The Rise of Cities in North-West Europe

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Contents

Maps

1 The transformation of the Roman towns

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.[1] 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

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[1] E. M. Wightman, *Gallia Belgica*, London, 1985, pp. 75–100.

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*).[2] 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).[3] 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.

The Meuse Valley

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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6] 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

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 204–5.   [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 222–7.

[4] 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.

[5] T. Panhuysen and P. H. Leupen, 'Maastricht in het eerste millennium', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 429–30, 432–3.   [6] *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.[7] 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

[7] T. Panhuysen, 'Wat weten we over de continuïteit van Maastricht?', in C. G. De Dijn (ed.), *Sint-Servatius, Bisschop van Tongeren-Maastricht: het vroegste christendom in het Maasland.* Borgloon and Rijkel, 1986, pp. 125–46.
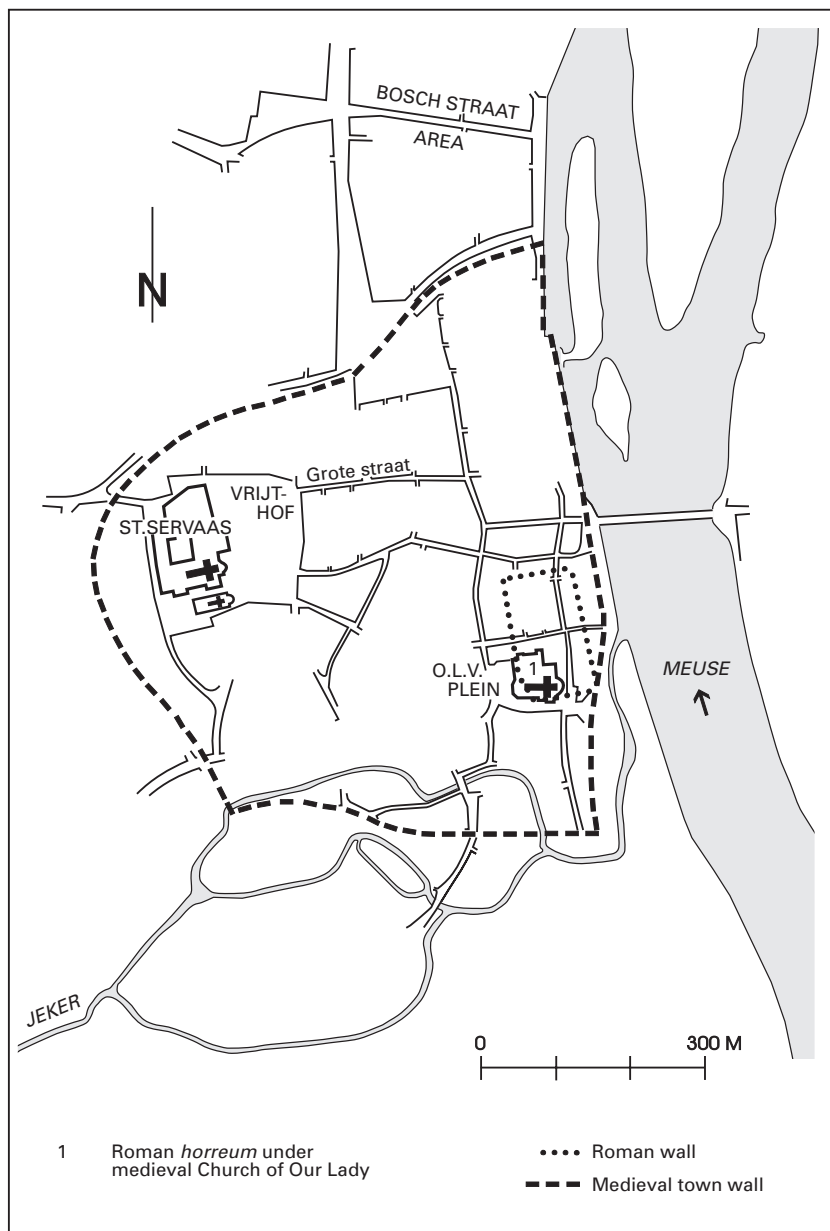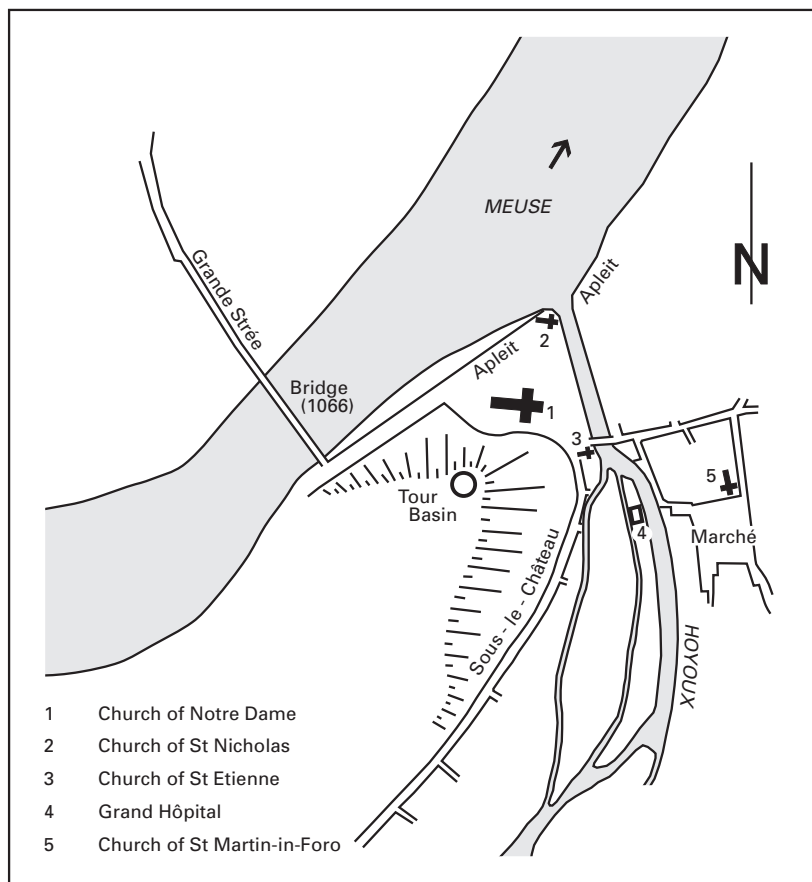
Map 2   Maastricht

