

## 1 The transformation of the Roman towns

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A history of the origin of the medieval cities between the Meuse, the Somme and the North Sea must begin in Roman times, even though there is no immediately apparent direct link between the emergence of urban centres in the eighth–ninth centuries and possible Roman antecedents.

The Romans did indeed introduce the city as a geographical phenomenon in the area under consideration here.<sup>1</sup> The real question we must ask, however, is whether the location of the Roman urban agglomerations determined the location of important medieval cities, and first and foremost of the oldest group of cities in the area in question, namely those which emerged in the eighth–ninth centuries. This does not necessarily mean, in our opinion, that the existence of an urban agglomeration in Roman times had any influence on or significance for the topography of most of these cities. This is only the case – and then still to a limited extent – further south than the area under consideration here, to the south of the Somme and Seine and even to the south of the Loire. In the regions between the Meuse, the Somme and the North Sea, probably only the location of the Roman city or agglomeration – and then usually not even in a micro-topographical, but in a general-geographical sense – affected the location of the oldest group of medieval cities.

On the other hand, medieval cities did not always emerge as early as in the eighth–ninth centuries on or near the place where a Roman city or agglomeration had existed. Sometimes this happened much later, in the eleventh–twelfth centuries, as for example in Tongeren, Kortrijk and Aardenburg; sometimes it did not happen at all, as in Oudenburg and Bavay. Moreover four phases are distinguishable in urban development in our area during the four to five centuries of Roman domination, and of these only the last, that of the Late Empire (260/84 to mid-fifth century), is of importance in the limited sense that we have indicated. A few cities, like Cassel and Bavay, which had been administrative capitals of the

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Wightman, *Gallia Belgica*, London, 1985, pp. 75–100.

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*civitas Menapiorum* and the *civitas Nerviorum* respectively, lost this status at the beginning of the Late Empire, and with it their importance, to the advantage of earlier *vici* such as Tournai (*civitas Turnacensium*) and Cambrai (*civitas Cameracensium*).<sup>2</sup> Located on a waterway, the Scheldt, and no longer on a land route, in the ninth–tenth centuries these earlier *vici* – unlike Cassel and Bavay – would become centres not only of ecclesiastical administration but also of trade and industry. Above all, however, walls were built around large and small urban agglomerations at the end of the third century, enclosing a much smaller expanse than the earlier urban area (Amiens: 25 ha; Tournai: 13 ha; Bavay and Maastricht: 2 ha).<sup>3</sup> The walled centre was made into a sort of fortified citadel, which in some cities, such as Cambrai, would play the role of pre-urban nucleus in the emergence of the medieval city.

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**Tongeren** (Tongres), with a second, smaller wall – but 2,650 m in length nevertheless – dating from the late third century, and still one of the largest cities in the northern provinces of the Roman Empire at that time, is an exception to this, even if here too the surface area was reduced from 72 to 43 ha.<sup>4</sup> But it was Tongeren that was to founder as a city in the fifth–sixth centuries. It did not play an urban role again until the twelfth century, long after the episcopal see, which had been based there since the middle of the fourth century, was eventually transferred at the beginning of the sixth century to Maastricht where the first bishop of Tongeren, Servaas (d. 384), was buried.<sup>5</sup> Also interesting in this respect is the shift of a centre served exclusively by land routes, like Tongeren, to a place on a river, like Maastricht on the Meuse, though in this case at a later time and in a context different from the shift from Cassel to Tournai and from Bavay to Cambrai.

In **Maastricht**, as in many other places, the nature of the settlement in the fourth century is completely different from that before its destruction during one of the great invasions by Germanic tribes in the seventies of the third century.<sup>6</sup> A fortification was built on the ruins of the earlier *vicus* in the fourth century, around 333, a small fort measuring 170 by 90 m, the longest side being the one running along the (western) left bank of the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204–5.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222–7.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mertens, 'La destinée des centres urbains gallo-romains à la lumière de l'archéologie et des textes', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles des villes médiévales dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux*, Brussels, 1990 (Crédit Communal, Collection Histoire in-8°, no. 83), pp. 68–9.

<sup>5</sup> T. Panhuysen and P. H. Leupen, 'Maastricht in het eerste millennium', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 429–30, 432–3.    <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 411–49.

