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Roma Secunda

Trier in Late Antiquity

When writing on Trier's Roman past modern historians, since the early nineteenth century, followed almost exclusively the ancient writers in viewing the late Roman period as an age of military defeat and economic decline, ending with catastrophic destructions of ancient city life. Archaeology however, in the last few decades, has in vain looked for wide spread destruction layers to be connected with Germanic invasions in the fourth and fifth centuries. Instead, the excavators found indications of an undisturbed transformation process between the ancient and the medieval city, thus establishing archaeology as an independent source of historical information.

Trier: a late Roman metropolis

Trier's history as an Imperial centre started in the later third century: after an agricultural and economic boom of more than two centuries, the city became, together with Cologne, one of the capitals of the Gallic Empire. Between 260 and 274 A.D. the city issued coins bearing the portraits of the usurpators Postumus, Victorinus Tetricus I and Tetricus II who claimed to be Emperors of the Gaulish and Germanic provinces of the Roman Empire.¹

Twelve years after the suppression of the usurpation by Emperor Aurelian in 274 A.D. Trier was chosen as residence by Maximianus, Diocletian's colleague in the *Tetrarchy*. In 293/4 A.D. an Imperial mint was opened in the Mosella capital, and from 306 to 315 A.D., in succession of

1 K.J. Gilles, *Das Münzkabinett im Rheinischen Landesmuseum Trier. Ein Überblick zur trierischen Münzgeschichte* (Trier 1996) 22f.

his father Constantius Chlorus, Constantine I as Roman Emperor (306 - 337 A.D.) took residence in Trier, and established the *praefectus praetorio Galliarum*, the highest military command of the Western Roman Empire.²

Again, from 367 to 383 A.D., Trier served as Imperial residence to the emperors Valentinianus I (364 – 375 A.D.) and his son Gratian (367 – 383 A.D.). After an interregnum by the usurpators Magnus Maximus and Flavius Victor Trier, from 388 to 39, again became capital, this time of the Roman Emperor Valentinian II. After Valentinian's death in 392 A.D. emperor Theodosius I transferred the Imperial court to Milan and the seat of the *praefectus praetorio* from Trier to Arles. In the fifth century Trier declined to a more regional political centre which was ruled, by a local *comes* (warlord) named Arbogast.

Medieval traditions compiled in the *Gesta Treverorum* of the eleventh century mention a Christian community and a sequence of bishops from the late third century onwards, but cannot be verified through late Roman sources. In the fourth century the presence of Christian church fathers Athanasius from Alexandria and Ambrosius from Milan and the legendary bishop Martin of Tours is attested by contemporary authors and indicates the spiritual significance of the Imperial residence.³

When these famous early Christian personalities came to Trier in the fourth century they met a city which differed completely from the smaller, declining late Roman settlements they had crossed on their way from the south. Instead, the Imperial residence on the South Eastern shore of the Mosella matched all the standards of urban centres in the late antique Mediterranean world: visitors approaching Trier either from Metz, in the south, or from Mainz, in the north, had to pass first large cemeteries extending on both sides of the road. At least from the

2 As an introduction: H.P. Kuhnen, 'Das römische Trier.' *Führer zu archäologischen Denkmälern* 40 (Stuttgart 2001) 27-58.; H.P. Kuhnen, 'Trier, Kaiserpalast und Wirtschaftszentrum der Spätantike' in: H. Siebenmorgen ed., *IMPERIUM ROMANUM. Römer, Christen, Alamannen - Die Spätantike am Oberrhein. Ausstellungskatalog Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe* (2005) 52ff.; H. Heinen, *Trier und das Trevererland in römischer Zeit* (Trier 1988). With focus on the Constantinian period: A. Demandt and J. Engemann ed., *Konstantin der Große. Geschichte, Archäologie, Rezeption. Kolloquium Trier 10/15-10-2005* (Trier 2006).

3 H.P. Kuhnen, 'Palazzo imperiale e centro economico: Treviri al tempo di Ambrogio' in: Museo Diocesano di Milano ed., 387 d.c.: *Ambrogio e agostino - le sorgenti dell'Europa. Ausstellungskatalog* (Mailand 2003) 35-42.



Fig. 1: The Porta Nigra.

middle of the fourth century, but maybe already in the late second or mid third century, the city itself was surrounded by an impressive city wall of 6480 meters long, six and a half meters high and three meters thick, protected by an outer ditch and up to 38 intermediate towers. At least five monumental gates gave access to the city. Most famous amongst them, the so-called Porta Nigra in the north, had two half-circular protruding towers of 22,65 meters high, and two gallery storeys of arched openings above the double-arched gateway (fig. 1).

