An Aspect of Continuity between Antiquity and Middle Ages: the origin of Flemish cities
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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

Adriaan Verhulst

Most historians of the Flemish cities have argued that there was no significant Roman habitation north of the civitates of Belgica secunda. Urban development in Flanders was thus seen essentially as a creation of the Carolingian period and after. But recent archaeological excavations have shown a substantial Roman presence at six sites which later were towns of medium or considerable importance. Although the buildings were evidently abandoned in the fifth century, settlement and political and ecclesiastical organization developed around them in the Merovingian age. The Roman background thus had a considerable effect on the development of town life in medieval Flanders.*

In a brief article entitled Les villes flamandes avant le XIIe siècle, Henri Pirenne in 1905 provided an exceptionally clear exposition of his views on the origin and earliest history of the Flemish cities (Pirenne 1905). He did not modify his theories significantly thereafter (Pirenne 1910, 1925, 1927). Subsequent Belgian historians who dealt with this problem, particularly the historians of the Ghent school—Van Werveke, Ganshof, Vercauteren, Dhondt, and others—remained faithful to the essential lines of Pirenne’s concepts until the 1950s (Van Werveke 1950).

In 1958 the German historian Petri tested the validity of Pirenne’s theories critically in the light of the numerous studies of individual towns of the Low Countries and the neighbouring regions of northern France.

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which had appeared during the previous two decades (Petri 1958a). Among other things, his synthesis demonstrated that Pirenne’s view of the origin of the medieval cities of the Low Countries had to be nuanced and corrected, particularly for the towns of the southern Low Countries, situated in modern northern France, and for the towns of the Meuse region, and that Pirenne also had to be supplemented with new information about early medieval commercial settlements in the delta area of the great rivers. But Petri basically confirmed Pirenne’s theories for the great Flemish cities of the Scheldt basin and along the North Sea coast, specifically Ghent and Bruges. Vercauteren’s bibliographical overview of the cities of medieval Europe, published in 1967, reached the same conclusion (Vercauteren 1967). The extremely detailed and analytical bibliographical survey which Nicholas published in 1969 on the origin of the medieval cities of northwestern Europe (Nicholas 1969) confirmed Petri’s findings on a more general European scale. But numerous detailed studies of the Flemish towns which had appeared since Petri wrote led Nicholas to the conclusion that the by now classic theories of Pirenne on these cities could no longer be maintained without serious qualification.

Pirenne proceeded on the assumption that in Flanders proper, between the North Sea and the Scheldt, every form of urban life and organization had been annihilated during the third and fourth centuries. He thought that in contrast to a few civitates in the southern part of this region, which began to revive as urban centres from the early Merovingian age, the great Flemish cities, particularly Bruges and Ghent, were completely free of Roman influences or antecedents, although they were in an area which had belonged to the Roman Empire for quite some time. Their origin as trading centers in the Carolingian period, according to Pirenne, was due entirely to long distance trade. Their continuation or revival after the Viking invasions of the second half of the ninth century was made possible only by the protection afforded by the new military fortresses which the counts of Flanders had erected in their immediate neighbourhood.

I have noted that a number of recent individual studies, some by historians but most by archaeologists, have contradicted Pirenne’s essentially simple views on several important points. Since most of them have appeared since Petri wrote in 1958, their results have not yet been incorporated into a synthesis. I wish to do this here, so that two important aspects of the new views can be tested against the theory considered valid since Pirenne: the extent and intensity of urban life between the North Sea and the Scheldt in the Roman period and its importance for early medieval urban development; and the traces and forms of urban life in this area during the early Middle Ages up to the time of the Viking invasions.

**Urban life in the Roman Empire**

Archaeological investigations over the past fifteen to twenty years have considerably broadened our understanding of urban life between the North Sea and the Scheldt during the Roman period. Not only Pirenne’s ideas, but also the more recent expositions of Petri and even of De Laet (1960) on this point, must be thoroughly
Figure 1. Cities in Flanders with Roman origins.
revised and supplemented. Together with new studies of material which had lain untouched in museums and collections for many years, the most recent excavations have emphasized the persistence of comparatively numerous vicī from the second half of the first century A.D. to the second half of the third. If we confine ourselves strictly to the North Sea-Scheldt area, we find Roman vicī at Courtrai, Harelbeke, Wervik, Oudenburg, Wenduine, Bruges, Aardenburg, Ghent and Antwerp. Some of these survived the Germanic invasions of the third quarter of the third century as castella (Raepsaet 1975). What strikes us is the appearance in this list of places along the North Sea coast and the Scheldt which merit our special attention in a discussion of the traces of urban life during the early middle ages (Figure 1).

A still unpublished thesis of H. Thoen, directed by Professor S. J. De Laet at the University of Ghent (Thoen 1973), shows that one of three mercantile vicī discovered to date along the North Sea coast was at Bruges, in the dock area just north of the modern city. The two others were at Oudenburg and Wenduine. The vicus of Bruges originated rather late, around 200 A.D., along an old creek created by the Dunkirk-I transgression, where there had been settlement since the Iron Age. This favourable location for commerce probably determined its mercantile character. There must also have been significant Roman habitation in the old medieval centre of Bruges even from the beginning of the imperial age, but its exact location and character cannot yet be determined. It was probably along the Roman road leading from Cassel to Aarden- burg over Poperinge and Bruges, which did not bisect the vicus noted above, for it ran farther south, passing through the territory of the medieval town from west to east. The settlement may have had the character of a statio along this route. Its relation to the vicus farther north is still uncertain (Figure 2).

Of cardinal importance is the fact that while the vicus north of the town was abandoned as a result of Germanic attacks from the sea between 268 and 270, and shortly thereafter destroyed and flooded by creeks during the Dunkirk-II transgression, the settlement along the southern road was not flooded because it was located on higher sandy ground, so that although it too was devastated in 268–70, subsequent settlement there remained possible. Finds from the late third and fourth centuries prove that this indeed happened. For this reason, Thoen thinks it not inconceivable that the fourth-century settlement in the city of Bruges acquired a military character, just as happened with other places in Flanders which survived the invasions of the late third century. Its center may have been a castellum, as at Oudenburg, Aardenburg, and perhaps also Ghent and Antwerp. Thoen thinks that this fortification should be sought on the site of the later medieval castle at Bruges, which was crossed by the Roman road between Cassel and Aardenburg. Systematic excavations have not yet been conducted along the southern side of this route, in the open ground in the middle of the castle in front of the modern city hall, but isolated Roman remains have been found there (De Vliegher 1965). The site, on the edge of the Pleistocene land mass along the then coast and not far from a creek made by the Dunkirk-II transgression, which in its turn
was connected to the open sea, was quite similar to that of the castellum of Oudenburg, which I shall discuss shortly.

