramic cosmologies—which depict soulish coexistence and harmony between the spheres inhabited by naturally contentious creatures, and not violence or invasion—or even a cursory inventory of serpents’ behavior on the islands. Every surviving basin, to be sure, usually includes serpents openly inhabiting a central island (like the coastal islands of Saintonge), but here the snake (or snakes) coexists in a peaceable manner with their natural prey (amphibians, fish, mollusks, and other crustaceans, such as crayfish, as well as lizards and
insects). There is no evidence whatever of violence in basins made by Palissy; only in nineteenth-century “revival” pottery made by post-Darwinian followers of Palissy is such behavior displayed.

Following Palissy’s “De la ville de forteresse” is it not more plausible to say, with him, that the serpentine snake embodied the wavelike and spiral movements of the spirit of the inner body through the matter of elemental earth (the material of the basin

**Figure 2.3.** Johann Theodore de Bry, *Integrae naturae speculum artisque imago*, in Robert Fludd’s *Utriusque cosmi majoris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia in duo volumina secundum cosmi differentiam divisa... tomus primus De macrocosmi historia* (Oppenheim, 1617; 2d ed., Frankfurt, 1624). Courtesy Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
Like Palissy’s rustic basins, where translucent glazes can redeem and rise above basic earth materials, this publisher’s device uses the combination of a toad and serpent within a matrix of alchemical symbols to signify the conjunction of macrocosm and microcosm, leading to the goal of unification, metamorphosis, and distillation of formerly dark and corrupted earth materials, shed like transparent tears from a purified and light “Aquila volans,” or flying eagle.
itself)? The basins, like cosmologies that depicted the great synthesis of the macrocosm and microcosm, put diverse outer bodies (“scattered with shells and many animals of all sorts”) unified by the one, “fired” inner body (the snake) on display all at once. These clay serpents did not disperse the inhabitants of Palissy’s cosmology, “causing” the “other creatures to flee.” On the contrary, they appear to signify the underlying knot binding a material-holiness synthesis together, at the center of Palissy’s artisanal “forteresse.” Consider, for example, the role of the snake in the early modern iconography of alchemic distillation (fig. 2.4). This potter’s serpent seems closer to God reanimating postlapsarian Nature than the devil. Calvin asked Palissy, a reader of Philibert Hamelin’s edition of the Institutes and “a maker” in his own right, to consider:

how far men are fallen from that purity which was bestowed upon Adam. And first let it be understood that, by his being made of earth and clay, a restraint was laid upon pride; since nothing is more absurd than for creatures to glory in their excellence who not only inhabit a cottage of clay but who are themselves composed partly of dust and ashes. But as God not only deigned to animate the earthen vessel but chose to make it the residence of an immortal spirit, Adam might justly glory in so great an instance of the liberality of his Maker.77

This representation of the synthesis of the pure spirit with fallen matter most closely approximates the Protestant sacrament of baptism, a visible sign of inward grace. And, indeed, a sparkling stream of translucent water always runs through or around earth on which the serpent is coiled. The elements of water and earth are explicit in the basins, while both fire and air remained implicit in the process of firing the pottery in the kiln, and in the rustic, outdoors environment, with its flying insects and, above all, that ubiquitous serpent spiraling between macrocosm and microcosm. It is also suggestive that many sixteenth-century Protestant baptismal fonts were markedly oval in shape, much like Palissy’s basins.78 Luther had expressly linked this sacrament with death and rebirth through the baptism of Christ, giving it even greater meaning for Huguenots during the genocidal civil wars. In his tract of 1520, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, Luther made this relationship his central point: “Baptism, then, signifies two things—death and resurrection, that is, full and complete justification. When the minister immerses the child in water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth again it signifies life.” This signification, as such, connoted reconstruction of the prelapsarian unity of Adamic clay and immortal spirit in elemental fire and water. For Luther, moreover, baptism was not merely a single brief experience in the Christian’s life. Rather, it was a permanent condition, signifying each new man’s and woman’s covenant with God. Death fulfilled the ultimate promise by God, made in baptism, when a Christian’s sin was put to death permanently.79