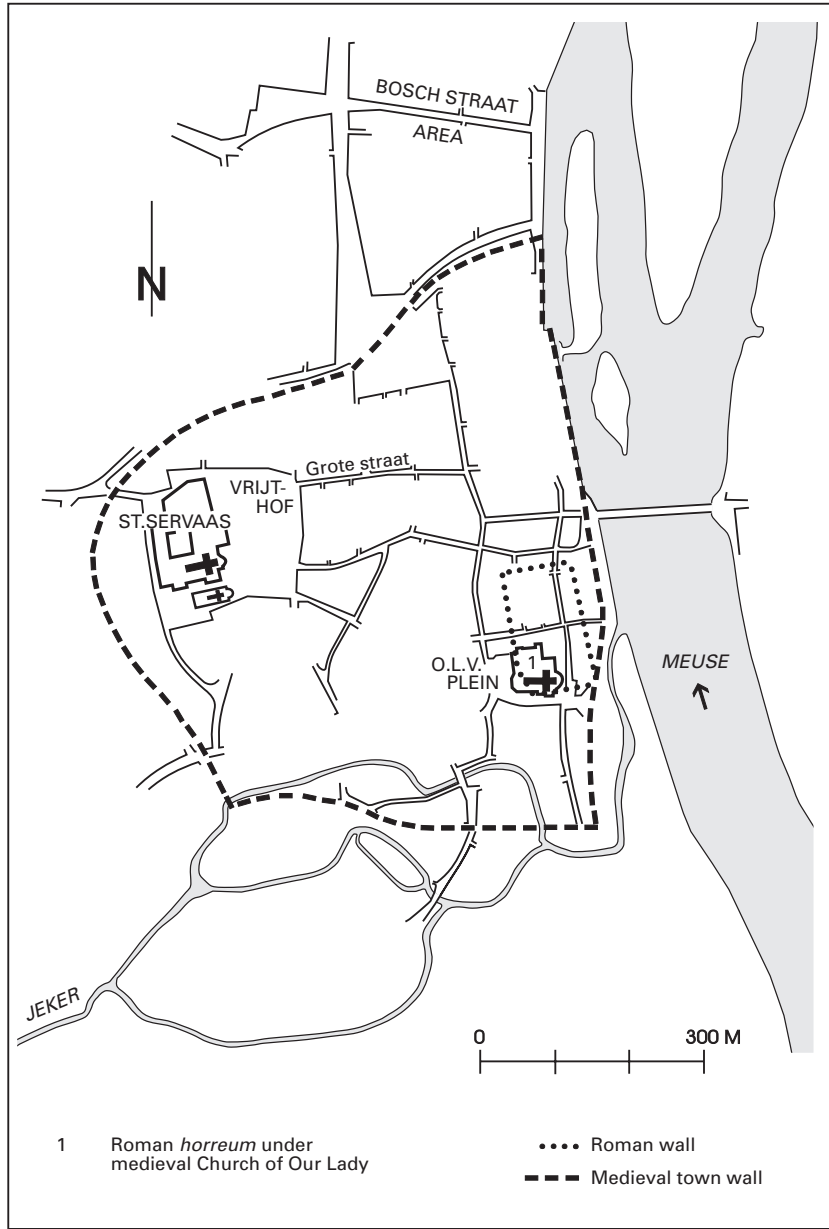
Meuse (Map 2). Like many similarly small fortified settlements, it is usually called *castellum* or *castrum*, though this word does not appear to have been used with reference to Maastricht in the Roman period.