But the square form and dimensions of the castellum at Oudenburg should not lead us to assume that the plan of a Roman castellum which may eventually be discovered at Bruges will correspond to the later square form of the medieval castle there. We have no certain knowledge of the latter structure before the mid-eleventh century (Dhondt 1957a; Verhulst 1960), and it is very difficult to reconstruct the topographical development of the castle before that time. We do
know that the late Carolingian pre-Romanesque church of St Donatian, which was probably built in the first half of the tenth century as a fortress church on the northern side of the east-west Roman road which crossed the area of the later fortification, was built on extremely marshy terrain in a thick peat stratum on a foundation of transversally positioned beech logs (Mertens 1955a, 1955b). The comital castle at that time thus very probably did not yet encompass the terrain north of the Roman road, but rather the land south of it on the Pleistocene sand ridge, where there was perhaps not enough room even in the first half of the tenth century to build the count’s church on the open plain that would constitute a central and essential part of the castle in later centuries (Verhulst 1960:41–4). This topographical situation virtually excludes the possibility that the marshy fenland north of the road, where a systematic excavation of the pre-Romanesque church of St Donatian has revealed no Roman finds at all, could have been part of a Roman castellum. The latter, if indeed it existed at all, could only be sought south of the Roman road which was on the northernmost extremity of the Pleistocene sand ridge, perhaps in the southern half of the later comital castle, perhaps farther west in the adjoining area of the Oudeburg (Koch 1962:59–64; Ryckaert 1973:165–7).

Until systematic excavation solves the problem of a castellum, we can only say with certainty that the inundations of the Dunkirk-II transgression in the northern and northwestern part of the area of the medieval city, together with the marshy fen character of the terrain on the northern edge of the Roman road formed by the west–east axis Zuidzandstraat–Steenstraat or Oudeburg–Hoogstraat–Langestraat, would have permitted habitation at Bruges in the fourth century only south of this road, on the Pleistocene sand ridge, presumably on the location of the later comital castle and/or somewhat west of it.

Although the military character of the late Roman settlement at Bruges remains somewhat uncertain, no such doubt is possible for Oudenburg, sixteen kilometres west of Bruges (Figure 3). The excavations of Professor J. Mertens between 1956 and 1970 revealed the existence here of a civilian vicus and a castellum. The former was on the western extremity and the latter on the eastern edge of the east–west Pleistocene sand ridge, which was the site of the Roman road linking Oudenburg and Bruges and which had a rather dense Roman settlement (Mertens 1962; Creus 1975). The vicus, which was extremely important, can be attested from the early imperial period and it was flourishing in the second century and the first half of the third, but it was probably devastated shortly after the middle of the third century.

A castellum was constructed at about that time somewhat farther east, involving an earthen wall with moat and a wooden palisade. It was revamped and elevated shortly thereafter, at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, to avoid the rising water level of the Dunkirk-II transgression. As early as the second half of the fourth century, however, it was replaced by a larger castellum (163 x 146 metres) surrounded by a turreted stone wall, which was connected with the establishment of the so-called litus Saxonicum on both the British and continental shores of the North Sea during
Figure 3. Oudenburg: 1. Limit of the Pleistocene sand ridge; 2. Roman cemetery; 3. Roman settlement; C. Roman castellum.
the fourth century. This was the Roman defense line of which the *Notitia dignitatum* gives us information, and Mertens thinks that Oudenburg was the chief stronghold on the Belgian North Sea coast.

The construction technique of the northern wall, which faced the sea, also shows that the rising sea level may have been a consideration in the replacement of the original wooden *castellum* at Oudenburg with one of stone. The originally favourable location of a *castellum* on a Pleistocene promontory in the flooded coastal area, connected to the open sea by a wide channel and to the interior by a Roman road, was probably destroyed gradually by the effects of the Dunkirk-II transgression. The sudden abandonment of the *castellum* in the first years of the fifth century can be explained by a combination of military factors connected with the disorders in northern Gaul between 406 and 410 and the Dunkirk-II flooding of the area east of the *castellum*. This inundation cut off the military base from its hinterland and it consequently lost its importance. This topographical isolation of Oudenburg is in contrast to the late Roman settlement at Bruges, where the Dunkirk-II inundations probably did not reach the Roman road along which the habitation was concentrated. It will be an important element in any evaluation of my argument concerning the importance of the two places during the seventh and eighth centuries.

Aardenburg, seventeen kilometres east of Bruges, is also on a ridge of sandy Pleistocene topsoil, on the edge of the coastline which had been flooded since about 300, and on the Roman road leading from Bruges (De Vries 1968). Earlier scholars presumed that a Roman fortification had existed here, on grounds of the *burg* suffix in the toponym and the later medieval plan of the city. The excavations begun between 1961 and 1963 by Trimpe Burger have shown conclusively that Aardenburg was the most important settlement in the area of the great river mouths from about 100 A.D., and especially between 170 and 273 (Trimpe Burger 1971:51-2; 1973:141-4; Raepsaet 1975:150) (Figure 4). It included numerous large buildings of Tournai stone, and during its great age between 170 and 273 had an essentially military character. The *castellum*, whose existence has been demonstrated conclusively by very recent and as yet unpublished work, seems to have been even larger than that of Oudenburg. But although it was still inhabited during the fourth century, it seems to have been comparatively unimportant then; for the settlement had been destroyed in or about 273 by fire and shortly thereafter flooded in large part by the Dunkirk-II transgression. In this, it forms a striking contrast to Oudenburg.

We must also note briefly that both earlier and more recent investigations have attested several Roman settlements in the delta area (Figure 5). They were commercial depots, military fortifications, or cult centres (Trimpe Burger 1971, 1973). One of the most important was the *emporium* which has since been submerged by the sea on the coast at Domburg. In addition, a sanctuary of Nehallenia has recently been discovered on the coast of North Beveland northwest of Colijnsplaat. Farther north, on the islands of Schouwen, Goeree-Overflakkee and Voorne around the mouth of the Meuse, archaeologists have identified a sanctuary, a *vicus*, and perhaps a *castellum* at Ouddorp, and a *castellum* which may have included a
commercial settlement at Oostvoorne. This entire area must have been of considerable commercial importance (it was on the route from England to the Rhineland) at least until about 270 A.D., when military events (the naval invasions) and probably also the rising sea level resulting from the Dunkirk-II flooding ended its activity. The Roman presence after that date, which had mainly a military character, can only be attested farther south, particularly at Bruges and Oudenburg, but also at Aardenburg.