Trier: the genesis of an urban centre

The urban area inside the city enclosure had an extension of 285 hectare. It was divided, since the early first century A.D., according to the *Hippodamian* principle by a rectangular grid of streets.⁴ Having been laid out originally with a width of about seventeen to eighteen meters, the width in the late Roman period was diminished to eleven to twelve meters, due to the extension of private buildings into the public space.

Most of the square areas – the so-called *insulae* – between the urban

4 R. Schindler, 'Das Straßennetz des römischen Trier' in: Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier ed., *Festschrift 100 Jahre Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier. Trierer Grabungen und Forschungen* Bd. XIV (Mainz 1979) 122-140.



Fig. 2: The amphitheatre of Roman Trier.

streets were densely built-up since the Early Imperial period. After the first generations of settlers had lived in wooden houses and dedicated wooden temples in the indigenous so called Altbachtal sacred area, stone architecture prevailed among public and private buildings since the period of the Flavian emperors of the late first century A.D. It was under their rule that a forum was built as the monumental centre of the city. In the second century A.D. the Augustan wooden bridge which crossed the Mosella was replaced by a stone construction. In the late first or second centuries two public thermal buildings - the so-called Therms of St. Barbara and the Therms of the Cattle Market - and two monumental Roman temples were built in the city on the eastern side of the Mosella. Another sanctuary and a cultic second theatre were added on the opposite side of the Mosella, dedicated probably to Lenus Mars as the main tribal goddess of the Gaulish tribe of the Treveri. Towards the end of the second century an amphitheatre was constructed on the eastern end of the *decumanus* main road.⁵ The northern half of the city area was dominated by upper class urban dwellings, whilst in the southern half private construction was less luxurious, and ended, towards the south,

5 H.P. Kuhnen, 'The Trier amphitheatre: an ancient monument at the light of new research' T. Willmott ed., in: *Roman amphitheatres and spectacular: a 21 century perspective*. BAR Internat. Series 1946 (Oxford z.j.) 95-104.



Fig. 3: The Aula palatina ("Basilika") was the central part of the Imperial palace at Trier.

with the large potters' area on the southwestern edge of the city.

Trier in the Age of Constantine

In the days of Constantine and his successors the Forum and the Roman temples had lost most of their significance. The new highlight of late Roman Trier was the huge imperial palace which covered about 15 to 20 *insulae* of the urban ground plan, all together at least 20 hectare out of the 284 hectare of the walled city area. The most impressive monument of the residence quarter was the *Aula palatina*, the so-called Basilika. The Aula palatina formed the centre of the *palatial* area.⁶ Construction began shortly after 307 A.D. which is proven by a coin impressed in the mortar of the exterior wall. The ground plan was a rectangular hall of 71,5 to 32,6 meters on the ground and an interior height of about 30 meters, ending with an apse in the north. The floor was heated by a *hypocaust* composed of 7 segments each with an exterior *praefurnium*. Never in antiquity was the basilica seen as an isolated building as it looks today, since it was framed in the East and West by porticoes up to the second storey (fig. 3).

6 M. König ed., *Palatia: Kaiserpaläste in Konstantinopel, Ravenna und Trier* (Trier 2003).

The walls were built of brick masonry covered on the outer side by plaster scanty remains which can be seen in the window openings of the west side. The interior walls were covered by polychrome marble slabs in the *opus sectile* technique, as was the floor. To the east and south of the *Aula palatina* additional buildings of the imperial residence followed, most of which have disappeared due to building activities between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. Even the 500 meters long *circus* building for horse races to the east of the palace has completely disappeared due to modern building activities. So the only other visible building of the Late Roman Palace are the Imperial Therms on the southern end of the residential area, close to great *decumanus* central road and the amphitheatre. In order to build the Imperial Therms at least four *insulae* of a former luxurious living quarter with peristyle houses had to be demolished. The therms whose construction began early in the fourth century consisted of three units: the monumental entrance building and the square *palaestra* to the west, and the heated thermal unit with an enormous *frigidarium*, *tepidarium* and *caldarium* to the east, followed by an additional courtyard for technical purposes. The lay out was symmetrical and was classified by archaeologists as representing, like the therms of St. Barbara, the so-called small imperial type. The *frigidarium* (cold bath) consisted in a rectangular hall 57 to 22 meters with a large semicircular pool. The *caldarium* (hot bath) had three large apsidal pools and 22 vaulted windows in the central apse, and had originally a height of 18 meters. In spite of their name the Imperial Therms were never completed as therms. Construction ceased probably in the moment when Constantine left Trier around A.D. 315, and the building was left unfinished until the second half of the fourth century.⁷ At that time the *caldarium* was transformed into a *triapsidal* hall serving most probably, like similar buildings in the Roman East, representational purposes of the political aristocracy (fig 4).