This condition of permanence also permeated the green fecundity of Nature in
Palissy’s rustic basins. In most, the stream flows in an endless circle of time, while the snakes’ serpentine line shifts or conflates synchronic and diachronic time. In some, the alchemist’s salamander turns back toward its tail, appearing in the central space. This was a symbol of the crucible with its fire that does not destroy purity in matter but facilitates alchemic rebirth. The confluence of water and fire in these artifactual contexts suggests the symbiosis between death and life that Palissy conceptualized in the natural history of Saintonge and in the artisanal syncretism of alchemy and baptism.80 Perhaps Amico’s reading is an unintended example of Palissy’s manipulation of the surface to hide his multiplicity of messages? Did Palissy suggest the ambiguity of corruption and purity in the movement of the spirit? Were the snakes a variation of the snail, emerged outside its shell? Could they therefore embody the hidden potential of the power of weakness to animate both the destructive and the creative force of nature’s tiny, industrious creatures. If perceptions of weakness masked strength, and divisiveness and evil obscured the presence of unity and pure goodness, then may we argue that the basins were made to possess a rhetoric that simultaneously concealed and revealed protective strategies based on the spiritual potential contained in the elemental materials that Palissy brought back to life through the fire of his pious artisanry?

“An ignorance of things makes figurative expressions obscure when we are ignorant of the natures of animals, or stones, or plants, or other things which are often used in the Scriptures for purposes of constructing similitudes,” Augustine said in On Christian Doctrine, perhaps the most influential early text on natural wisdom and spiritual security. “The well known fact that a serpent exposes its whole body in order to protect its head from those attacking it illustrates the sense of the Lord’s admonition that we be wise like serpents.” After adumbrating the exposed Palissian serpent and the Huguenot concept of hiding in plain sight, Augustine concluded that “the same thing is true of stones, or of herbs or of other things that take root. For a knowledge of the carbuncle which shines in the darkness also illuminates many obscure places in books where it is used for similitudes, and an ignorance of beryl as of diamonds frequently closes the doors of understanding.”81

An Invisible portrait

One particular “walk,” in the course of which he came into possession of the specific species of snail whose shell inspired his invisible portrait of the newly invented fortress town, is pivotal in Palissy’s “De la ville de forteresse.”

Like the shape of the snail and the snake, this walk through coastal Saintonge seemed to follow the same serpentine pattern used in the basins. The narrative movement was similar in effect to the ceramic snakes that twisted and spiraled from one edge of the basin to the other. “I took a walk from here to there,” Palissy wrote, “from
one coast to the other, to see if I might yet learn something about buildings made by animals.” “This went on for many months,” he said, “and at the same time I always practiced my art of the earth [mon art de terre] in order to feed my family.” This passing reference to simultaneous practice of natural-philosophical research and artisanry must not be overlooked. Palissy begins to forge basic equivalences here, integrating experiments with the kiln that resulted in his “art de terre,” research undertaken with his “head lowered,” looking down at the earth floor, and the dual, domestic-military labors of the tiny industrious animals that he pursued so relentlessly. The “rustiques figurines” with surfaces encrusted—figuratively crawling on the basins—with precise models of these creatures (literally duplicates molded from life from the bodies of the animals and plants Palissy collected on these walks)—were used in his “art de terre,” natural-philosophical studies and writings on the natural history of artisanal security. This was the potter’s source material for his “impregnable” fortress town.

The serpentine pattern was primarily vertical (up and down), following steep wilderness terrain: into woods, over hills, and down valleys, where Palissy failed initially to find an appropriate natural artifact of mimetic desire. As in his first encounter with the limace, however, God’s animated (or soulish) motion provided further clues to fruitful direction after a chastening interval of apparently aimless wandering. Following the hermeneutic structure conventional in pilgrimage narratives, empirical clues, gathered through physical experience and “decreated” for their secrets by artisanal labor, were ultimately turned inward toward the pilgrim himself. Return to self (the inner body), knowledge, and wisdom were achieved using local geographical references as both a literal and metaphorical map; a framework by which to return to the point of embarkation (Saintes) and epiphany. What is most extraordinary about the stages of Palissy’s outer and inner journeys of self-transformation is that the walks were harnessed to experience of the movement of his spirit into the matter of the scorched earth of Saintonge. Hence, he documented the process by which “mon art de terre” was sacramentalized by violence.