The situation at Antwerp must also be considered, particularly in view of the significance of the area of the mouth of the Scheldt and the Meuse in the Roman period. Roman remains were revealed by the excavations of Professor A. Van de Walle along the Scheldt at Antwerp in the vicinity of the so-called ‘Steen’ within the later medieval semi-circular fortification (Van de Walle 1960, 1961). Interpretation of these finds was hindered, however, by the fact that they were not found in direct connection with Roman settlement traces in situ, and by the lack of a comprehensive report on the excavations. Only the finds themselves, dating from about 140 A.D. until the second half of the third century, have been interpreted somewhat more thoroughly (Vandenborn 1965). Although they did not directly prove the existence of a settlement,
the fact that they include tiles, roofing material, and the like already suggested it. Genuine direct traces of Roman settlement were found for the first time in 1975, just outside the wall of the fortification beside the butchers' hall (Oost 1976) (Figure 6). This suggests that the Roman settlement at Antwerp was comparatively large, but we still need further information concerning its essential character. There have been no finds
Figure 6. Antwerp: 1. Earthen and wooden rampart of the Burg, built in the second half of the ninth century; 2. Stone wall (built about 1225) enclosing the Burg area; 3. Present Scheldt quay; 4. Present-day alignment of the houses along the Scheldt: all streets and buildings west of this line were razed during the great works of straitening the Scheldt bank at the end of the last century; A. Former St Walburga Church; B. Steen; C. Butchers' Hall; D. Town hall; E. Excavation area, 1975; F (and also at A and B). Excavations by A. Van de Walle.
to date from the fourth century. For this reason too it is impossible for the time being to use archaeological evidence to hypothesize a Roman fortification at Antwerp, although several pieces of written evidence from the eighth and ninth centuries which I will discuss later might suggest this.

Such a hypothesis may not, however, be excluded farther upstream along the Scheldt at Ghent, where it has been shown that a Roman castellum almost certainly existed. The systematic excavations of Professor S. J. De Laet and his colleagues at the eastern end of the modern city area of Ghent, about two kilometres southeast of the medieval St Bavo’s Abbey on the border of the suburb of St Amandsberg and the village of Destelbergen, between the road to Dendermonde and the course of the Scheldt, have revealed an industrial settlement, as well as one of the largest cemeteries discovered to date in northern Gaul (De Laet 1969). Both were undoubtedly part of a widespread vicus which, just as was the case with many other Gallo-Roman vici in these regions, must have had a very diffuse geographical structure. The settlement and cemetery formed the eastern rim of the vicus at that point, so that the vicus most probably extended from the site of the excavations westward along the Dendermondse Steenweg to the site of the medieval St Bavo’s Abbey, at the confluence of the Lys and the Scheldt, where numerous Roman finds have already been discovered. This vicus was reached by a Roman road which archaeological evidence enables us to locate for a considerable distance northward from its junction at Blicquy. It reached the south bank of the Scheldt at Gentbrugge, just across from the vicus on the north bank (Figure 7). The vicus, which the name Gentbrugge and the designation Ganda for the site of the later St Bavo’s Abbey both suggest was probably named Ganda, existed from the mid-first century A.D. into the fourth. But the invasions of the late third century cost the eastern elements of the vicus most of its industrial and commercial character, with the result that the core of the settlement, which was to be primarily military from that time on, was probably located thereafter in the westernmost nucleus on the location of the medieval St Bavo’s Abbey. We may safely assume that a late Roman castellum existed here, in which the St Bavo’s Abbey was built in the second quarter of the seventh century. It was still being called castrum Gandavum in the first half of the ninth century (Verhulst 1972a, 1972b). But archaeological evidence cannot yet prove directly that a castellum existed here in the fourth century, although numerous random Roman finds have been found on the site. The deduction rests on historical arguments, a toponymic consideration, and several eighth- and ninth-century narrative sources which suggest that the remains of the castellum were still visible in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods. But the eastern sections of the vicus had been abandoned and had disappeared as a real settlement. They had a purely agrarian character in the early middle ages.

We conclude this summary with Courtrai. Located in the far interior, at the junction of the Roman roads Tongres–Boulogne and Tournai–Courtrai, this place is linked to the territory of the civitates along the southern edge of the area between the North Sea and the Scheldt which we are presently considering. The name Cortoriacum and the location on a Roman road have meant that scholars...
Figure 7. Ghent: 1. Marshes; 2. Presumed site of the Roman vicus; 3. Excavations by S. J. De Laet; A. Roman industrial area; B. Roman cemetery; C. Presumed site of the Roman settlement; D. St Bavo's Abbey, formerly castrum Gandavum and Roman castellum; E. Roman road Bavai-Ganda; F. Zandberg; G. St Bavo’s Cathedral, formerly St Jans Church; H. Gravensteen (the Count’s Castle); J. St Peter’s Abbey on the Blandinum hill.
have never seriously questioned the Roman character of Courtrai. Several excavations during the past twenty years have brought much new archaeological evidence to light which emphasizes the considerable importance of the place in the Roman period,
although the diggings were unfortunately unsystematic and disconnected (Raepsaet 1975:100, 164-5). Although they have not yet been formulated into a synthesis, we should note them briefly, for these Roman antecedents can explain the role which Courtrai played as an administrative centre in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, just as we shall see was the case for Bruges, Antwerp and Ghent.

The site of Courtrai and neighbouring Harelbeke contained two important *vici* or two segments of a single very extensive and loosely structured *vicus*. At least part of it, if not the entire agglomeration, had important industrial activity involving ironworking from the mid-first century A.D. until the great invasions of the late third. A sophisticated complex of trenches has also been excavated from the mid-first century, as well as remains of wooden and stone buildings. To date it is uncertain whether or not these should be interpreted as remains of a military encampment connected with the preparation of Claudius’ invasion of Britain. Finally, a cemetery dating from the first and second centuries has also been investigated (Figure 8). No trace has yet been found at Courtrai of fourth-century remains, but the reference in the *Notitia dignitatum* to a Roman garrison there suggests that it was still inhabited in the fourth century and had a military character (Dhondt 1948:133). The entire Roman settlement at Courtrai is at least as important as those at the other places we have considered. The fragmentary yet unmistakable indications of life at Courtrai in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods must be interpreted in the light of this.

These new data concerning Bruges, Oudenburg, Aardenburg, Antwerp, Ghent and Courtrai, practically all of which have only come to light during the intense archaeological investigations of the past fifteen or twenty years. They have substantially supplemented and modified our picture of urban life in the far northwest of Roman Gaul. Our previous knowledge was largely confined to the *civitates* of Cambrai, Tournaï, Arras, Thérouanne and Boulogne on the southern border of the region between the North Sea and the Scheldt, in the zone between Bavai and the coast where Roman and German had their points of contact (Vercauteren 1984). Now we find that commercial, industrial, and military settlements which were appreciably different from *civitates* and yet had an urban character existed north of this, with a striking concentration along the coast, adjoining or in the area of the mouth of the Scheldt, and along the Scheldt into the interior. In contrast to the walled *civitates*, these were open *vici* with a very diffuse geographical structure, consisting of several nuclei of settlement at some distance from one another, some of which had a decidedly commercial or industrial character, while others were military or semi-agrarian. From the mid-third century, one of the nuclei was frequently a *castellum*, whose fortifications made it increasingly important because of the invasions of the second half of the third century.

In contrast to the *civitates*, these *vici* owed their origin not to a function in the Roman administrative system, but to commerce on the North Sea and the great rivers, particularly between Britain and the Rhineland, and to certain forms of local industry such as iron extraction, pottery, and salt produc-
tion. In terms of these functions, practically all of them ceased to exist around 270. But whenever the settlement had included a military element, generally a castellum, it always survived the invasions of about 270 and continued to exist, in some cases until the beginning of the fifth century. This of course does not exclude the possibility that random civilian settlements tied in some way to the castella may have been repopulated during the fourth century, but they cannot have been of much practical importance in any sense, and certainly not for commerce.