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**,[8] 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.[9] 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

[8] A. Dierkens, 'La ville de Huy avant l'an mil', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 391–409.
[9] Bibliography of the numerous archaeological reports by J. Willems, *ibid*., p. 393, note 9.

MEUSE

N

Grande Strée

Apleit

Apleit 2

Bridge
(1066)

1

3

5

Tour
Basin

4

Marché

Sous - le - Château

HOYOUX

1   Church of Notre Dame
2   Church of St Nicholas
3   Church of St Etienne
4   Grand Hôpital
5   Church of St Martin-in-Foro

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.[10] 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.[11]

Clues about the Roman history of **Dinant**, upstream from Namur on the Meuse, are scant.[12] 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.

[10] 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).

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

[12] 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 *Valentinianas* (manor belonging to Valentinus) is of Roman origin.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15]

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.[16] 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

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[13] 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.

[14] H. Platelle, 'Du "Domaine de Valentinus"', pp. 160–2.

[15] F. Vercauteren, *Etude sur les civitates de la Belgique Seconde*, Brussels, 1934, pp. 213–14.

[16] *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.[17] 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 Thérouanne 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

[17] 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.

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.[18] 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,

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

when it was restored. Around 400 AD the walls probably encompassed a state-run workshop, a *gynaeceum*, where under the authority of a *procurator* women made kit, possibly mainly of wool, for the Roman army. There may also have been a military garrison stationed there to defend the Bavay–Tournai–Kortrijk road. There were several cemeteries outside the walls: in 1653 the grave of Childeric, father of Clovis, who had died in 481, was discovered in one of them on the right bank of the Scheldt in the vicinity of the later St Brice Church. Both Childeric and Clovis had stayed in a residence inside the walls which was inhabited by members of the Merovingian royal dynasty and still existed around 575. The oldest trace of a Christian presence in Tournai probably dates from the second half of the fourth century, and less disputable proof was found of the presence of Christians in Childeric's heathen burial place dating from the second half of the fifth century. The cemetery was still used from the sixth century until into the eighth century. Together these various details point to continuous habitation in Tournai through the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries and to the relative importance of the city as a political and administrative centre.