Experience of spiral movement was the crux of this narrative. Despite numerous pilgrimage studies that followed on his pioneering work, the etymological relationship of limace to limen, and hence to liminality, makes Victor Turner’s comparative work on the sacred structures of pilgrimage particularly apposite here, as Palissy’s Saintongeais promenades were constructed in molluscan forms. That Palissy’s Saintonge was quintessentially liminal territory is crucial to the implications that the long, allusive passages describing his walks have for understanding his texts, written and non-verbal, and of the interplay between structures of societal power and community standards of competence expected from Saintongeais Huguenot artisans during the wars of religion. The folklorist Arnold van Gennep first introduced the term limen into the anthropologist’s lexicon in 1908. Turner then mapped the relation between liminality,
pilgrimage, and performance in a series of ethnologies (his term is “comparative symbologies”) in which concepts of liminality serve, in a historical framework, to analyze the progressive marginalization of subcultures and their responses (what Turner calls the innovative and creative “anti-structural” manifestation of *communitas*) under pressure from dominant social orders.84

Turner’s useful reformulation of Gennep’s tripartic processual structure (or “rites of passage”—“that is, separation, *limen* or margin, and reaggregation”—is very well known among historians and requires no lengthy discussion here.85 Rather, by way of reminder and for future reference, I shall quote Turner’s working definition of liminality modified for Christian cultures:

> The state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage. During the liminal period, the characteristics of *liminars* (the ritual subjects in this phase) are ambiguous, for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminals are betwixt and between. The liminal state has frequently been likened to death; to being in the womb; to invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, and the wilderness. Liminals are stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and leveled to a homogenous social state through discipline and ordeal. Their secular powerlessness may be compensated for by a sacred power, however—the power of the weak, derived on the one hand from the resurgence of nature when structural power is removed, and on the other from the reception of sacred knowledge. Much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated, notably the sense of comradeship and communion, or *communitas*; while much of what has been dispersed over the many domains of culture and social structure is now bound, or cathected, in the complex semantic systems of pivotal, multivocal symbols and myths, numinous systems which achieve great conjunctive power. In this no-place and no-time that resists classification, the major classifications and categories of culture emerge within the integuments of myth, symbol, and ritual.86

Consider for the moment, Palissy’s artisan-scientist’s status in “De la ville de forteresse” as Huguenot pilgrim *cum* liminar in Turner’s sense; and indeed henceforth, the potter consistently recreated this role in precisely those crucial moments strategically located throughout the *Recepte*, when innovative processes specifically related to new artisanal practices were at stake. But unlike with Turner’s liminar, it is clear there was a violent context that functioned as a foil for this pilgrim’s return, so his situation defies rigid classification as “no-place and no-time.” Rather, the empirical *specificity* of Palissy’s geographic references to the rocky coast that alternates with the three vast *marais* comprising southwestern Saintonge is striking.

The context of “De la ville de forteresse,” written in 1562–63—“some time after that I had considered the horrible dangers of war, from which God had miraculously de-
livered me”—becomes absolutely crucial to explicating both the force of the text and the magnitude of Palissy’s contribution, not only to the historiography of the Reformation in provincial France, but to the historiography of Atlantic history and culture. It is possible to argue that this historical moment above all others—even including the massacre on St. Bartholomew’s Day in 1572 (which increased the flow of Huguenot refugees to the southwest, making it an even larger center of Huguenot culture in regional France)—was the one in which significant elements of the local Saintongeais Huguenot community initiated a pervasive discourse of margination for the first time. This was the moment of historical consciousness when Huguenots, especially artisans such as Palissy, began to represent themselves and their community to one another and the outside world artfully, as a socially alienated culture—simply put, a “sub” (or “out”) culture—still in continuous, albeit necessarily oblique, dialogue with the centralizing power, then beginning the arduous process of systematically consolidating the institutional basis of absolutism. The long history of these complex representations and dialogues, and the extension of the southwestern Huguenot regional subculture to the markets and plantations of colonial America, exemplified by the craft and mercantile network of New York leather chair makers, must therefore begin with this historical moment and with Palissy as its most articulate artisan. Understanding Palissy and his followers, together with his sociocultural milieu, provides insights into the foundation of such New World discourse among coastal Saintongeais Huguenots as early as the late 1550s.