**Traces and forms of early medieval urban life**

The problem of continuity from late Roman to early medieval urban life between the North Sea and the Scheldt must be reviewed in the light of the new material presented above. In particular, we must consider the extent to which the combination of the new archaeological data with historical material long since available may alter the thesis dealing with this problem which J. Dhondt formulated in 1957 (1957b). Dhondt noted the blossoming during the Merovingian period of commercial settlements at Dinant, Namur, Huy and Maastricht in the Meuse valley. Save Maastricht, which had been more important, all of them had been merely small forts in the Roman period. Dhondt drew a striking contrast between these places and the commercial and industrial decline of the old Roman civitates of Cambrai, Tournai, Arras and Thérouanne, the fate of which he attributed to the decline of the land routes, on which these civitates were located, in favour of waterways. He also contrasted strongly the rise of such new coastal harbours along the English Channel and the North Sea coast as Quentovic and Domburg with the decline of such Roman centres as Boulogne and Oudenburg.

As Petri noted (1958b), this viewpoint is perhaps too schematic and inadequately nuanced, and leaves no role for elements of continuity with the Roman period. On the contrary, for Dhondt as for Pirenne, the determining factor par excellence in establishing the first signs of urban life in the early middle ages was long-distance trade overseas and along waterways. But Dhondt in my opinion paid too little attention to the bare and quite striking fact of topographical continuity with the Roman period, which I think is important for every place which he considered (Dhondt 1957b:60–1), with the provisional exception of Quentovic (Dhondt 1962:196–7). Dhondt furthermore did not deal with Flanders proper between the Scheldt and the North Sea except for the civitates in the extreme south, for he felt that no traces of urban life could be detected here in the Merovingian age in terms of trade or industry, nor indeed by any other criterion. Since he knew of no evidence of Roman urban life in this region save at Oudenburg and Courtrai, continuity as a problem no more occurred to him than it had to Pirenne. But now, in the light of the new archaeological data concerning the Roman past of Bruges, Oudenburg, Aardenburg, Antwerp, Ghent and Courtrai, the fragmentary information concerning these places in the Merovingian and early Carolingian periods, to which Dhondt and others assigned no particular significance, must be re-examined. Indeed Petri noted in 1958 the possible importance of such a
study, on the basis of the first Roman finds at Antwerp as they were then becoming known (Petri 1958a:241).

We therefore return to our discussion of the places along the Flemish coast: Oudenburg, Bruges and Aardenburg. Because of their location on the edge of the Dunkirk-II transgression from roughly 300 to 700 A.D. (Verhulst 1959, 1962-3), any evaluation of the importance of each of these sites in the early middle ages must take account of the local consequences of these floods for habitation and general commercial location.

As we have seen, the castellum at Oudenburg suffered directly at the end of the third century from the rise of the sea level. Even the area east of the fortification was added, and the castellum was consequently built higher (see above, p. 182). The areas directly south of the castellum, Groeninge and Riedinne, were three metres below sea level and were still wet and marshy in the late middle ages (Gysseling 1950:81) (Figure 3). The exposed position of the Pleistocene sand ridge after the floods practically isolated Oudenburg from its hinterland, a fact which would have had a deleterious effect on its development as an eventual centre of the area. Thus it is hardly surprising that the cella which was erected at the beginning of the eighth century in the vicinity of Oudenburg and which was given in 745 to the abbey of St Bertin at Saint-Omer was built farther inland at Roksem, a few kilometres south of Oudenburg. The church of Roksem was the mother parish for the more recent parish of Oudenburg itself, of which only the part farthest south, in the vicinity of the castellum, was above sea-level, forming a small strip of sandy ground. The rest of the parish of Oudenburg consisted of flooded marshlands which were only brought into use as pasture in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries (Gysseling 1950; Noterdaeme 1958). When the name of Oudenburg appears for the first time in a medieval text, in 866, the place was a cattle pasture and had no urban character at all. The name Aldenborg which was then used for it means 'old fortification' (Gysseling 1950:48, 62). Although the Roman castellum still existed and was visible — and would be until the end of the eleventh century (Gysseling 1950:55-8) — this name shows furthermore that the earlier name of the Roman settlement had been lost. The place had been depopulated and was considered an abandoned ruin by the newly arrived German-speaking inhabitants.

The author of the Vita Eligii, writing in the first quarter of the eighth century, listed the various urbes or municipia appertaining to the diocese of Eligius, who had been chosen bishop of Noyon-Tournai (Krusch 1902:695); but the pastoral character of Oudenburg at that time makes it highly unlikely that he meant Oudenburg by his vaguely described and loosely identified municipium Flandrense.3 This curiously indirect description requires explanation. We get the clear impression, by the author's mention of all these places with the adjectival use of a place name beside the independent noun urbs or municipium, that the adjective has principal reference to the circumscription of which the author considered the municipium, which is not given its own proper name, the chief place.4 Three of the Flemish places with which we are concerned—Tournai, Ghent and Courtrai—were capitals of pagi which bore the town's name: pagus Tornacensis, pagus Gandensis, pagus Cor-
turiacensis (Ganshof 1949:268). But this is not true of the *pagus Flandrensis*, which was named from an area and not from an administrative centre. The use of the expression *municipium Flandrense* in the same context can hardly be explained other than on the assumption that the author of the *Vita Eligii* intended by analogy to indicate the chief place of the then existing *pagus Flandrensis*. This capital thus actually existed at the beginning of the eighth century, but it certainly did not give its name to the *pagus Flandrensis*, as Tournai, Ghent and Courtrai did to their respective *pagi*. We may deduce from this fact that the capital in question was either somewhat less important than the others or was of more recent date as a major centre. In this connection it is not without significance to note that the author of the *Vita Eligii* neglected to name two other *pagi*, the *pagus Mempiscus* and the *pagus Rodanensis*, which were constituent parts of Eligius' diocese and which are mentioned in other contemporary sources (Ganshof 1949:268). Neither of these *pagi* had an identifiable settlement with a non-agrarian or only semi-urban character which could have constituted a capital at that time and might have given its name to the *pagus*.

The author of the *Vita Eligii* thus seems to have been limiting his remarks to the most prominent centres of the bishopric of Tournai which had a somewhat urban character and were simultaneously capitals of a *pagus*. The *municipium Flandrense* is hard to identify because of the author's obscure terminology, but it would fit this description even if it were less important or of more recent origin than Tournai, Ghent and Courtrai. But the author was undoubtedly using *urbs* or *municipium* to mean a non-agrarian agglomeration which was either fortified or contained a fortification, or was of Roman origin – which at that time amounted to the same thing (Vercauteren 1934:350-1; Niermeyer 1960:710-1).