Kortrijk (*Cortoriacum*, Fr. Courtrai), on the same latitude as Tournai but located on the River Leie some 25 km to the west, was an important intersection in the first and second centuries AD.[19] Several roads ran from west to east close to the river along the northern and southern banks of the Leie (from Cassel and from Arras to Tongeren and Cologne). Not all of these roads have been identified with certainty as being Roman. On the south bank, a road from Tournai joined one of these roads. At that time Kortrijk was a large *vicus* covering an area of more than 40 ha on both banks of the Leie. As a result of the Germanic invasions in the second half of the third century, the *vicus* was largely abandoned by the beginning of the last quarter of the third century. Only a small part of it – 7 ha at the most – on the south bank of the Leie, between the medieval St Martin's Church, the marketplace and the Leie, was still inhabited in the fourth and the first half of the fifth centuries, as appears from the recent discovery of several shards of cooking utensils. It is far from certain that this area was fortified by a wall or bulwark. Likewise, it is equally uncertain whether the *Cortoriacenses* cavalry unit, which is mentioned in the *Notitia dignitatum* around the year 400, was quartered in Kortrijk itself, or if it consisted of cavalrymen from Kortrijk who were quartered elsewhere.

[19] N. Maddens (ed.), *De geschiedenis van Kortrijk*, Tielt, 1990, pp. 13–28; P. Despriet, *2000 jaar Kortrijk*, Kortrijk, 1990, pp. 9–17; A. Verhulst, 'An Aspect of the Question of Continuity between Antiquity and Middle Ages: The Origin of the Flemish Cities between the North Sea and the Scheldt', *Journal of Medieval History* 3 (1977), pp. 186–8 (reprinted in A. Verhulst, *Rural and Urban Aspects of Early Medieval Northwest Europe*, Aldershot, 1992).

There was a complete absence of information about Kortrijk after the middle of the fifth century until a few fragments of Merovingian earthenware were found inside the zone of the late Roman settlement. While difficult to date, they do suggest habitation in the sixth or seventh century. Continuity between then and habitation during the first half of the fifth century seems doubtful, however. Bearing in mind the lack of information about the late fifth, the sixth and the seventh centuries and the absence of any trace of urban life in Kortrijk in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, it is difficult to interpret the reference to Kortrijk as a *municipium*, i.e. with the role of capital of a *gouw* (district or *pagus*), in the early eighth-century *Vita Eligii* as absolute proof of the existence of an urban settlement, which is permissible for the other *municipia* (Ghent and Bruges) mentioned at the same time.

Ghent lies on the Scheldt downriver from Tournai and some 60 km to the north of that city, at the point where the Leie enters the Scheldt, i.e. a very favourable location in terms of traffic.[20] So it is hardly surprising that the most important Roman settlement in the territory of the later city of Ghent was located at this very confluence, on a slightly higher (8–9 m) sand ridge along the (eastern) left bank of Scheldt and Leie (Map 5). This is the only favourable location for a settlement on either river in the immediate vicinity of the confluence. Directly opposite this spot, the right bank of the Leie and the left bank of the Scheldt where the rivers meet consist of low-lying, wet terrain (called 'meers' and 'briel' in Dutch; *mariscus* and *broilum* in Latin). In the seventh century the missionary Amand built a church at the higher place on the left bank, called *Ganda*, which means 'mouth'. Before the end of that century, the church became an abbey and was later called Sint-Baafs or St Bavo. A huge amount of Roman building material has been found, particularly in the abbey church which was demolished in 1540: fragments of roof tiles (*tegulae* and *imbrices*) and above all large blocks of tuff and sand-lime bricks. These materials may have come from one of the Roman public buildings in the immediate vicinity. *Ganda* is also important because this site stands out from all the other Roman centres of habitation in the territory of the later city of Ghent, not only because of the concentration of the finds, but also and above all because of their date, which runs uninterrupted into the late fourth century. This dating may indicate a late third- or a fourth-century military fortification, as are known to have existed in other cities. As well as being a toponymic relic, the use of the word *castrum* in the ninth–tenth centuries to refer to *Ganda* and St Bavo's Abbey should serve to strengthen this assumption. The facts that Amand founded a church there