Palissy’s pilgrimage in search of the prototype for his New World fortress town was undertaken in response to the turmoil of local confessional violence and the emotions of war—this narrative was about security—but it was also intended to present the authority of scientific evidence to document Palissy’s personal experience with animate nature:

After many days of spiritual turmoil [debat d’esprit], I decided to travel to the coast and the rocks of the Ocean sea [the Atlantic coast], where I saw such a variety of houses and fortresses made by certain little fish from their own juice and saliva, I then began to think that I could find something there that would suit my project. At that time, I had started to contemplate the industriousness of all these species of fish, to learn something from them, from the biggest to the smallest: I discovered things that made me feel small [tout confus also connotes “confused” and “ashamed” in this context] when I considered the marvelousness of Divine providence, which took such care with these creatures, to the point that God has endowed the smallest with the greatest industry, but not so the others: I had thought I would find some great industry and excellent knowledge among the large fish, [but] I found nothing industrious about them, which made me consider that they were sufficiently armored, feared, and dreaded, because of their grandeur, that they had no
need of other weapons: but as for the weak, I found that God had given them the industry and know-how to make fortresses marvelously excellent to counteract the intrigues of their enemies [emphasis added].

Fundamental to Palissy’s pilgrimage experience with Nature was his spiritual and material epiphany when “I discovered things that made me feel small in the presence of God’s artistry.” This was the crucial act of self-transformation—of identity with survivors in nature that most clearly approximated his own experience as a Huguenot artisan in Saintonge during the civil wars—that marked Palissy’s inculcation of the power of weakness, the spiritual foundation of industriousness and hence artisanal security. The world had been turned upside down, with power now residing on the earth’s floor, at the lowest levels of natural history. Palissy’s smallness—his embarrassment and inversion of perception—allowed him to see for the first time that although the largest fish were so obviously well armed, their very “grandeur” had obviated the necessity for creativity and innovation. Big fish had “nothing industrious about them.” Grandeur made for uninspired artisanry. God directed the natural philosopher not to look for useful secrets of fortress construction among the well-protected. “As for the weak,” Palissy “found that God had given them the industry and know-how to make fortresses marvelously excellent to counteract the intrigues of their enemies.” While walking away from violence in molluscan spirals—“where I saw such a variety of houses and fortresses made from [their] own juice and saliva”—to find a prototype upon which to model a new paradigm of security, Palissy transformed himself into a snail.

After some time “walking on the rocks” like the snail he had become in his imagination, “where I saw marvels,” Palissy was given “occasion to cry, after the Prophet: ‘Not for us, Lord . . . but to your Name is given the honor and the glory.’” The pious artisan paid preliminary homage to the artisan God of Genesis and source of the creative power hidden in his soul. Palissy, overwhelmed by the difficulty of his project of godlike emulation, “began to think to myself that I would never be able to find anything to counsel me best on how to design my fortress town. Then, I took to examining all the fish that were most industrious in architecture, with a goal of taking some counsel from their industry.”

Ironically, given the source, a natural paradigm for the new stationary fortress—advertised as an improvement over all previous immobile designs because of its flexibility—was never found among the rustique rochers of Saintonge, but was a foreign specimen that was presented to Palissy from inside “The Rock,” as a gift from a collector with a suspiciously hermetic name, “a bourgeois from La Rochelle, named l’Hermite”:

who presented me with two good-sized snail shells, seeing one was the shell of a pourpre [Purpurellus muricidae?], and the other was from a buxine, these [shells] had been brought in from Guinea [in coastal West Africa], and were both made in the shape of the
limace with a spiral line; but that of the buxine was stronger and bigger than the other. However, considering the statement that I made above, that God had given the most industry to the weakest things and not the strongest, I resolved to contemplate the shell of the pourpre more closely than that of the buxine, because I am secure in the knowledge that God has given it some kind of advantage to compensate for its weakness. And so, having pondered these thoughts for a long while, I observed that on the shell of the pourpre there were a number of sufficiently large points ["spires or beads"], which were all around the said shell; I was certain from that moment on that it was not without cause the said horns were formed, and that these were so many sundry little troughs, vessels, and safeguards for the fortress and [places of] refuge for the said pourpre [when it withdrew into its shell].