Only two places in the territory of the *pagus Flandrensis*, which extended from the Yser on the west to just east of Bruges and consisted, outside the flooded coastal area, only of a small strip of sandy ground to the south (Dhondt and Gysseling 1948), merited the term *urbs* or *municipium* at the beginning of the eighth century: Oudenburg and Bruges. Most scholars have heretofore assumed that Oudenburg was meant by the phrase *municipium Flandrense*, since they knew that it was of Roman origin (Gysseling 1950:68-71), while nothing of the sort had been ascertained for Bruges. In view both of what we have noted above about early medieval Oudenburg, and of my interpretation of the list of Flemish *municipia* in the *Vita Eligii* as capitals of *pagi* with a somewhat urban character and of Roman origin, we must identify Bruges as the *municipium Flandrense* mentioned in this source. Bruges was the capital of the *pagus Flandrensis* from the second half of the ninth century (Dhondt 1942:77-8), and I see no good reason why this could not have been the case a century and a half earlier, for it is now absolutely certain that Bruges originated as a Roman settlement.

If this conclusion is accurate, the problem of the origin of medieval Bruges must be posed in a radically different light. Bruges has always been regarded up to now as a completely new settlement owing its origin, which could be dated no earlier than the beginning of the ninth century, to overseas trade made possible by its favourable
location. It was at the junction of an overland route with a creek of the Dunkirk-II transgression which provided a link to the sea (Figure 2). A fortification provided the settlement with the necessary protection from the third quarter of the ninth century (Ganshof 1938; Dhondt 1957a; Verhulst 1960; Koch 1962; Ryckaert 1972). It was uncertain whether the commercial settlement originated during or before the first half of the ninth century, thereby predating the erection of the fortress, or whether it developed only after the castle had been built in its shadow in the second half of the century. But our new insights suggest on the contrary that Bruges was a centre with some urban characteristics which functioned as the capital of a pagus by the beginning of the eighth century at the latest. It owed its position to its topographical continuity with an eventually fortified Roman settlement which had been able to survive despite the floods of the Dunkirk-II transgression. Various considerations, however, suggest that it can hardly have been very significant in the early eighth century, among them the fact that it had still not given its name to the pagus Flandrensis of which it was the capital.

We are no more certain than we were before concerning the time when this centre, favoured by its location at the edge of a creek which crossed a road and led to the sea, became a centre for commercial activity transcending mere regional importance. The first reference to Bruges as a vicus dates only from about 900 (Koch 1949), but even this does not necessarily imply a mercantile settlement, for vicus can be interpreted to mean this only when other contemporary information confirms it (Petri 1958a; Köbler 1973). We have this information for Bruges only at the beginning of the eleventh century, when the place was first called portus (Ganshof 1938:282).

Our only piece of indirect evidence from an earlier period which suggests the role which Bruges would eventually play in international commerce is the derivation of the name of the city from the Old Norse bryggja, which means landing bridge or quay. Since the name is first recorded shortly after the middle of the ninth century, it must have been borrowed during the first half of that century at the latest. It may have occurred by confusion with an original local name derived from the little river Reie which flows from the hinterland of Bruges into the creek (Gysseling 1971). The meaning of the new name suggests that the place functioned as a harbour, so that it may have been borrowed from Old Norse as a result of commercial contacts with Scandinavia. We have no proof of this, but Louis the Pious’ grant to St Anskar of a small abbey at Torhout, twenty kilometres southwest of Bruges, as a training school for missionaries who were being sent to Scandinavia, suggests something of this kind (Verhulst 1960:60).

The presence of a mint at Bruges, attested around or shortly after the middle of the ninth century (Verhulst 1960:59), says little of the commercial importance of the place. The area of circulation of the Bruges coins, which could tell us something more, was not very extensive until about 900. Bruges coins of the Charles the Bald type have been recovered at Assebroek, Zelzate, Domburg, Glizy and Cuerdale (Morrison 1967:188). The Bruges mint was thus essentially regional. Numerous Bruges coins found in the Baltic region suggest that it only assumed
more international overtones at the beginning of the eleventh century (Ganshof 1938:284).

It is extremely difficult to draw a conclusion from this sparse and indirect evidence. Provisionally, it seems unlikely that Bruges owed its origin and earliest prosperity to international trade, although we cannot exclude the possibility that it had commercial significance as early as the first half of the ninth century. The infrequent direct evidence from written sources before 900 about the nature or importance of the settlement at Bruges all suggests that it was a political, military, administrative, and also eventually ecclesiastical centre (Ganshof 1938:281-2; Dhondt 1942:77-80; Noterdaeme 1954; Dhondt 1957a:4, 15; Koch 1962:34-6). The role of Bruges in politics and government continued to be the principal element in the importance of the city during the tenth century (Verhulst 1960:63). We still cannot prove even for that time that Bruges owed its rise primarily to international trade, and I think that this conclusion is even more valid for the ninth century. We must beware of forcing all large Flemish cities into the same pattern and deriving their origin from a single theory, as scholars since Pirenne have done. I do not think that Bruges originated as a Carolingian trading centre beside which a castle was subsequently erected in the second half of the ninth century which would endow the place with its continuity and economic prosperity as a city. Bruges was much older than this as a non-agrarian settlement, but on the other hand it only became an important centre of international commerce much later. The reasons for this slow and secondary commercial development are not completely clear.6 On the coast of Walcheren at Domburg, not far north of Bruges, another commercial centre played a very important role in continental trade with England until roughly the mid-ninth century, when it disappeared (Jankuhn 1958:464-72). Coin hoards prove that it had ties with Bruges (De Man 1936:6; Jankuhn 1958:471), and it seems probable that Bruges gradually assumed the role of this place (Koch 1970:317-18, 321-2). On the other hand, a number of urban centres, particularly Ghent and Tournai, became important for trade in the interior along the Scheldt during the second quarter of the ninth century, as did one palatium, Valenciennes (Petri 1958a:239, 248-9; Koch 1970:319). Their commercial activity during the second and third quarters of the ninth century was, I think, also a factor in the evolution of Bruges into a trading centre.

Just as was the case with Oudenburg and Bruges, the history of Aardenburg (Figure 4) after the Roman period shows the importance for the eventual survival or disappearance of a place of the local consequences of the floods of the Dunkirk-II transgression from the end of the third century. When the sea burst across the Pleistocene sand ridge on which Roman Aardenburg was situated, the major part of the settlement was flooded. Only the highest point, the site of the castellum, was spared. The ruins of this fortress remained isolated in a landscape which was uninhabitable until the beginning of the eighth century. From that time until well into the ninth century, we have reference only to sheep meadows in this vicinity which were exploited from artificially constructed mounds (De Vries 1968:238-4, 244). The area was
known as *pagus Rodanensis* from that time on. The name was derived from the Rudanná, the little stream on which Roman Aardenburg was located and which had probably been widened into a creek by the floods. As I emphasized above, this *pagus* had no population centre of an urban character, so that neither such a place nor the *pagus* itself was included in the early eighth-century summary of the *Vita Eligii*, discussed above (De Vries 1968:233–4).