[20] J. Decavele (ed.) *Ghent: In Defence of a Rebellious City*, Antwerp, 1989, pp. 28–59 (chapters by M.-C. Laleman with H. Thoen and by A. Verhulst with G. Declercq).

around 630 and that *Ganda* is the first and only place on Ghent territory where a commercial settlement grew up in the third quarter of the ninth century point to the importance of *Ganda* in the development of this first medieval commercial settlement in Ghent. This importance can perhaps be explained by the assumed continuity of habitation on that spot from the late fourth to the early seventh century. Continuity of habitation, however, is not in the least certain, although continuity in terms of location is beyond all doubt.

The other traces of Roman life in Ghent outside *Ganda* are much less relevant to the emergence of the medieval city. In the medieval centre of Ghent, which – as will be illustrated in a different context – was no longer located on the *Ganda* site after the ninth century, traces of Roman habitation and burial places were identified by means of finds from graves, concentrations of shards and random discoveries, partly in the vicinity of the oldest medieval urban church (the present-day St Bavo's Cathedral) and partly on the site of the medieval castle, the Gravensteen. Their location shows that when the centre of the medieval trade settlement was moved there after the ninth century, the area between the Leie and the Scheldt had already been inhabited for a long time. This may still have played a role in the location factor in the late ninth and tenth centuries without necessarily suggesting continuity of habitation from the Roman period. The dating of the Roman finds in the historical centre of Ghent is in any case fairly vague; in particular, it is unclear whether they carry on through into the fourth century.

To the north of Ghent, **Antwerp** lies some 60 km downstream, on the right bank of the Scheldt. Excavations in the 1950s and 1970s revealed traces of a totally unsuspected Roman presence.[21] These were single finds dating from the second and third centuries AD, mainly concentrated inside and just outside the medieval semicircular fortification alongside the Scheldt, of which the present-day Steen is a remnant and which was known by the name of *Burg* (Map 12: 'Burcht'; only the name 'Burcht-gracht' survived). The items discovered inside the *Burg* were Roman in origin and brought here from the surrounding area, whereas traces of a real settlement were found just outside the *Burg* when the present-day municipal car park was being laid. Its urban character, however, is very doubtful. On the other hand, there have been no Roman finds to date 1,000 m to the south along the same right bank of the Scheldt, i.e. on the site of the medieval St Michael's Abbey, where we can deduce from texts

[21] Verhulst, 'An Aspect of the Question of Continuity', pp. 195–9; A. Verhulst, 'The Origins and Early History of Antwerp' in Verhulst, *Rural and Urban Aspects*, XIV; T. Oost and R. Van Uytven, 'Een historisch-archeologisch overzicht van het vroegste Antwerpen', in *La genèse et les premiers siècles*, pp. 331–45.

that a fortification (*castrum*) stood in the seventh century. Since new Merovingian castles are rather rare, it may have been a Roman fortification. Yet, as is evident from its eccentric position, it played no role in the creation and location of the medieval urban settlement in Antwerp, perhaps because it was destroyed by the Vikings in 836 when they set fire to the *civitas* of Antwerp, a term which may refer to this castle. The commercial settlement (*vicus*) which grew up in Antwerp in the ninth–tenth centuries, as we will see later, lay 1,000 m to the north, in and/or outside the above-mentioned *Burg*, though there is no demonstrable link with the Roman vestiges excavated there.