The walls were probably provided with ten round turrets and two massive rectangular gatehouses. A wide moat was dug around the walls. The old bridge over the Meuse must have been repaired at about the time the fortification was built. The road from Cologne to Tongeren ran over the bridge and straight through the *castellum* in an east–west direction. Within the fortification there was a 30 × 15 m grain store or *horreum*, which was wrongly thought to have been the oldest bishop’s church and the forerunner of the nearby Church of Our Lady. Another storehouse or barracks, built on the ruins of a former temple, stood against the inside of the bulwark near the west gate. So far insufficient archaeological proof has been found to ascribe a purely military function or population to the *castellum* of Maastricht, even though it is obvious that the fortification was built for military and strategic purposes. The development of a large cemetery on the road to Tongeren, 400 to 500 m to the west of the fortification near the later Vrijthof, gave the settlement an added dimension. This could be an indication of population growth during the fourth century. The first bishop of Tongeren, St Servaas (d. 384) was buried here. Later, shortly after 550, a cemeterial church was built over his grave. This church and the grave were both archaeologically identified under the crossing of the actual Church of St Servaas.<sup>7</sup> Under the successors of St Servaas, in the fifth or at the latest at the beginning of the sixth century, Maastricht became the centre of the bishopric, ousting Tongeren from that position. It is far from certain whether the bishop of Maastricht took up residence in the *castellum*, for no layers of waste dating from the sixth and seventh centuries have been found in the southern part. Traces of habitation from the fourth and fifth centuries have been found outside the walls of the *castellum*. They indicate the presence of a predominantly Roman population. Many typical fifth-century shards have been found, often with Christian motifs, while graves from the fifth century, unaccompanied by gifts and so undoubtedly Christian, have been found in the western cemetery near and under the Church of St Servaas. These signs of growth in Maastricht between the middle of the fourth and the end of the fifth centuries cannot be dissociated from the decline of Tongeren, perhaps as early as the fifth century. Indeed, finds from that century and later are extremely rare in Tongeren.

So, unlike Tongeren, in Maastricht there is clearly continuity through

<sup>7</sup> T. Panhuysen, ‘Wat weten we over de continuïteit van Maastricht?’, in C. G. De Dijn (ed.), *Sint-Servaas, Bisschop van Tongeren-Maastricht: het vroegste christendom in het Maasland*. Borgloon and Rijkel, 1986, pp. 125–46.

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Map 2 Maastricht

the fifth century to the sixth, and not only topographical continuity with regard to location and structure but also continuity of habitation. The latter, unlike topographical continuity, is fairly rare in the area between the Meuse and the North Sea, at least as regards the furnishing of proof.

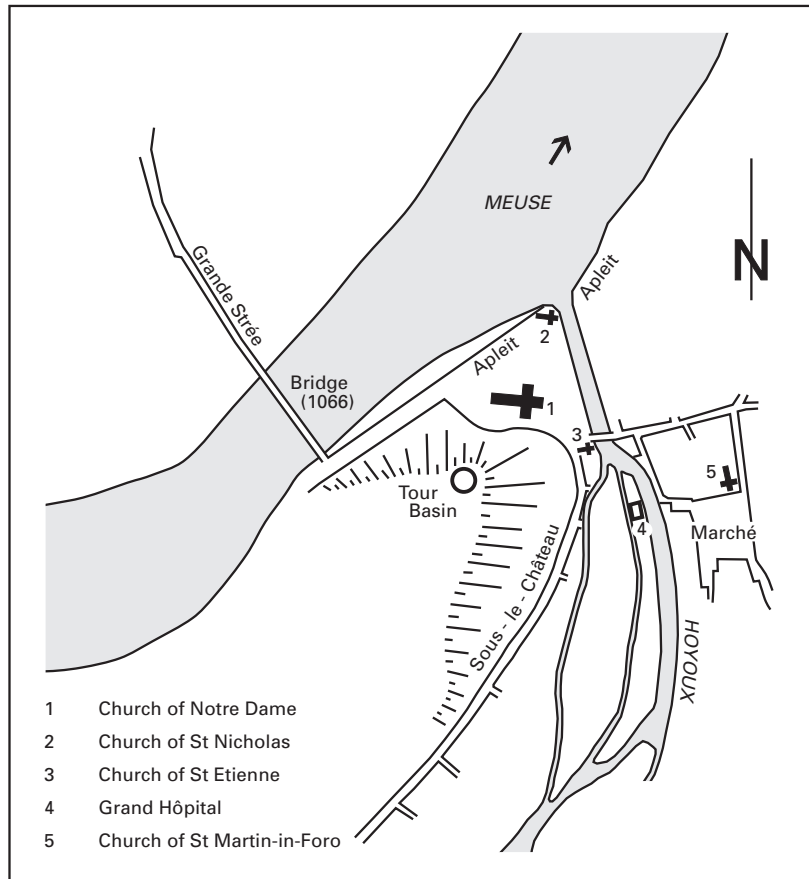
Upriver from Maastricht, in **Huy**,<sup>8</sup> there are traces not only of continuity of habitation but even of functional continuity. This however does *not* apply to the place where we would expect to find the oldest centre, that is to say the medieval Huy, between the right bank of the Meuse and the left bank of the Hoyoux, in the corner formed by the confluence of the two rivers, where the Church of Notre Dame has stood since the second quarter of the seventh century and possibly longer (Map 3). Owing to a lack of archaeological data, the siting of the oldest centre is based on evidence of a topographical nature like the debouchment of the Hoyoux into the Meuse, the jutting promontory between the two rivers close to this debouchment, the easily defensible site on that spot and the location of the oldest bridge over the Meuse. Furthermore, arguments of an ecclesiastical nature favour the siting of the oldest medieval centre of Huy and a certain continuity with the fifth century, namely the location of the Church of Notre Dame at the foot of the promontory, close to the confluence of the Meuse and the Hoyoux, and the fact that it had been the religious centre of the whole district, at least since the second quarter of the seventh century and perhaps since the fifth century. The traces of a Christian presence in Huy in the fifth century (see below) and the cult there of St Domitian, bishop of Tongeren-Maastricht between 535 and 549, who was buried in the Church of Notre Dame and whose relics were dated at between 535 and 640 using the radiocarbon method, serve to substantiate this early dating.