Palissy demonstrated the ways in which “God had given the most industry to the weakest thing”—the smaller limace—by presenting a lengthy analysis of the pourpre’s enormously complex and varied internal defense system as a model for his fortress. Camouflage seemed infinitely available for industrious Huguenot defenders and their armaments inside the vast labyrinthine spiral of the town, as it turned in upon itself. Defenders counterattacked from places of surveillance hidden in shadow. No one was visible for long enough to absorb the brunt of a full frontal assault. The entire fortress was alive—the inner and outer walls in particular—with furtive eyes and fluid bodies in motion. “You see,” Palissy claimed, “that I could find nothing better upon which to frame my fortress town than to use the fortress of the pourpre as my precedent to follow”:

forthwith, I took up a compass, ruler, and the other tools necessary to make my pourtrait. Firstly, I made a drawing of a large central square; towering around and encompassing this place, I drew a great number of houses, in which I put windows, doors and shops, having every view toward the exterior part of the plan and the streets of the town. And inside one of the corners of this place, I designed a great portal, on which I noted the plan of the house or domicile of the principal governor of this town, so that nothing could enter the said place without his leave. And to put around the base of the tower, I designed certain lean-tos, or lower galleries, to hide the artillery under cover, so that the walls in front of the lower gallery will serve both for defense and as a platform for the battery, they will have several master gunners all around all with their sights set on the center of the square, so that even if enemies enter by undermining the said place, they can all be exterminated at once [by cannon fire].

Accordingly, if enemies managed to penetrate the hidden, innermost square of the fortress by force—not welcomed through the door by the “governor” (or soul?) of the fortress’s “heart”—annihilation came instantaneously. Thus, what appeared to be the weakest space in the inner body—the hub where invaders expected to claim victory—was the heart of reversal and secret power. Here the malefactors were destroyed
through the pious industry of artisans and the vast, decentralized security system they had created to project invisible power from the depth of shadow.

Continuing to work inside out from the core, as did the pious artisan and the limace, Palissy used the compass almost exclusively in order to complete drawings of his fortress, following the spiral constructed by his natural “precedent”: “That done, I started at the end of the street, coming out from the said portal, to create a circular plan for the houses that I marked for the outside edges of the [central edifice], wanting to frame my town on the spiral form and line, following the form and industry of the pourpre.”

Palissy continued to extend the drawing for his “town and fortress” outward from center in this concentric pattern, plotting a series of spiral streets, most with squares occupied by towers with both domestic space and artillery, having much the same double security function as the central edifice. These “Vitruvian” circled squares were necessary as stages for defenders to counterattack at specific points along the spiral, because Palissy “perceived that the task of the cannon is to fire in straight lines and that, if my town was framed totally on spiral lines, the cannon could not fire on the streets.” “That is why,” Palissy “thought it prudent,” to adapt humanist classical learning to his natural plan, and to “follow the industry of the said pourpre only when it would behoove me.” The pragmatic pattern of beginning with a natural precedent, subject to adaptation from humanism, or commonsense experience in everyday life, was a hallmark of Palissy’s written and material work.

Having “found my invention” of a new fortress that synthesized human learning with the natural arts “exceedingly good and useful,” the potter announced a final step that would fully “concatenate the fortress’s members with its body.” After drawing numerous streets in the “spiral line” emanating out, yet still connected with its hub hidden inside the central tower, Palissy now planned the outermost street of the fortress; the one conventionally located just inside, but always separated from, the freestanding outer walls:

I found that the said town was big enough and proceeded to set down the houses all around the said street, joining the houses’ walls to the town walls, which walls I joined together with the walls of the houses of the street next to them, [and so on, inward, back to the central portal]. Then, having thus completed my design, it seemed to me that my town had made a mockery of all the rest, because all the walls of the other [fortress] towns are useless in times of peace, and those that I made served all the time for habitation for the same people who practice many trades [arts] to protect and defend the said town [emphasis added].