If one follows the Scheldt downriver from Antwerp, i.e. in the late Roman and early medieval period along the Eastern Scheldt because the Western Scheldt did not exist at that time, then one comes to the sea on the north coast of the island of Walcheren. Just to the west of this estuary, on the north-west coast of Walcheren on the North Sea, near **Domburg** and a few hundred metres seawards of the present coastline in the then so-called 'Old' (Roman) dunes, which were engulfed by the advancing sea during a phase of transgression in the fourth–fifth centuries, there stood a Roman sanctuary with a temple dedicated to the goddess Nehalennia and probably also a commercial settlement.[22] One day in 1647, when the sea retreated far from the present-day coastline, remains of buildings, altars, votive stones and coins were found: proof of occupation in the second and third centuries AD, which ended fairly suddenly between 260 and 279, probably as a result of Germanic attacks from the sea. The advance of the sea in the fourth–fifth centuries, which is known as the Dunkirk-II transgression phase, meant that the site lay abandoned and eventually disappeared. Three centuries later, however, in the late sixth century, people must have begun to repopulate the area around the Roman site. Another commercial settlement began to emerge in the late sixth century approximately 1,000 m to the north-east, in the dunes – before they disappeared into the sea – and a couple of hundred metres beyond the present-day coastline. That settlement achieved its peak in the eighth century and at the beginning of the ninth. An account

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[22] H. Jankuhn, 'Die frühmittelalterlichen Seehandelsplätze im Nord- und Ostseeraum' in T. Mayer (ed.), *Studien zu den Anfängen des europäischen Städtewesens*, Lindau and Konstanz, 1958 (Vorträge und Forschungen 4), pp. 464–72; P. A. Henderikx, 'The Lower Delta of the Rhine and the Maas: Landscape and Habitation from the Roman Period to c. 1000', *Berichten van de Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek* 36 (1986), pp. 445–599; Henderikx, 'Walcheren van de 6e tot de 12e eeuw' in *Archief van het Koninklijk Zeeuws Genootschap der Wetenschappen*, 1993, p. 115 note 2; S. Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs frisons du haut moyen âge*, I, Lille, 1983, pp. 142–4; Lebecq, 'L'emporium proto-médiéval de Walcheren-Domburg: une mise en perspective', in J.-M. Duvosquel and E. Thoen (eds.), *Peasants and Townsmen in Medieval Europe: Studia in honorem Adriaan Verhulst*, Ghent, 1995, pp. 73–89.

of this will follow in another connection. In the context of this chapter about the late Roman period, it is interesting to note that the location has remained practically unaltered, give or take 1,000 m. This is all the more remarkable because there is a gap of three centuries between the two occupations and very probably nothing remained of the Roman site in the sixth–seventh centuries. Perhaps in this case the explanation for the continuity of the location is not the Roman antecedent, but the favourable location at the Scheldt estuary.

The North Sea coast

If one follows the North Sea coast from the (Eastern) Scheldt estuary near Domburg to the south-west, bearing in mind that the estuary of the present-day Western Scheldt to the south of Walcheren did not exist in Roman times, then the first Roman urban settlement one encounters is the small modern-day town of **Aardenburg**.[23] It must have had access to the sea via one of the creeks which penetrated inland from the then coastline as a result of the flooding allied to the Dunkirk-I transgression in the last centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. The *Rudanna* watercourse, from which Aardenburg derives the first part of its Germanic name (original form *Rodenburgh*, *Rodenburg*), may have been the remnant of one such Roman creek in the ninth–tenth centuries. It was reactivated by the inundations of the Dunkirk-II transgression (fourth–sixth centuries). The *-burg* element of the name indicates that in the ninth–tenth centuries the Germanic-speaking inhabitants from the area knew the place via oral tradition, or perhaps from their own observation, as a fortification, probably as a dilapidated Roman one, which had lost its original name. Indeed it is very uncertain that Aardenburg was fortified again in the ninth century, as was the case in Domburg where a round fortification was built in that century. As in Domburg, at the end of the ninth century a round stronghold was also constructed in Oostburg, some 7 km to the north of Aardenburg, as part of the coastal defence against the Vikings. The late Roman fort of Oudenburg, to the west of Bruges, which shows a certain analogy with Aardenburg and will be discussed later, was not restored in the ninth century as a fortification against the Vikings either, but used as a stone quarry. Aardenburg was in fact a Roman camp dating from 170–225 AD which developed into an important civil settle-

[23] D. De Vries, 'The Early History of Aardenburg to 1200', *Berichten van de Rijksdienst voor het Oudheidkundig Bodemonderzoek* 18 (1968), pp. 227–60; Verhulst, 'An Aspect of the Question of Continuity', pp. 182–3, 194–5; R. Brulet, 'Le Litus Saxonicum continental', in V. A. Maxfield and M. J. Dobson (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 1989*, Exeter, 1991, pp. 163–4.