Excavations underneath Trier's episcopal cathedral revealed remains of a third to early fourth century luxury dwelling the ceilings of which were decorated with excellent frescos. At a later date the private dwelling was demolished in favour of a new *basilical* building which formed part of an ecclesiastical complex with seemingly two *basilicae* with atrium adjoining each other. As the relevant excavations have not yet been

7 D. Krencker en E. Krüger, *Die Trierer Kaiserthermen*. TGF I,2 (Augsburg 1929).



Fig. 4: The Imperial Therms.

published the foundation date and most details of the building history are still in debate, but it can safely be considered that at the latest in the sixth century A.D. Bishop Nicetius erected on the site his ecclesiastical church which became the predecessor of the *Romanesque* dome.⁸

Until today no traces of other late antique churches have been found inside the city wall. Instead, all the other build monuments of late antique christianity are situated in the cemeteries surrounding the walled area in the north, west and south. Most famous amongst them are the *basilicae* of St. Maximin in the northern and of St. Matthew in the southern cemetery. Both of them are built in the middle of graveyards which were used since the second and third centuries. Ruins of early Christian churches have been discovered underneath the floors of both, but so far cannot be dated precisely between the fourth and the sixth centuries A.D.⁹

As a densely populated urban centre Trier's authorities had to supply an urban population of about 50.000 to 80.000. For this purpose large granaries were built on the western edge of the urban area, underneath

8 S. Ristow, *Frühes Christentum im Rheinland. Die Zeugnisse der archäologischen und historischen Quellen an Rhein, Maas und Mosel* (Köln, Münster 2007) 193-202.

9 Ristow, *Frühes Christentum*, 203-214.

the medieval St. Irminen monastery close to the Mosella. The complex consisted in at least three large rectangular halls of 70 meters by 20 meters each. As the complex was walled it can be postulated that it was under imperial supervision and formed part of the official *annona* supply system.

Numismatic evidence gives proof of an Imperial mint, and the official late Roma military handbook of the *Notitia dignitatum* mentions Trier as seat of an Imperial arms factory. Traces of both have not yet been found by archaeology.¹⁰

Instead, rescue excavations since the 1920s uncovered a large number of ruins of private dwellings and craftsmen workshops. As most of the material concerned is unpublished and no synoptic analysis is available it is hard to work out the differences between private architecture of the first to the third century and of the fourth to the fifth century. In general it can be said that private housing showed considerable continuity and developed without major interruption from the beginning of stone architecture in the late first century until the end of the antique city structures somewhere in the fifth century. Up to now no overall destruction layers can be identified, contrary to the written sources who speak of several destructions by Franks in the first half of the fifth century A.D.¹¹ Consequently building and rebuilding of houses in most cases form part of a continuous process. When houses were rebuilt building debris were as far as possible filled in on the site in order to avoid transportation costs. The consequence was a gradual growth in height of the floors of the later Roman houses, with accumulation layers of the Roman period of about two to four meters below the present-day surface. Another characteristic feature of late Antique housing was the re-use of building material from earlier periods, causing a mix of masonry stones and spolia. Mosaics and wall paintings as interior decorations remained in fashion until the second half of the fourth century. Though the use of the houses concerned might well have continued into the fifth century there are no traces of new mosaics in private houses from the fifth century onwards.

10 B. Beyer-Rothhoff en B.M. Luik, 'Wirtschaft in römischer Zeit.' *Geschichtlicher Atlas der Rheinlande* III/3-4 (Bonn 2007). Mit einem Beitrag zur Münzgeschichte von R. Loscheider.

11 H.P. Kuhnen, 'Zwischen Reichs- und Stadtgeschichte. Trier in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter' in: Reiss-Museum Mannheim ed., *Die Franken - Wegbereiter Europas. Ausstellungskatalog* (Mannheim 1996) 138-144.

Similarly the custom of painting the walls and ceilings of private houses seems to have ceased in the fifth century, but early Christian wall paintings in churches and burial architecture prove that the technique itself did not disappear completely with the end of antiquity.