Palissy revealed the essential element of artisanal security. Artisans live virtually inside the walls of the fortress itself. Inhabiting the seamless, concatenated flesh of the town’s inner and outer protective bodies, workmen labor covertly and with devious
efficiency, to compensate for their lack of size and ostensible weakness. As their artful
construction of platforms and housing and their stealthy manipulation of the deadly
artillery hidden in the central tower’s shadowy galleries indicates, artisans “practice
many trades to protect and defend the said town.” Above all, alchemists’ workshops,
and even alchemic crucibles themselves, were represented as turreted fortress towers
(fig. 2.5). In short, these Huguenot artisans have been transformed into the very em-
bodyment of the fortress wall and have assumed its protective function. Unlike the old
medieval wall, however, this “natural” wall was alive and vigilant (a synonym for in-
dustrious) with the eyes, ears, hands, and souls of its craftsmen. What gave this par-
ticular aspect of Palissy’s portrait power and resonance was the knowledge that fol-
lowing representations like the one in figure 2.5, his own pottery workshop and kiln,
as well as his alchemical laboratory, were hidden inside a tower of a rampart of Saintes’s
surrounding walls (fig. 2.6), during the first civil war of religion.96

The plan of Saintes in 1560 reproduced in figure 2.6 shows where Palissy installed
his workshop (in the large tower situated between D and E). Following convention,
almost all domestic housing in Saintes was separated from the defensive walls (and
hence plainly visible and vulnerable if the outer defenses were breached). And, from
Palissy’s vivid description of “reports” of the slaughter of Huguenots in those houses
(which he mostly heard from friends in the street or sometimes spied himself from
furtive “eyes” in the tower, where he hid until the terror had passed), the decision to
build a clandestine living area and workshop-laboratory into the fortress walls saved
his life, while simultaneously being a formative natural-philosophical experience. In
1576, eleven years after Palissy left Saintes (and one year after hostilities started up
again, to begin the fifth civil war of religion), a certain Bastien de Launay, an artisan
whose occupation is not mentioned, petitioned “our Lords the mayor and aldermen of
the town of Saintes,” to “give and rent the said de Launay the room and tower next to
the house of master Bernard Pallicis, for the price and sum of five sous rent that the
said supplicant had always paid.” Before being displaced by the prefect of Saintes to
serve Palissy’s powerful patron, de Launay’s own workshop had occupied the tower.
Palissy was long gone now, and de Launay had reason to want his old atelier back:

for some time he [de Launay] had ceased paying the rent because the said master Bernard
occupied the said room and tower to lay out his work . . . that was due to monsieur the
Constable [Montmorency], and nevertheless, before occupation by M[aster] Bernard . . .
my lord the Prefect, as a provisional measure and until the said work was taken away from
the said town [of Saintes] and place occupied, had leased to the supplicant another tower,
vulgarily called the executioner’s tower, to practice and labor in his art . . . [but] during the
troubles, it fell into ruin . . . please allow the said supplicant to pay the old rent and
reestablish himself in the tower and room.97
Figure 2.5. Alchemical furnace in the form of a fortified tower, from Philippus Ulstadius, *Coelum philosophorum* (Strasbourg, 1526). This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. RB 483479. An early representation of the fortress as a secure container that internalized, mastered, and diverted powerful forces for man’s use in making things, inverting the traditional definition of the fortress as a place of security capable of repelling force and maintaining distance and exclusivity.
Nothing more can be said of Bastien de Launay. His religious affiliation and the state of his prior relationship with Palissy is unknown. Bastien’s use of the honorific “Master,” in deference to the man who displaced him, and the fact that this “suppliant” did not reveal Palissy’s hiding place to avid pursuers when Saintes was sacked during the first civil war, suggests a deeper connection to Montmorency and Palissy than the limitations of this document reveal. But it seems perfectly clear that other artisans practiced their trade inside the walls and towers of Saintes before Palissy established himself in the town. The potter had appropriated and reimagined the material and metaphysical possibilities of a local custom to accommodate the larger natural-philosophical intent of artisanal sûreté.
“Having made my portrait,” Palissy expressed satisfaction to have “found that the walls of all the houses also served as so many fortified spurs, and, from whichever side cannon were fired against the said town, it would find the walls extended.” And if Palissy’s plan had successfully domesticated the fortress wall by joining it with the houses of the town, then the spiral form of the limace was the natural answer to the unified defense of the fortress town and its interior even if the individual, yet concatenated, walls were somehow bypassed by invading enemies:

Therefore, in the town, there will be but one street and one entry, which will always be winding about [in a spiral] and going in from the outer corners to inner corners; this will lead in a curved line until it ends at the square in the center of the town. And in each corner and angle facing the street, there will be a double, turning door, and above each of these, a high battery, or platform, placed in such a way, that from the two angles of each corner, the cannons could fire constantly from one angle to the other, and by means of these turning doors, the cannoners can also be hidden so that they will not be offensive.98

As with the snail, whose “house” was also its fortress, every domestic function in Palissy’s impregnable fortress town was a “double door” (or mirror) that literally “turned” into a hidden weapon. Palissy’s spiral town of corners and angles was an inverted Trojan Horse, which led enemies to their deaths. If the Trojan Horse dissimulated a benignly natural object, constructed to capture a closed fortress by stealth from the outside in, then Palissy’s construction was a Trojan Horse in reverse—in effect, it was turned inside out by artisanal industriousness—and was transformed into an instrument of the fortress’s protection.

Palissy’s “portrait, plan, and model of the most impregnable town known to man,” a human invention, was built in emulation of Nature, with “knowledge of the art of geometry and architecture,” to withstand the assaults of enemies better than any, “excepting those places which God had fortified naturally.”99 He guaranteed that “were a town built according to the specifications of my model and portrait,” it would be impervious to attack, whether “by a multitude of men [and] bombardment; by fire; by a tunnel [that “emerges in the middle of town”]; by scaling; by famine; [or], by undermining [the walls].” And after listing the most common methods of attack from without, Palissy evoked an “interior” danger, surrender “by treason.”100

How could any formal plan guarantee against treason, a threat from the inner man? In an illuminating coda titled the “Explanation of Certain Articles,” Palissy acknowledged that “some may find the article of treason strange.” The explanation again lay in decentralization of parts and the interconnection of inner and outer bodies. Palissy’s spiritual and anatomical principle of “concatenation” of macrocosm and microcosm was key when combined with the power of small things to resist:
When the ten or twelve parts of the town, and even their governors, conspire with the enemy to surrender the town, it is not in their power to deliver, provided that there is one small part of the town that resists them [emphasis added], because the order of the buildings will be so well concatenated that it will be necessary for all the inhabitants to consent to the treason before the town can be surrendered, and such a general conspiracy could never happen . . . [without] warning.101

Like the tiny limace, small, overlooked elements in the Palissian cosmology were always the essential source of power and virtuous resistance to corruption of the whole. “Even their local governors” were powerless against them.

The secure body was only as powerful as its weakest and most subtle, nearly imperceptible part. Enemies who contrived to spy over the outer walls would only be able to “see up to the pavement of the streets next to the walls” and nothing more. Their view was blocked by design, and they would be unable to aim effectively so as to be able “hurl down their bullets” and other missiles. Only “the street next to the walls” would be affected by such an attack, and its “inhabitants would receive no injuries.” If anything, they might suffer from “fear and poisoning by bad fumes.” So, too, enemies on ground level, down in the streets, would only be able to see until their sightlines were blocked at the next bend in this town of spirals. Defense was carefully choreographed in a theater of revelation and concealment.102

Palissy envisioned artisanal security, both literally and metaphorically, without straight lines. His fortress town would “be built with such subtlety and invention that even children, younger than six years old, could be helpful in its defense . . . ; indeed, without anyone having to shift from his room and domestic dwelling, and without putting anyone in danger of their lives.”103 Here was Palissy’s most astonishing claim: that the artisanal defense of his Huguenot fortress involved so “subtle and inventive” a system of security that even children, its most innocent and seemingly defenseless members, could play a part in it. A system of household security that obviated the need for a fortress on the model of La Rochelle was necessary, because in this new, apocalyptic world without walls, security had either to be internalized as skill and industriousness or carried by fleeing refugees “on their backs” the way an artisan carried his tools, or the limace its portable, inside-out shell.