The earliest surviving use of the name Aardenburg may be in a barely legible inventory of the properties of St Bavo’s Abbey at Ghent, dating from 810–11: *apud Rudburg ... bercarias ...* (Verhulst 1971:226). This form is related to the old versions of the toponym which are known from 966: *Rodenburg* (De Vries 1968:234). It is a Germanic word meaning fortification or burg on the Rudanná. It is striking that the inventory does not call it a *villa*. Several archaeological finds confirm the fact that it was inhabited in the ninth century (De Vries 1968:233), but it could have been only minimally important. It was probably limited to the ruins of the Roman *castellum*, which may have been rebuilt during the ninth century as a defensive outpost against the Viking danger (De Vries 1968:235–6). Maurice Prou thought that a coin of Charles the Bald (840–75) with the inscription *Rotanis civitas* was minted at Aardenburg rather than Rouen (Prou 1892:28). This identification is by no means certain (Dhondt 1948:137; De Vries 1968:234), but the term *civitas* does merit attention, for it then meant a fortification, generally of Roman origin. Other places which had been Roman and probably also contained ruins of a fortification, such as Antwerp and Courtrai, were called *civitates* in the ninth century, the former in a written source, the latter on a coin, as we shall see. *Civitas* was the translation of the Germanic *burg* (Köbler 1973), and this qualification certainly fits Aardenburg.

Ninth-century Aardenburg was thus in all probability a fortification rather than an agrarian settlement, but I hesitate to attribute any urban function to it, and certainly none of a commercial nature. It only became a secondary town with trading importance much later. Its existence as a non-agrarian centre from the ninth century is due entirely to its topographical continuity with the Roman period. That it did not become a nucleus for urban development in the ninth century, like Oudenburg but in contrast to Bruges, can certainly be explained largely by the fact that it was uninhabitable from the late Roman period until the beginning of the eighth century. Aardenburg and Oudenburg thus can constitute a demonstration *a contrario* of the accuracy of my hypothesis concerning the origin of medieval Bruges.

The history of early medieval Antwerp remains for various reasons a difficult and complex problem which cannot be resolved satisfactorily within the limits of this study. Although written evidence from the seventh through the ninth centuries is somewhat more plentiful than for the three places considered thus far, its authenticity and interpretation pose such problems that earlier scholars have not been able to reach definitive conclusions on the basis of it. Nor has any scholarly attempt been made to investigate critically the appreciable but fragmentary information about the earliest history of Antwerp and work it into a coherent synthesis since Professor Van de
Figure 9. Medieval Antwerp: 1. Castrum area; 2. First suburbium, enclosed by the ruien (eleventh century); 3. New quarter near the O.L. Vrouw Church, enclosed about 1200 by the welsen; A. Former St Walburga Church; B. Stee (castle); C. Nieuw Vleeshuis (Butchers' Hall); D. Town hall. E. O.L. Vrouw Church; F. St Michael's Abbey.
Walle's excavations in the medieval castle along the Scheldt revealed extremely interesting additional archaeological data from the Gallo-Roman, Carolingian and post-Carolingian periods (Van de Walle 1960, 1961). This archaeological information indeed is in some respects difficult to reconcile with the written sources.

Despite a hiatus in the archaeological evidence within and in the immediate neighbourhood of the tenth- and eleventh-century castle between the end of the third century and the ninth (Van de Walle 1960:13; 1961:136), it is still possible to assume on the basis of the evidence of the written sources that the nucleus of the early medieval settlement at Antwerp was in this area rather than around the twelfth-century abbey of St Michael, nearly a kilometre south of the later castle, a solution suggested by several authors including P. Bonenfant (1953:421-2) (see Figures 6 and 9). We proceed on the basis of a charter of 726, whose authenticity was demonstrated by Ganshof (1962:314) and Bonenfant (1958:420-1), in which a certain Rauchingus and his wife Bebelina gave to St Willibrord the church of SS Peter and Paul, which according to the charter had been built by St Amand infra castrum Antwerpis (Wampach 1930:78-80). Although the Vita Amandi does not mention the foundation of this church (Krusch 1910), this omission can be explained by analogy with other foundations of this missionary which his biography does not enumerate (Verhulst 1955:42-4). We may therefore assume that after the first unsuccessful missionary efforts of Eligius (de Moreau 1947:92; Notersdaeme and Dekkers 1955:141-9) and Amand (de Moreau 1942:26-7, 1947:88-9; Notersdaeme and Dekkers 1955:146-7), a church dedicated to SS Peter and Paul was in fact established at Antwerp after the mid-seventh century.

Solving the problem of the exact location of the fortification within which the charter of 726 places the church would require a lengthy digression which we shall omit here. Its existence however is confirmed by the reference Normanni Andwerpam civitatem incendunt in the Annales Fuldenses for the year 836 (Kurze 1891:27). This source uses civitas to mean a fortification of Roman origin constituting the administrative and/or ecclesiastical centre of a wider area (Bonenfant 1953:422; Schlesinger 1954; Köbler 1973). Since it seems improbable on the other hand that the civitas of 836 was a recent fortification (Vercauteren 1936), we may identify it with the castrum of 726, which in its turn must be considered of older origin. No doubt it originated in a late Roman fortress, just as did practically all Merovingian castra (Vercauteren 1936).

Although archaeologists have not proven that a late Roman castellum existed at Antwerp, the topographical connection and even the continuity of the Merovingian castrum with the now definitely attested Gallo-Roman agglomeration near the area of the later fortification seems very probable. A possible Merovingian settlement at Antwerp was thus probably concentrated in the neighbourhood of a Roman fortification in which a church was built in the seventh century. Both church and fortification were probably burned by the Northmen in 836. A new castle was built along the Scheldt at the end of the ninth or beginning of the tenth century, and a church was constructed within it shortly afterward.
which was dedicated to St Walburga (Van de Walle 1960, 1961; Van Werveke 1965:46–7).

What else do we know of the nature and importance of this place between the seventh and tenth centuries? Coins were struck there in the seventh and eighth centuries, and this happened more often than not in or beside a Merovingian fortification (Bonenfant 1953:423). But minting does not necessarily indicate commercial activity, concerning which we have no other references, for the mention of a toll in the charter of 726 is probably an eleventh-century interpolation (Ganshof 1962:314). No coins are known to have been struck at Antwerp during the Carolingian period. But the area of the later castle was still inhabited without marked hiatus in the ninth century, despite the annihilation of the earlier fortification by the Northmen.11 The structure of the ninth-century houses which have been excavated, particularly their arrangement in a row along a single street and the correspondingly advanced stage of division of the land into lots, suggests that this settlement had an urban character (Van de Walle 1960, 1961), which may be attributed to a commercial function of the town,12 but it can be explained equally well by its administrative and military role. The importance of this urban agglomeration in one or other of these aspects must have been affected by the invasion of the Northmen in 836. Antwerp shared this fate with the Carolingian emporia at Domburg, Wilna and Dorestad, the prosperity of which also declined for the same reason around 840, in contrast to the places upstream along the Scheldt — Ghent, Tournai and Valenciennes — which were just assuming a commercial character during the second and third quarters of the ninth century (Koch 1970).