The development of Trier's private architecture in the migration period remains mostly unknown. There are faint indications in the Altbachtal temple compound that a Carolingian dwelling existed on the site which consisted, like many other contemporary settlements in the Rhine area, of wooden huts partially with sunken floor (*Grubenhäuser*).¹² A recent rescue excavation close to the early medieval episcopal precinct revealed plantation ditches probably of a vineyard in the midst of late antique Trier, giving indication that agriculture returned into the urban centre well before the high medieval urban landscape.

Cemeteries as indicators of social change

A very clear distinction between the middle and the late Roman periods emerges from the funerary rites. Already in the early third century A.D. cremation burials came out of fashion, and were gradually replaced by inhumation graves. Towards the end of the third century the custom of erecting representative grave monuments alongside the roads was abandoned in favour of small inscribed marble slabs put over the grave, mentioning the age of the buried and occasionally giving him some Christian blessing. From the fourth century onwards upper classes no longer used the pagan grave temple but buried their dead as close as possible to the church and / or martyrs. Heavy sandstone sarcophagi became popular in order to protect the buried body for resurrection. As a consequence of the presence of the Imperial court many grave inscriptions of the fourth century mention officials of the Imperial administration or Christian priests and functionaries.

The dawn of the migration period

The arrival of a new era after the collapse of the late Roman administration emerges in the archaeological record only at a slow rate. Isolated objects of Frankish origin can be found in the cemeteries from the third

12 Kuhn, *Zwischen*, (n.9) 138-144.

century onwards, but the traditional Frankish grave goods remain mainly restricted to the early medieval graveyards outside the city where Franks seem to have settled from the late fifth century onwards.¹³

The city of Trier, however, remained conscious of her antique heritage all over the Middle Ages, and yet in the twelfth century they proudly claimed that Trier was even older than Rome: "*Ante Romam Treviris stetit annis mille trecentis*" (Before Rome, Trier had existed for 1300 years), as a late medieval inscription tells.

Trier in Late antiquity: Research between past and future

In sharp contrast to earlier theories postulating a series of catastrophic destructions by Franks in the early fifth century historians and archaeologists today agree that the late Roman city was transformed gradually into an early medieval urban settlement. Few of the ancient public monuments were completely dismantled in the Middle Ages, as was the case with the various Roman temples, the amphitheatre and the late Roman *circus*. Some of the other late Roman monumental buildings, as for example the episcopal cathedral, the funerary churches on the northern and southern cemeteries and the Roman stone bridge, continued in use from the fifth century onwards. Other public monuments changed function and were transformed into churches, as for example the Porta Nigra and the public granaries of St. Irminen, or reused for private dwellings, as was the case with the Therms of the Cattle Market and the Therms of St. Barbara. The *caldarium* of the Imperial Therms became part of the reduced medieval city fortifications, and many of the Latin tomb stones were re-used as *spolia* in medieval buildings. Therefore the educated classes in high and late medieval Trier were fully aware of the city's ancient heritage and presented ample proof of their knowledge, though sometimes in a mythical disguise.¹⁴ On a more scholarly level early historians and geographers, from the age of enlightenment, started to analyse the written sources and the ancient ruins

13 H.P. Kuhnen and E. Riemer, 'Das Moseltal am Übergang von der Römerzeit zum Frühen Mittelalter. Eine Forschungslandschaft im grenzüberschreitenden Vergleich.' *Kurtrierisches Jahrbuch* 47 (z.p. 2007) 77-98.

14 L. Clemens, 'Trier I: Nachantike Zeit' in: M. Landfester, *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike. Rezeptions- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*. Bd. 15/3 (Stuttgart, Weimar 2003) 555-565.

accessible to them, but it took until the Napoleonic era that systematic research began. Pioneer work in early excavating was done by officials of the new Prussian civic and church administration, mainly Friedrich von Quednow and Nikolaus von Wilmowsky, whilst educated citizens initiated the earliest public collections of antiquities on behalf of the *Gesellschaft für Nützliche Forschungen* (association of useful research) of 1802. In 1877 the Prussian provincial administration established in Trier the *Provinzialmuseum (Rheinisches Landesmuseum der Generaldirektion Kulturelles Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz)*, which until today serves as centre of excavations and collections in the city. In 1928 the episcopal museum was founded, which laid its focus between 1945 and 2002 on excavations in the episcopal area around the cathedral.