ment between 225 and 275 AD with (among other things) a large stone building, which could have been a temple, and turreted walls surrounded by a moat. Two coin hoards hidden around 271–3 AD confirm that the site was abandoned shortly after that. Unlike Oudenburg, Aardenburg played no role in the *Litus Saxonicum* coastal defence line during the fourth century, perhaps because it had become uninhabitable as a result of flooding during the Dunkirk-II transgression. Despite the fact that the site was uninhabited for a fairly long period, a new settlement started to emerge in the ninth–tenth centuries on the ruins of the Roman settlement in Aardenburg. It became a small town of more than regional importance in the eleventh–twelfth centuries.

Aardenburg was linked to **Bruges** in a westerly direction and further westwards to Oudenburg by what is generally regarded as a Roman road. This road crossed the Reie, i.e. the main watercourse in Bruges, at the very site of the castle built there during the ninth century, now in the centre of the modern-day city (Map 9). Roman archaeological remains have been found there *in situ* in recent years, as well as further westwards along the road.[24] Consequently it was believed that the medieval castle in Bruges might have been built on the remains of a Roman fortification, yet absolutely no trace of a Roman edifice has been found there to date, just a few single shards, such as have been discovered in several other places in Bruges. On the other hand, a real settlement was discovered in 1899 on the northern edge of the modern-day city, in the area called Fort Lapin, during excavation work for the port of Zeebrugge. This was a commercial settlement which developed fairly late, around 200 AD, but it was destroyed in the third quarter of the third century and shortly after this was flooded during the Dunkirk-II transgression. The floods reached the settlement from the sea via the creek on which it was located, thereby creating a favourable link with the North Sea. In the light of the recent Roman finds in the centre of Bruges itself, it is now believed that there must have been a link between the centre and the commercial settlement some 2,000 m to the north. The nature of this link is, however, far from clear. Moreover, it is not certain if some rare discoveries from the late third century and from the fourth century in the centre of the medieval city indicate a continuation of the Roman presence, more specifically a military one as indicated above. We are feeling our way in total darkness as regards habitation in Bruges in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. Yet it is interesting to note that the earliest provable medieval habitation in Bruges, as in a number of other places, was established in the area around and

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[24] Verhulst, 'An Aspect of the Question of Continuity', pp. 178–80, 192–4; H. Thoen, *De Belgische kustvlakte in de romeinse tijd*, Brussels, 1978, pp. 107, 147; H. De Witte (ed.), *Brugge onder-zocht*, Bruges, 1988, pp. 16–19, 64–70.

partly on the very site of the Roman presence, despite a possible absence of habitation in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. As observed elsewhere, however, this choice of location could have been the result of the continued existence or even the improvement of a favourable geographic location on the edge of the Pleistocene sand bed and the polder plain which had been covered with clay during flooding. As we will see in another chapter, the link between Bruges and the sea was in fact maintained by the Roman creek to the north of the city which was widened by flooding during the Dunkirk-II transgression in the fourth–fifth centuries and perhaps even extended in the direction of the medieval centre.

The small town of **Oudenburg** lies some 15 km to the north-west of Bruges. Though an important fortified base on the coast in Roman times, in the Middle Ages Oudenburg did not become a town, of secondary importance, until the twelfth century.[25] It nevertheless deserves a mention here, not so much because of the important excavations carried out there over a period of many years, but because of certain comparisons (for example, with Aardenburg and Boulogne) and because of the fact that the Roman fort was used as a stone quarry in the tenth–eleventh centuries, partly for the construction of the castle in Bruges. This fort represents a third phase in the Roman presence in Oudenburg, when in the second half of the fourth century a larger fortification measuring 146 × 163 m (2.4 ha) was built in stone on the square ground plan of a clay fortification which was perhaps half a century older (Oudenburg II). Surrounded by a 20 m moat, this stone fortification consisted of a stone wall 1.3 m thick with round towers at the four corners and octagonal towers near the four gates. A main feature of the *Litus Saxonicum* was that the regular troops who had been stationed there were withdrawn after the year 400. This happened as part of the general strategic movement inland, but in Oudenburg more specifically also because the rising ground- and seawater caused by the Dunkirk-II transgression made use of the fort and its surroundings, including a camp village (*canaba*) and two cemeteries, increasingly difficult, despite the fact that they were located on a Pleistocene sand bed which formed a small peninsula surrounded on three sides by the rising seawater. The northern wall of the fort was even directly exposed to the seawater. According to a description in an eleventh-century chronicle from the Abbey of Oudenburg, which archaeology has confirmed, the foundations of the wall consisted of large square stones, probably from the Boulogne region, secured to each other by iron and lead.

