

# ANTWERP

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL VIEW ON THE  
ORIGINS OF THE CITY

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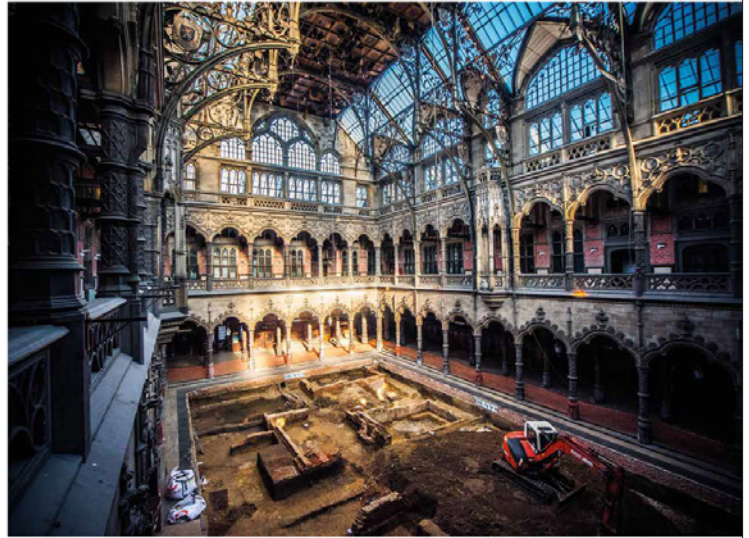
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val ploughs, have withstood the test of time. Three cheers for urban archaeology!

13 The burned bones in the two urns appear to have belonged to an adult male and a female, both buried around 1000 BC. Due to the poor state of the bone remains, little is known about the male. Physical-anthropological examination of the burnt bone remains of the woman shows that she was between twenty and forty years old. It is plausible that both of them were buried around the same time, at the site where, more than 2,500 years later, the monumental stock exchange will rise up. For the time being, nothing is known about the possible family or marital relationship between the male and the female: this could be clarified by a DNA investigation, but genetic research on such old bones does not always have much chance of success. It seems plausible that both belonged to the same group or community, with a common cemetery. Is it the savage man and his wife?

The archaeological discovery leads to the surprising finding that the Meir, contrary to what historians believe, was not originally so wet and marshy after all. Moreover, the discovery of these Bronze Age urns immediately places an older find in a new light: the primitive, hand-shaped pot that was discovered in the mid-1980s under the nearby Sint-Jan Berchmanscollege, between the Jodenstraat and the Meir, could well also be a Bronze Age urn. In that case, it seems clear that the Bronze Age burial field spread over a significant area, which tells us something about the size of the settlement. Whether we can really speak of a settlement core or nomadic encamps around common grounds - including a cemetery - is not clear. Indeed, the city's subsequent history has wiped out most of its traces. Here and there during a city excavation a vague trace of a post or other



soil discoloration sometimes appear, but clear building plans of Bronze Age farms or granaries (storage areas for harvested crops) have not yet been revealed by the soil under the city centre.

However, such settlement structures have been found in the outskirts of the city. For example, during poldering works in Deurne-Eksterlaar in 2015, archaeologists found the remains of several housing settlements from the Bronze Age, Iron Age farms and Gallo-Roman period. The Deurne-Eksterlaar site, located on dry sandy soil and hardly affected by later soil activities, is an invaluable multi-period site: a terrain used by archaeologists to indicate when a site contains traces and artefacts from successive periods of human cultural presence and activity. A characteristic feature of Deurne-Eksterlaar is the specific, deliberate layout of the different farms, the continuity of inhabitation over the cultivation periods and the increasing degree of landscape exploitation. The latter can be deduced from the presence of so-called 'deep litter houses' in the Gallo-Roman period: here, stable manure is spread over the fields on a systematic basis, indicating the pursuit of a higher agricultural and therefore also livestock yield. In other words: over time, people gain more and more control over the landscape and the fauna and flora around it. This increase in scale also goes hand in hand with an increase in population, and vice versa.