Trier archaeology in the nineteenth century followed two objectives – first getting information about the ancient monuments and the topography of the Roman city, second enlarging the museum collections of Roman antiquities.¹⁵ Due to a lack of funds archaeological excavations before the First World War consisted mainly of smaller soundings. Large-scale systematic excavations were limited to the Imperial Therms, the Therms of St. Barbara and the amphitheatre. Small rescue excavations prevailed until the 1930s, but enabled the museum, through meticulous recording, to reconstruct the Roman period city plan of Trier as early as 1906. The Nazi period saw a considerable growth of archaeology, though under heavy ideological burdens.¹⁶ Archaeology flourished again in the 1950s when extensive post war reconstruction works gave access to archaeological areas which were inaccessible before. The last large-scale research excavations in Trier took place during the 1960s in the western half of the Imperial Therms. From then onwards traditional rescue archaeology with short term salvage excavations became increasingly incapable to match the rapid building activities of the

15 H.P. Kuhnen, 'Trier II: Ausgrabungsgeschichte / Altertumsforschung' in: M. Landfester, *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike. Rezeptions- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*. Bd. 15/3 (Stuttgart, Weimar 2003) 565-578.

16 H.P. Kuhnen, 'Trier archaeology in the years 1933 - 1945. - L'archéologie à Trèves entre 1933 et 1945' in: J.P. Legendre, L. Olivier et B. Schnitzler ed., *L'archéologie nationale-socialiste dans les pays occupés à l'ouest du Reich. Actes de la Table ronde internationale "Blut und Boden" tenue à Lyon dans le cadre du Xe congrès de la European Archaeologists' Association EAA*, 8. - 9.9.2004 (Gollion 2007) 133-144.

economic boom with its large shopping malls and subterranean parking lots.¹⁷ Only when, in the late 1990s, the Landesmuseum succeeded in convincing developers to refund excavations caused by their building projects, archaeology regained a chance to cope with the progress of antiquities' damage.

Given these circumstances the resources for archaeological research were extremely limited. Between 1966 and 1979 the Thyssen foundation funded the publication of some of the major monuments and excavations of the museum, for example the Porta Nigra, the temple precinct of Altbachtal, the Roman bridge, pottery of the Imperial Therms and the Porta Nigra. From the 1960s a laboratory of dendrochronology and from 1986 to 2006 a laboratory of archaeobotany were engaged in interdisciplinary archaeological research,¹⁸ enabling, amongst others, some interesting studies on landscape change between the Celtic and the Early Roman period and between the Late Antique and the Early Migration period.¹⁹

Towards the end of the twentieth century the political authorities shifted their interest from excavation and research to projects of conservation and presentation of Trier's Roman antiquities.²⁰ In 1998 a futuristic protective building over the Therms of the Cattle Market was opened, in 2007 the city presented a big exhibition on Constantine I and his age.²¹ Critical readers will find, however, in the catalogue the research agenda of the next decennia: to publish the many excavations undertaken by the museum, to integrate archaeological sciences such as anthropology, archaeobotany and geoarchaeology into the practice of every day

17 H.P. Kuhnen, 'Das Archäologische Erbe Triers: Gewinne und Verluste im Spannungsfeld zwischen Denkmalpflege und Stadtplanung.' *Rheinische Heimatpflege* 43 (2006) 95-115.; H.P. Kuhnen, 'Trèves - une métropole gallo-romaine confrontée à la sauvegarde du patrimoine archéologique' in: D. Bayard e.a., ed., 'La marque de Rome. Samarobriva et les villes du nord de la Gaule' in: *Ausstellungskatalog Musée de Picardie Amiens* (z.p. ; z.j.) 190-194.

18 M. König, 'Archäobotanik in Trier.' *Funde und Ausgrabungen im Bezirk Trier* 34 (z.p. 2002) 113-122.; M. Neyses, '25 Jahre dendrochronologische Forschungen in Trier.' *Funde und Ausgrabungen im Bezirk Trier* 27 (z.p. 1995) 24-32.

19 L. Clemens en H. Löhr, 'Drei neue Landschaftsbilder zur Geschichte der Trierer Talweite in der Spätbronzezeit, der Spätantike und dem Hochmittelalter.' *Funde und Ausgrabungen im Bezirk Trier* 33 (z.p. 2001) 113-126.

20 Kuhnen, (n.15) 571-573.

21 A. Demandt en J. Engemann, 'Konstantin der Große.' *Ausstellungskatalog* (Trier 2007).

archaeological work, to build up a complex site-to-site stratigraphy of the city, and thus finally to write an archaeological history of late Roman Trier which will use archaeology as an independent historical tradition and not only as illustration of the long known written sources.