We have no record of the Roman name of this important fort, which

[25] J. Mertens, 'Oudenburg and the Northern Sector of the Continental Litus Saxonicum', in D. E. Johnston (ed.), *The Saxon Shore*, London, 1977, pp. 51–62; Verhulst, 'An Aspect of the Question of Continuity', pp. 180–2, 190–1; Brulet, 'Litus Saxonicum', pp. 161–3.

suggests that the place lay abandoned for a long time, perhaps because flooding during the Dunkirk-II transgression in the fifth and sixth centuries rendered it uninhabitable and it became difficult to reach from the Pleistocene mainland, where rural Merovingian settlements have recently been excavated. The Abbey of Lobbes had a cattle pasture (*vaccaritia*) there in the ninth century. The Germanic name Oudenburg (*Aldenborg*), which appeared for the first time during the ninth century, leaves little or no doubt that no new castle was built there against the Vikings, as in Domburg, and that the name referred to the abandoned Roman fort. Only after the establishment of a chapter of canons, which was turned into a Benedictine abbey in 1090, did Oudenburg become a small town of secondary importance.

The Roman settlement in the 'Old Dunes' of **De Panne**, in what is now a nature reserve a few hundred metres to the east of the French–Belgian border, would not be mentioned here were it not for the recently launched hypothesis that there had been a trading settlement on the same spot since the end of the seventh century and during the eighth–ninth centuries and that its establishment was comparable with that of Domburg.[26] This hypothesis is based on the discovery there of a substantial quantity of *sceattas* dating from 680–750 AD and on the possible existence of one or two cemeteries. Moreover, the author of this hypothesis identifies the trading settlement in the dunes of De Panne with the *Iserae portus* where a fleet of Vikings moored in 860 and which has been difficult to locate. In the next chapter we will contest this hypothesis, showing that in this case the various data are too fragile for the problem of continuity even to be posed.

In reality there are no archaeological or historical indications of a Roman settlement of any significance between Oudenburg and Boulogne on or near the coast where a (trading) settlement might have grown up during the early Middle Ages and developed into a medieval city. Saint-Omer is a case in point. Lying close to the mouth of the River Aa between Dunkirk and Calais, it was to become an important city in the eleventh–twelfth centuries but had no Roman antecedent.

Boulogne, on the other hand, was an important Roman city, but, despite the very remarkable and exceptional continuity of its habitation in the fifth and at the beginning of the sixth centuries, its development into a medieval city did not take place during the early Middle Ages but had to wait until the tenth century.[27] The Roman name *Bononia* was used to

[26] J. Termote (ed.), *Tussen Land en Zee: het duingebied van Nieuwpoort tot De Panne*, Tielt, 1992, pp. 54–60.

[27] A. Lottin (ed.), *Histoire de Boulogne-sur-Mer*, Lille, 1983; Brulet, 'Litus Saxonicum', pp. 158–61.