Palissy ended “De la ville de forteresse”—and indeed the Recepte veritable—with an abrupt dialogue of one question and response, returning to complete his thoughts on the subject of the invisible pourtrait. Having just finished reading the allusive yet finally unsatisfying essay without seeing the promised plan realized in concrete form, an impatient and exasperated “Demande” complained:

You make a promise above in which you have the temerity to say that with the drawing and plan you will produce, one will easily learn that what you have called the fortress town
contains truth. Why, then, have you not put in this book the actual drawing and plan for
the said town? Only by seeing the plan would it be possible to judge whether what you say
contains truth.104

But the “truth” “contained” in the town body of this “forteresse,” was unavailable from
an exterior plan, but hidden deeply inside the soul-animated rooms of a Huguenot ar-
tisan’s serpentine interior. Demande demonstrated that he had learned nothing from
the text. “Seeing the plan” would never reveal truth. Seeing was not necessarily be-
lieving. Visible truth appeared only to uncorrupted eyes that looked beneath the ma-
terial surface of things to see God’s plan in the invisible portrait. If truth were made
plain for even corrupt enemies to see, then where—in which private “room and
dwelling”—would Huguenot artisans find the space to “invent” their “subtle” fortresses?
The very subtlety invested in Palissy’s artisanry lay in the mutability of perception and
the potter’s “recipe” for the naturalistic camouflage of inner reality. So Palissy proposed
an inversion of the plan.

In Response, Palissy replied, condescendingly: “You have completely misunderstood
my statement; for I did not tell you that by the plan and drawing you would be able to judge
the whole.” To judge the whole was the philosopher’s task. Then, rather abruptly, he
dverted the reader’s attention from the metaphysical meaning of “the whole” to the
material requirements of the marketplace, where artisans sought to extend their search
for security. Palissy was in quest of patronage. After all, the metaphysical foundations
of his natural philosophy did not stipulate that he had to give his secrets away. Palissy
would be pleased to negotiate the value of his labor face-to-face with wealthy patrons:

With the plan and drawing I have added that it would be required to make a model. Con-
sidering that there would be no reason to make one at my own expense, it was suffi-
tient to tell you that the thing merited payment, because it is only proper that those who want
the said model should pay for the labor. Now, if there is anybody who wants to have a
model of my invention, you may give him my address, which is what I hope you’ll do, and
I trust he’ll be satisfied.105

And yet, with the last line of “De la ville de forteresse,” Palissy subverted the sin-
gular status of his stationary fortress for the Huguenots of Aunis-Saintonge, even as
he boldly advertised the availability of his new plan to any noble patron who purchased
the Recepte from Chez Berton, La Rochelle. “And if you live hereabouts,” he wrote in
defiance of La Rochelle’s very reason for being, “I will pray the Lord God to take you
into his protection.”106 No one fortress town of stone and mortar could provide secu-
rity for Huguenots in the southwest of France. God chose not to give industry to all
the faithful. A “poor unlettered artisan” inferred that while La Rochelle (the buxine of
fortresses) was “sufficiently armored, feared, and dreaded because of [its] grandeur,”
God had not “given [the Rochelais?] industry and know-how to make fortresses . . .
to counteract the intrigues of their enemies.” The Huguenot potter from Saintes had
imagined the unthinkable and “proved” it with science. Palissy predicted the fall of
“feared” La Rochelle, and so the relocation of cultural and economic power from the
wreckage of a monolithic, enclosed center to the hinterlands—a diversified, frag-
mented, and open yet “concatenated” haven for “the weak” but “industrious.” He found
truth and power intertwined in a serpentine spiral, having “discovered things that made
me feel small.”