14 When we consider pre- and proto-history on the present-day Antwerp territory, we may conclude that the human influence on the landscape only increases over time. Settlement structures tell us that original inhabitants, nomadic or sedentary, or both, primarily seek out the more elevated parts of the landscape. The primordial landscape, *the land of the wild man*, in which the river sys-



16 Aerial reconstruction of Gallo-Roman Antwerp



fall of the Roman Empire, just as they had not been wiped off the map during the colonisation in the first century BC, contrary to what Julius Caesar had boasted and epically put into words in *De Bello Gallico*. Just as the winter cold only affects the leaves of a tree but not the roots, no occupation erases all traces of a people.

After the implosion of the Roman Empire, towns and villages fall into decline, buildings and infrastructure remain as scars on the landscape. The ruins of temples, bath houses or military forts recall a glorious past and appear in the early Middle Ages as *limes* or *memoriae* to reinforce the legitimacy of new authority structures. Bishops sit in places that long ago emanated importance and status, such as Maastricht, enhancing the importance of this former Roman city at the expense of Tongeren. Our ancestors buried their dead in and around centuries-old ruins in order to lay claim to land and power. Territorial and administrative boundaries from the Roman era live on, taxes are collected, slavery remains chained to the age-old division between free and unfree people, shaping feudal society.

69 How this all plays out in Antwerp is difficult to estimate. The fact is that, to date, few late-Roman remains have been found, with the exception of a handful of shards in a pit along the Hoogstraat and two coins: one of Constantius I from the middle of the fourth century (348-350 CE), minted in Trier and found in the early medieval earthen wall of the earliest stronghold, another of Valentinian I from the third quarter of the fourth century (364-375 CE), minted in Rome and left in a ditch near the present Royal Academy of Fine Arts. It could be asserted that the coins were in the possession of early medieval inhabitants or passers-by, but this is much less likely for

the pottery in the Hoogstraat. So it seems that the Gallo-Roman settlement under the Antwerp city centre grew from the second half of the second century until the middle of the third century, then declined considerably in importance, but continued or revived in the fourth century. It is not clear how the existing infrastructure and the building stock were used. If we are talking about timber construction, the shelf-life is in any case limited: a house made of wattle and daub does not last much longer than one or two generations. If durable building materials were used, natural stone and mortar, it might be a different story and the building could survive as a ruin for several centuries. As is the case in a number of other historical cities, a dark layer of earth stretches under the Antwerp medieval city centre. For the sake of convenience, soil specialists call such a homogeneous dark layer a 'dark earth layer'. In many cases it covers vestiges from Roman times and at the same time forms a breeding ground (also in a literal sense) for the growth of the medieval settlement or city. During the excavations along the Jordanenshoek in 2008-2009 my colleagues and I found the layer and we called it a 'volvetraai', as it forms an underlayer on which all medieval structures - an earthen wall, houses and paths - are erected. The layer is about thirty to forty centimetres thick and in a way resembles the dark layer of earth you sometimes find under the turf or plough layer of your garden. In the 1970s and 1980s, former urban archaeologist Tony Coor invariably named this layer 'the Gallo-Roman soil', which is not surprising given that it contains many potsherds from that cultural period. The broken and discarded household goods in the dark earth layer often turn out to be severely weathered, which can be explained by the centuries of ploughing the soil in which the shards are found. Without setting the household waste as we now