The parish of Notre Dame originally extended over both banks of the River Meuse. This fact is important because on the left bank of the Meuse, in the Batta area, close to the bridge over the river, archaeological evidence is said to have been found of a more than purely topographical continuity between the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> Five pottery kilns dating from the fourth–fifth centuries were excavated there, together with shards of late *terra sigillata* (fourth–fifth centuries) with Christian motifs. Furthermore, the discovery of pottery kilns, two of which date from *c.* 700, and of bone and metal workshops, with vestiges from the second half of the sixth century or from around 600, in the Batta and Outre-Meuse areas and on the right bank of the Hoyoux (rue des Augustins and rue St Séverin), led to the conclusion that there was continuity in the production of ceramics in Huy from the fifth to the

<sup>8</sup> A. Dierkens, 'La ville de Huy avant l'an mil', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 391–409.

<sup>9</sup> Bibliography of the numerous archaeological reports by J. Willems, *ibid.*, p. 393, note 9.

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Map 3 Huy

eighth centuries and so a functional continuity. This is extremely rare. Traces of habitation on the left bank of the Meuse and the right bank of the Hoyoux since the beginning of the fifth century and the continuous subsequent use through the sixth and seventh centuries of some cemeteries on the left bank of the Meuse, to the west of the Batta area (St Hilaire and St Victor), could be further confirmation of the continuity of habitation on and in the area around these places. The question remains, in the light of all these facts, whether the name *castrum*, which was given to Huy on a seventh-century coin, relates to a possible reinforcement of the promontory at the confluence of Meuse and Hoyoux and if that reinforcement dates back to the late third or the fourth century, or

whether it denotes a hypothetical fortification on Mont Falize on the left bank of the Meuse, a recent stratigraphic section of which appears to suggest dates from the fourth century. These questions have not been answered with any certainty, but this does not detract from the importance of the other arguments for continuity in Huy, as regards both occupation and function, between the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages.

In many ways the topographical situation in **Namur** is very similar to that of Huy.<sup>10</sup> Here, too, a promontory dominates between Sambre and Meuse: on top of it stands the modern citadel; below it the two rivers meet. However, as in Huy, it is difficult to furnish archaeological proof of the fortification of this promontory in the late Roman period, for information relating to an excavation carried out in 1885 is incomplete and not very accurate and some of it has even been lost. Yet a fortification is believed to have existed and a link is even made with a medieval fortification to which the oldest reference as *castrum* dates from the late seventh century. There is greater certainty, based on archaeological data, about the habitation at the foot of the promontory. This grew during the Late Empire by comparison with the left bank of the Sambre, where habitation was substantial during the first centuries of the Christian era but declined in the late Roman period. Growth can be identified from the end of the fourth and during the fifth century in the habitation between Sambre and Meuse, at the foot of the promontory which may have been fortified as a *castrum*, so that its continuity is almost certain until after the end of Roman domination.<sup>11</sup>

Clues about the Roman history of **Dinant**, upstream from Namur on the Meuse, are scant.<sup>12</sup> A Roman road led from Bavay to the Meuse near Dinant and bifurcated on the right bank in an easterly direction, with one road leading to Cologne and the other to Trier. However, we do not know exactly where it crossed the Meuse and whether it was through a ford or over a bridge. There is mention in 824 of a *pons publicus* in Dinant, located near the later Church of Notre Dame and thought to be of Roman origin. Likewise, the existence of a *vicus*, a little further upstream in the southern part of the city between rue St Martin and rue des Fossés, is still hypothetical, as is its conversion into a *castrum*, a term first applied to Dinant in 744.