refer to the upper town. At the beginning of the second century the troops of the *classis Britannica* were stationed there at an army camp with barracks surrounded by a stone wall. The camp was temporarily and partially abandoned soon after 270 AD, but shortly after that, at the end of the third century, a new turreted wall was built in the ditch around the earlier wall. In the thirteenth century this provided the basis for the city wall and enclosed an area of 320 × 400 m or 12 to 13 ha. The city owes its survival and that of its name to this fortification. We have no information about its military role as a possible part of the *Litus Saxonicum* in the fourth century. Boulogne is *not* mentioned in the *Notitia dignitatum* (*c.* 400 AD), though there are references to other places along the coast as moorings for the fleet, to the north of Boulogne (possibly Marck and/or Marquise) and to the south of that (possibly Etaples, on the right bank of the Canche, opposite Quentovic). This can probably be explained by the theory that the lower town, where the port was situated and whose name, *Gesoriacum*, disappeared for good at the beginning of the fourth century apart from a mention in Beda Venerabilis, could no longer be used as a naval base because the Dunkirk-II transgression had caused the sea level to rise. According to some, the port was moved upstream to Audisque on the River Liane. Attempts have been made to identify Audisque as the *portu Aepatiaci* referred to in the *Notitia dignitatum*, but others associate this mysterious name with the above-mentioned Etaples not far from the mouth of the Canche, 29 km south of Boulogne. Whatever the case, only the upper town of Boulogne continued to be of any significance after the fourth century: around the middle of the fifth century, the Roman troops there were replaced by Saxons from overseas who made cemeteries inside the Roman walls in the fifth and sixth centuries, a serious degeneration of the habitation though one that did nothing to interrupt its continuity. The occupation of the upper town by the Franks around the middle of the seventh century and the temporary resumption of minting in the second half of that century did not prevent Boulogne's further decline. Thérouanne and not Boulogne was chosen as the seat of a bishop in the second quarter of the seventh century, despite the fact that there was a church in Boulogne even at the beginning of that century which, according to some, dated back to a brief evangelization of the region by Vitricus, bishop of Rouen, around the year 400, though this is also doubtful. The resistance of the heathen Saxons, who were fairly numerous in Boulogne and especially around the city, would also explain the choice of Thérouanne rather than Boulogne as a bishopric. After the introduction of Christianity at the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries, nothing is known about Boulogne in the eighth century. Even the fact that Charlemagne had a fleet built there in 810–11

as defence against the Viking threat and had the ancient fire tower restored says little about the economic importance of Boulogne at that time. One might well deduce from this that the port in the lower town was usable again, which is quite well possible after the end of the Dunkirk-II transgression, though its end must be dated earlier, at the latest in the sixth–seventh centuries. Consequently, it seems more likely that Boulogne never managed to recover as a port in the sixth–seventh centuries after being out of use for some three centuries.

In the meantime the traffic with England went through **Quentovic**, which began to emerge as the most important crossing place to England around the year 600 AD.[28] The explanation for this development should not in our opinion be sought in the fact that the port of Boulogne was unusable as a result of the rise in the sea level between *c*. 300 and *c*. 600. This probably affected the mouth of the Canche to the same extent, but Quentovic lay some 10 km upstream from there. Much later, in the eighth–ninth centuries, the site of Quentovic, which was situated on the very low left bank of the river, was having to cope with the problem of flooding, as the latest archaeological prospecting shows.[29] The question is why, despite being a generally less favourable site – though one which did offer some advantages (protection as a result of being 10 km from the mouth) – Quentovic grew up here.

There is scope within the limitations of this chapter only to pose the question – and it applies to other early medieval urban settlements too – of whether Roman antecedents played a role in the siting of Quentovic. The question can be answered positively, even though only one Roman kiln has been discovered a little less than 1 km south of the place where large quantities of Merovingian and Carolingian remains were found. This was between Visemarest and La Calotterie where, for this reason, Quentovic is currently thought to have been sited. Etaples, some 7–8 km downriver from Quentovic, on the other and higher right bank of the Canche and close to the estuary, was, as we have said, probably a Roman naval base and still served as a port in the ninth century. These Roman antecedents in the area around Quentovic currently seem to us too weak to be attributed the most important role in the siting of Quentovic. Moreover, the Roman roads in the area were directed at Boulogne and not at Quentovic.

[28] J. Dhondt, 'Les problèmes de Quentovic', in *Studi in onore di Amintore Fanfani*, I, Milan, 1962, pp. 181–248; D. Hill, D. Barrett, K. Maude *et al.*, 'Quentovic defined', *Antiquity* 64 (1990), pp. 51–8; S. Lebecq, 'Quentovic: un état de la question', *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 8 (1993), pp. 73–82; H. Clarke and B. Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age*, London, 1995, pp. 16–18.

[29] D. Hill, 'The Siting of the Early Medieval Port of Quentovic', in *Rotterdam Papers* 7, Rotterdam, 1992, pp. 17–23.