The expansion of Antwerp only recommenced about 900. A hint of this is the use of the term vicus in reference to it at that time (Bonenfant 1953:423), the construction of a new fortification and of a new civilian quarter within the walls (Van de Walle, 1960, 1961), as well as the reappearance of coins under King Henry I the Fowler (919–36) and the use of the term civitas (Bonenfant 1953:424). We still cannot say whether this expansion was connected with international trade, or that it resulted from the essentially administrative and military role still played by the castle of Antwerp, which was on the border of the Empire in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries (Dhondt 1952:8, 14; Van Werveke 1965:46; Van Acker 1975:35–8). Of course, such an administrative and military function is very probable for the seventh, eighth and early ninth centuries, but its precise content is still a mystery. Thus for example the bishopric to which Antwerp appertained and the secular circumscription of which it was a part are still uncertain well into the eleventh century (Dhondt 1952:8, 13–15). Further investigation must be made of the functions of Rauchingus, who was obviously a very distinguished Frankish potens vir with power over the castrum at the beginning of the eighth century (Ganshof 1958:22), as well as of the role of the unknown monastery of which the church of SS Peter and Paul was a dependency before Rauchingus gave it to St Willibrord (Van Acker 1975:15).

Although many aspects of the earliest history of Antwerp thus remain unclear, this preliminary investigation has in any case once again confirmed, as it did for Bruges,
the significance of Roman and Merovingian antecedents for the establishment of the settlement and later development of an important medieval city. We see again, too, that the role of such a non-agrarian population centre in military, monetary, ecclesiastical and perhaps also administrative affairs was primarily in the pre-Carolingian period and preceded the eventual commercial importance of the place.

A re-examination of the written evidence for the history of early medieval Ghent which I undertook in 1972 in the light of the excavations of Professor De Laet in and near Roman Ganda and of the attractive hypothesis which the toponymist Gysseling had elaborated from toponymic and topographical elements (Verhulst 1972a, 1972b), has thoroughly altered our knowledge of the history of Merovingian and Carolingian Ghent. My new concepts can be summarized as follows.

On a slight elevation along the left bank of the Scheldt at its confluence with the Lys, the ruins of a Roman castellum still existed at the beginning of the seventh century. The castellum and its immediate environs were uninhabited. The Roman vicus east of it had disappeared and been replaced by several small agrarian settlements of Frankish origin farther north. An overwhelmingly or even exclusively agrarian settlement must have been located in the seventh century a few hundred metres upstream along the left bank of the Scheldt before it joined the Lys, at the crest of a hill on which the modern St Bavo's Cathedral is located; part of this elevation is still called the Zandberg (Figure 7). St Amand tried in vain around 630 to convert the inhabitants of this settlement to Christianity. Their hostility toward him caused him to withdraw into the ruins of the Roman castellum a few hundred metres downstream, where a few years later, by 639 at the latest, he founded a church with a cloister. It was originally dedicated to St Peter, but it was called St Bavo's Abbey from the beginning of the ninth century. Some decades later, between about 650 and 675, several of Amand's disciples founded a little cella dedicated to SS Peter and Paul on the hill called Blandinium considerably farther south along the Scheldt. Its excentric location was to prevent it from becoming important in the history of Ghent until the beginning of the tenth century, after St Bavo's Abbey had been destroyed by the Northmen. But the fate of the abbey of Gand, the later St Bavo's, was quite different. It was at the confluence of Lys and Scheldt and was being called castrum Gandavum by the beginning of the ninth century because of the fortified castellum within which it had been built. The abbey evidently developed close ecclesiastical ties with the settlement upstream on the Zandberg in the course of the seventh and eighth centuries, since it was functioning as the cult centre of the Zandberg settlement in the ninth. At the beginning of the eighth century the Vita Eligii noted a municipium as the chief place of a pagus Gandensis, as did the roughly contemporary Vita Amandi. As we have seen, such language meant a settlement with urban character, fortified and as such considered at the time to be of Roman origin. The author very probably meant by this the complex formed by the Roman castellum and St Bavo's Abbey which had been built within it, which was the part best known to him. But this does not necessarily mean that the administrative centre of the pagus was also
located there. An examination from later sources of the juridical situation in the ninth century of the settlement on the Zandberg, several hundred metres upstream on the Scheldt, has shown that it probably still did not belong to the jurisdiction of either of the two abbeys of Ghent. It is thus not inconceivable that it may have been under the jurisdiction of the king or his representative, the count of the district of Ghent, in the ninth century, and that the administrative centre of the pagus was situated there as early as the beginning of the eighth century.

Be that as it may, the vicus which the Vita Bavonis situates along the Scheldt in the second quarter of the ninth century, not far from St Bavo’s Abbey, and the portus of Ganda that is mentioned around 865 in the Martyrologium Usuardi, both refer not to the location of St Bavo’s Abbey, but to the settlement several hundred metres upstream from the confluence of Lys and Scheldt, on the Zandberg in the vicinity of the later St Bavo’s Cathedral. Thus this settlement must have developed a commercial function along the Scheldt during the second and third quarters of the ninth century in addition to its eventual administrative function as capital of the district, which may be older but cannot be proven so. The proximity of the rich St Bavo’s Abbey was not unconnected with this, as is shown by the fact that the fair which was still being held around 1000 in the portus at the festival of St Bavo had probably originated in the ninth century in the settlement on the Zandberg.

This connection with the abbey of St Bavo — the term ‘dependence upon’ would surely be too strong in the case of Ghent — is further confirmed by the following considerations. St Bavo’s Abbey was burned by the Northmen in 851, but this occasioned only a brief caesura in the life of the abbey. However, in 879 the foundation was chosen and organized by the Vikings as a winter encampment, and this time it meant the end of the monastic community, which was only reinstalled several decades later, during the second quarter of the tenth century. The nearby portus probably suffered as little permanent damage from the first Viking raid in 851 as the abbey, since the Martyrologium Usuardi mentions the portus around 865. Shortly after the second Viking occupation, however, a completely new commercial settlement originated along the Lys, far to the west, in the immediate neighbourhood of a fortification constructed during the last quarter of the ninth century by the count or the lay abbot of St Bavo’s to defend the region against the Northmen. This development is characteristic in two respects: the new commercial settlement originated when St Bavo’s Abbey no longer existed, and it developed at some distance from it, this time in the shadow of a new fortress and clearly connected to it.

The earliest Carolingian mercantile settlement on the Zandberg, however, was probably abandoned during the Viking invasion of 879, and only revived in the first half of the tenth century. This time it was free of any connection with the earlier but not yet rebuilt St Bavo’s Abbey but was probably influenced by the second nucleus of the portus which had developed in the interim along the Lys. The two would grow toward each other during the tenth century. Thus, although the first commercial settlement at Ghent clearly originated in connection with the increase of trade along the Scheldt in the
ninth century, it cannot be considered apart from the administrative or ecclesiastical centre, in this case an important abbey, whose location was ultimately determined by topographical continuity with the Roman period, just as was true of Bruges and Antwerp.