<sup>10</sup> A. Dasnoy, A. Dierkens, G. Despy *et al.* (eds.), *Namur: le site, les hommes, de l'époque romaine au XVIIIe siècle*, Brussels, 1988 (Crédit Communal, Collection Histoire, in-4°, no. 15).

<sup>11</sup> A. Dasnoy, 'Les origines romaines et mérovingiennes', in Dasnoy *et al.* (eds.) *Namur: le site, les hommes*, pp. 9–32.

<sup>12</sup> J. Gaier-Lhoest, *L'évolution topographique de la ville de Dinant au moyen âge*, Brussels, 1964 (Crédit Communal, Collection Histoire in-8°, no. 4).

### The Scheldt Valley

The arterial importance of the River Scheldt increased in the late Roman period to the disadvantage of the earlier road network. Likewise urban settlements along the Scheldt, which had hitherto been small *vici*, like Cambrai, Bavay's successor as capital of a *civitas*, and Tournai, Cassel's successor as capital of a *civitas*, also gained in importance.

All we know of **Valenciennes**, also situated on the Scheldt between Cambrai and Tournai, is that the name *Valentinianus* (manor belonging to Valentinus) is of Roman origin.<sup>13</sup> However, 5 km south of Valenciennes – not right on the Scheldt though only a few kilometres to the east of the river – lay the Roman *vicus* Famars (*Fanum Martis*). The fact that for the first centuries of the Middle Ages Famars continued to give its name to the *Pagus Fanomartensis*, whose name was only finally changed to *Pagus Hainoensis* after 900, together with the military importance of Famars around 400 AD, where a high-ranking general, prefect of the *Nervic laeti* (Germanic auxiliary troops) was stationed, may have played a role in the evolution of the *fiscus* Valenciennes to an urban settlement in the ninth century, after the relatively late decline of Famars.<sup>14</sup> In addition to a temple, hypothetically devoted to Mars, and *thermae*, which were converted into a *castellum* in the fourth century (after 333), this *vicus*, located on a byway of the Bavay–Cambrai road, probably had a *diversorium*, an inn for travellers. Here it was that at the end of the sixth century or the beginning of the seventh Gaugericus (St Géry, bishop of Cambrai 584/90–623/6), met a slave trader whose slaves, possibly from Central Europe, he released while the slave trader was asleep at the inn.<sup>15</sup>

An absence of archaeological excavations means that little or nothing is known about **Cambrai** during the Late Empire, except that in the third and fourth centuries it was an important textile centre whose products were traded as far afield as the eastern basin of the Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup> A wall was probably built around Cambrai in the course of the fourth century, as was the case with many other places in the north of the Roman Empire. This belief is indirectly derived from late sixth-century information which tells us that the wall was still in a good state of repair and provided protection. We can also deduce from this information that there was a building inside the walls which could still be used as a royal

<sup>13</sup> F. Deisser-Nagels, 'Valenciennes. Ville carolingienne', *Le Moyen Age* 68 (1962), pp. 53–6; H. Platelle, 'Du "domaine de Valentinus" au comté de Valenciennes (début du XIe siècle)', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 159–68.

<sup>14</sup> H. Platelle, 'Du "Domaine de Valentinus"', pp. 160–2.

<sup>15</sup> F. Vercauteren, *Etude sur les civitates de la Belgique Seconde*, Brussels, 1934, pp. 213–14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205–14; M. Rouche, 'Topographie historique de Cambrai durant le haut moyen âge', *Revue du Nord* 58 (1976), pp. 339–47.



residence and which was probably also of Roman origin. It would appear from a rather uncertain hypothesis regarding the location of the fourth-century wall that the fortified area was not much larger than 4 ha, which is relatively small compared with the 13 to 14 ha inside the Roman wall of Tournai and the 10 ha in Arras. In any case, the Frankish conquest of Cambrai and, from the middle of the fifth century, the sojourn there of a rival of Clovis, who defeated and killed him in 509, heralded a period of decline for the city which came to an end with the arrival of Bishop Géry in Cambrai at the end of the sixth century. Christians had certainly lived in Cambrai before the middle of the fifth century, possibly under the authority of a bishop. It is doubtful whether Christianity survived the seizure of Cambrai by the heathen Franks around the middle of the fifth century. At any rate, there is no mention of a bishop in Cambrai before the end of the sixth century, when Géry took up residence there as such. To suppose any form of continuity with the second half of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth centuries is therefore questionable.