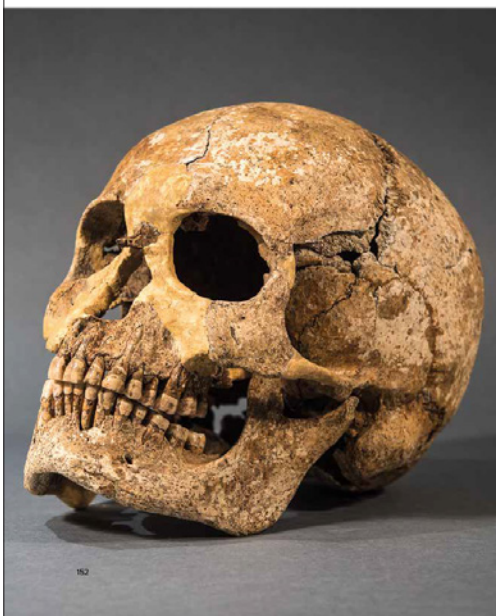
where primarily young animals are represented. Proportionally speaking, the Antwerp stronghold area has much more sheep than goats, approximately ten times as much. Such a ratio indicates the close link between Antwerp and the hinterland, where hearth-land has traditionally been devoted to sheep farming. During the late Middle Ages, this

will lead to market domination in the cloth industries in the cities of Brabant.

70 In contrast to sites such as Dorset or Hamwic (Southampton), the excavated goat bone remains in Antwerp indicate consumption rather than artisanal production. However, bone and antler processing clearly takes

place in the early medieval Antwerp stronghold area. Even more so: the entire production chain (*chaîne opératoire*) is represented, from primary raw material through semi-finished to finished products. Seven deer skulls, antlers cut into pieces and polished, decoration attempts, hollowed-out long bones and the like, everything found its way into fully

or semi-finished combs, spinning or playing discs, awls and tools of all kinds. It is a fact that in late Carolingian and early Ottonian Antwerp there is an abundance of specialised antler and bone work, destined for a given market. As such, Antwerp clearly pun itself on the map as a production and trading centre that transcends the local interest.



## THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

71 Every cloud has a silver lining. Also in archaeology, which is no fall of surprises. If the pump installation of a construction crane on the Koralberg had not leaked on Wednesday 3 February 1997, the so-called 'oldest inhabitant of Antwerp' would never have been discovered. As it happened, the water from the pumping station accidentally flushed a human skull free from the profile wall of an area of soil dislocation that had previously received little attention. The Koralberg site, situated on a higher sand ridge between Zijkoude, Hofstraat, Oude Beurs and Lange Doornikstraat, was the backdrop to archaeological research for several months. Initially, heritage enthusiasts Geertjan Troopin and Marc Hendrickx scouted the site in search of historical and archaeological remains. With success, as the duo mapped out dozens of foundations, pits, ditches and postholes. One of the pits contained several long bones from a human skeleton, which made no sense at all. After all, there was never a known cemetery or chapel on this spot. In their zeal, drowned out by the noise of construction machinery, the researchers did not give it much attention at that point. As the pit was one of the oldest traces on the site, the burial must have been very old, older than anyone had ever remembered.

Attention came anyway with the accidental discovery of the dislodged skull, which among the subsequent researchers Johan Voekman and Danny Huygens was quickly

acknowledged the 'oldest inhabitant of Antwerp' on account of the assumed age of the skeleton. Physical-anthropological research indicated that the skull belonged to a man who had died when he was 25-30 years old. In his youth, he was ill or suffered from malnutrition, as evidenced by the growth deficiency in his teeth. The discovery was soon the talk of the press, partly due to the spectacular laboratory dating: both burials - the partially preserved skeleton and the skull - probably dated from the sixth century, a turbulent period of geopolitical struggles and social change. The assumption quickly followed that the skull belonged to a Viking, who had earned his place in Valhalla during the siege of Antwerp. Before getting too carried away, there was no indication whatsoever that it belonged to a Viking. No traces of violence, no weapons, no boat grave, no buried horses or slaves, nothing of what is associated with illustrious Viking graves.

What is striking, however, is that both individuals are buried facing east in a simple burial pit, without any burial gifts. This indicates a Christian burial. Moreover, after deciphering the excavation data, it appeared that there might be several burial pits between the two graves found. These pits also had the dimensions of graves and followed the same west-east orientation. The fact that the pits did not contain bones could be explained by the extensive degradation of the bone and/or by grave plundering, which seems to have been a common phenomenon