The considerable importance of Roman Courtrai seems to have continued into the early middle ages. Just like Ghent, Tournai, and (as I think I have demonstrated) Bruges, Courtrai was called *municipium* by the *Vita Eligii* at the beginning of the eighth century. We may therefore assume that it was an agglomeration of urban type, in which fortifications, walls, or buildings were still present, which had originated in the Roman period. Perhaps for this reason too the place was the centre of the *pagus Corturiacensis*, whose existence may be assumed on grounds of my interpretation of this text given above. A mint still functioned at Courtrai during the Carolingian period, although this is less certain for the Merovingian age (Dhondt 1948:136). The coins struck there bear the reference *civitas*, a qualification which says less of the importance of the place than of its fortified character and its Roman origin. Finally, the choice of Courtrai as a winter encampment by the Northmen in 880 (D’Haenens 1967:48) should be considered in connection with these facts; it may also help to explain why we hear nothing else about Courtrai for roughly a century.

Yet Courtrai, just like Aardenburg, would nonetheless achieve a certain importance as a city of essentially secondary rank much later, in the twelfth century. Even more striking is the role which it, and nearly all the other places we have studied, assumed as an administrative centre in the Carolingian period. The case of Courtrai reinforces my thesis that the administrative factor was pre-eminent in the continuation of an urban centre of Roman origin into the early middle ages.

In conclusion, we see that Oudenburg and Aardenburg, which were rendered uninhabitable by floods until the ninth century and which were conspicuous for centuries as abandoned Roman *castella* towering over an inhospitable region, were exceptional cases. Bruges, Antwerp, Ghent and Courtrai, the other places which we have considered here, had also preserved their importance into the late Roman period, for the most part as fortified centres. But sources from the seventh or early eighth centuries show that these four were not merely more densely settled than the purely rural places in their environs, but also had an importance which transcended the immediate locality, mainly as fortified administrative centres for a larger area. This fact as well as their geographical location can only be explained by their Roman origin. Continuity with the Roman period must be viewed primarily or exclusively as topographical, but in some cases it probably involved the continuation of the subdivision of a Roman *civitas* within the circumscription of the *pagus* (Ganshof 1949:268). We thus find that these places had a distinctly urban character in the Merovingian and early Carolingian periods, just as did the larger *civitates* farther south: Cambrai, Tournai, Arras and Thérouanne. There are no more indications than for the *civitates* of the eventual commercial importance of any of these centres on a more than local scale before the second or third quar-
ter of the ninth century. Only then did *emporium* develop, at least at Ghent and perhaps also at Bruges and Antwerp, beside or within what we may consider pre-urban nuclei of Merovingian and Roman origin, just as happened at Cambrai, Tournai, and Arras at about the same time. These Carolingian trading settlements in Flanders no more developed *ex nihilo*, on virgin terrain and without historical antecedents or ties to centres of administration than those in other areas. On the contrary, they were bound to previously existing pre-urban nuclei whose location had been determined primarily historically, definitely not for commercial reasons. The role of these pre-urban nuclei in the rise of the mercantile settlements was for that reason perhaps more important than the revival of international trade, which I think exerted an influence of only secondary importance. This role was moreover probably not the mere passive protection afforded by the military character of the pre-urban nuclei. Although this military element was present from their Roman past, it was not primary.

Town development before the Viking invasions is thus similar in many respects to the picture which Pirenne sketched for the following period. Even for the post-Viking age, we may question whether the prior presence of a pre-urban nucleus, a completely new *castrum* or the fortification of an earlier centre, must not be interpreted as an indication of its more active role in relation to the commercial settlement than Pirenne was inclined to think, despite its now more overtly military role. Recent studies of the character and topography of individual pre-urban nuclei from the late ninth and early tenth centuries show that they, again contrary to Pirenne’s assumption, played an active economic role in themselves and in their relations with their neighbourhoods. They can no longer be considered mere passive consumers (Van Werveke and Verhulst 1960; Joris 1972). If the role of international trade was less dominant than the active role of the pre-urban nuclei in the rise and development of the mercantile settlements during the period after the Viking invasions, it was almost certainly less a factor in the age preceding them.

**Notes**

1 The topographical isolation of the castellum at Oudenburg as a result of the floods of the Dunkirk-II transgression east of it is not mentioned in the studies of Mertens (1962) and Creus (1975). H. Thoen has informed me that there is conclusive archaeological evidence to prove this.

2 It is striking that Petri (1958b) does the same thing.

3 *Vita Eligii*, 2, c. 2: Hoc ergo aurificem invivum detonsum constituerunt custodum urbium seu municipalium his vocabulis, Vennandensi scilicet, quae est metropolis urbs, Tornacensi vero, quae quondam regalis exitit civitas, Noviomagensi quoque et Flandrensi, Gandensi etiam et Corturiacensi.

4 Reasoning further along these lines, Van Werveke (1933:15) considered these *municipia* simply as *pagi* and not as population centres.

5 I shall deal later with the nature of Aardenburg, located in the *pagus* Rodanensis. Both the *pagus* and Aardenburg itself were named for the river Rudanná. On the *pagus* Memphicouis see Koch (1950).

6 I attempted in an earlier study to derive these reasons from Bruges’ problematical water link with the sea during the late ninth and tenth centuries (Verhulst 1960:59), but this hypothesis was called into serious question by Koch (1962:6-8, 48-9).

7 Bonenfant (1953:420-4) provides a summary of the problems and the literature, as well as an overly brief sketch of the earliest history of Antwerp. I must disagree with several of his views, and of course he
could take no account of the excavations, mentioned hereafter, of Van de Walle.

8 The most recent attempt in this direction (Van Acker 1975:9-62) is insufficiently critical and leaves many problems unsolved.

9 The gap in archaeological finds corresponds essentially to the Merovingian period, and as such is noticeable at many other places, such as Ghent.

10 I do not agree with Van Werveke (1965:47) that the church of St Walburga was constructed only at the beginning of the twelfth century, for he interpreted Van de Walle’s excavations too literally. Koch’s arguments (1962:44-8) for Bruges and Coens’ (1962) information on the cult of St Walburga at Antwerp suggest to me that this church could have been built no later than the tenth century.

11 In view of the difficulties in dating precisely the pottery fragments uncovered at Antwerp, Van de Walle’s dating (1960, 1961) of the Carolingian and post-Carolingian traces of settlement within the castle is not entirely exact, as indeed Van Werveke noted (1965:46). Van de Walle dates the construction of the earliest wall around the post-Viking castle after the mid-ninth century, on grounds of pottery finds which could also belong to the tenth century. But against this view we must consider that the material which Van de Walle did not note in his publications includes material which dates from throughout the tenth century. I owe this information to F. Verhaeghe, who studied the Antwerp pottery finds (Verhaeghe 1975:163-4).

12 This is apparent from the significance which must be attached in a number of places, such as Huy, Dinant and Tournai, to the existence of small plots with houses called sedilia (Koch 1970:319-20). Such sedilia are also found in the countryside (Ganshof 1975:73, 96), so that their occurrence does not automatically permit the direct conclusion that the place had a commercial character.

Literature


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