**Arras** is situated on the Scarpe, a tributary of the River Scheldt, less than 40 km west of Cambrai, to which it was linked by a Roman road. Consequently, as one of the southernmost cities in the area in question, we are treating it here immediately after Cambrai and in the group of the Scheldt cities.<sup>17</sup> And yet so long as the Scarpe was unnavigable until the tenth–eleventh centuries, it was primarily important as an intersection of land routes: north–west via Théroouanne to Boulogne, north–east to Tournai, south–east to Cambrai and from there to Bavay and Cologne, and south to Amiens. In the third and fourth centuries it was the most important textile centre in the north of the Roman Empire. Its reputation in this respect had given rise to a major export trade with Italy and the Mediterranean world and continued into the sixth century. Arras' strategic location on the road to Boulogne made it an important transit centre for troop movements between England and the Rhineland. *Laeti* (Germanic auxiliary troops) were also garrisoned there around 400 AD. So it is not surprising that at the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century the city was surrounded by walls. A section of those walls was discovered archaeologically not so long ago and is still being studied. The area fortified in this way more or less corresponds to the present-day park of the Préfecture, of which the east side is formed by rue Baudimont, where recent excavations have been carried out (Map 6). An area of 9 to 10 ha was enclosed, which is more than in Cambrai (4 ha), yet less than in Tournai (13 to 14 ha). Apart from the *castrum*, the urban settlement

<sup>17</sup> Vercauteren, *Civitates*, pp. 181–204; C. Brühl, *Palatium und Civitas*, I, *Gallien*, Cologne and Vienna, 1975, pp. 91–9; L. Kéry, *Die Errichtung des Bistums Arras 1093/1094*, Sigmaringen, 1994, pp. 211–24, 255–76.

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dating from the High Empire (second–third centuries) was abandoned during the fourth century. The walls of the *castrum*, which was called the *civitas* (Fr. cité) in later centuries, still existed in the seventh century. By the second half of the ninth century, however, they were so dilapidated that they no longer offered any protection against the Vikings, when the latter destroyed the Church of Our Lady in the south-east corner of the *civitas* in 883. It is not known if this edifice and the later episcopal palace inside the walls of the *civitas*, which is now the seat of the Préfecture, stand on the site of earlier Roman buildings such as a *praetorium*. The recent excavations next to the eastern wall of the *castrum* have revealed two layers of a barracks dating from the late fourth and early fifth centuries. We know of the early presence of Christians in Arras in the fourth and fifth centuries only through later traditions. It is not even certain that Arras was ever the seat of a bishopric prior to 1094, when it became a bishopric independent of Cambrai. St Vaast, who lived at the beginning of the sixth century (d. 540) and is the only bishop of Arras known with any certainty to have existed before 1094, must have been a travelling bishop without a permanent residence.

There was, it seems, no continuity in Arras between the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages, more specifically with the second half of the seventh century when, in addition to the aforementioned Church of Our Lady inside the *civitas*, St Vaast Abbey also existed. The abbey was located outside the *civitas*, close to where the medieval city was to develop. At best the late Roman fortification provided some continuity in terms of location, but that can only be described as relative.

During the High Empire (second and third centuries) **Tournai** spanned both banks of the River Scheldt, which were linked by a bridge whose arches also carried an aqueduct.<sup>18</sup> The right bank was little more than an intersection for traffic on the main road from Boulogne to Cologne, and the most important edifices were located on the left bank: a building which has been identified as a *praetorium*; a second building which may have the ground plan of a basilica and *thermae* (Map 7). On the right bank there were probably storehouses belonging to the imperial *fiscus*, where stone, which was quarried in great quantities around Tournai and exported down the River Scheldt, may have been piled up. Little remained of all these constructions after the devastation unleashed during the second half of the third century. At the beginning of the fourth century, a stone wall was constructed on the left bank, enclosing an area of some 13 to 14 ha. This is quite a size compared to other cities fortified at that time. This bulwark still existed at the end of the ninth century,

<sup>18</sup> Vercauteren, *Civitates*, pp. 233–53; *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 169–233 (chapters by M. Amand, R. Brulet, J. Pycke).