



## TERRA MOSANA

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Title: storyline on theme 7: Urbanism

Storyline: “Tongeren in the Late Roman period and the early Middle Ages”

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Ministerium für Wirtschaft, Innovation,  
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provincie limburg



# **Terra Mosana**

## **WP2**

### **Theme 7: Urbanism**

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#### **Storyline:**

## **Tongeren in the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages**

<b>Theme:</b>	Urbanism (theme 7)
<b>Storyline:</b>	<b>Tongeren in the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages</b>
<b>Theme coordinator + storyline secretary:</b>	Theme coordinator: Steven Vandewal Main author of the text: Steven Vandewal Contribution Maastricht: Eric Wetzels
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## 1. Introduction and context

Atuatuca Tungrorum (Tongeren) was founded around 12-9 BC and became the capital of the civitas of the Tungri. Older traces of inhabitation are scarcely found, but there are no indications of a pre-Roman settlement. The town was probably built by the Roman military and became a significant crossroads of several traffic axes that were both land-based and water-based with access to the River Meuse. The town suffered from the uprising under Julius Civilis in 69-70 AD but was restored.

In the second century, a 4,544 metres long town wall was constructed. In the same period Atuatuca Tungrorum became a municipium. An aquaduct was built, a large Gallo-Roman temple, public bathhouses, etc. In 275-276, the city was probably severely damaged but again without severe consequences in the long term. Nonetheless, around 300, a shortened wall of 2,804 metres with assumably guard towers every twenty-five metres was built. Tongeren became involved in the deep defence system of the Rhine limes, an evolution we see happening to most towns in the north of Gaul. Ammianus Marcellinus (c.330-400) speaks of Tongeren in the second half of the fourth century, together with Cologne, as a prosperous city. Around 356/7, caesar Julian visited the city to make peace with the Franks. In this period, we see a lot of land flight happening, but on the other hand also the settling of Germanic groups. The next major event was in 388, when the Ripuarian Franks invaded the territory. Again, Tongeren and the region suffered, as it is archaeologically attested. However, the city recovered, and around 400 Tongeren was still a thriving place.

What happened then is not clear. Theories go from assimilation between invading Franks and Gallo-Romans towards an abrupt end of Roman society and the city's abandonment. Recent archaeological discoveries and historical research suggest that Tongeren experienced a downfall – with the economic, political and religious centre moving to Maastricht – but not as dramatic as thought. Especially the excavations in the Church of Our Lady (1998-2013) gave new insights into the evolution of Tongeren in the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages. At least the idea that the city was a wasteland can no longer be followed between the fifth and ninth centuries.

There are dozens of finds and historical sources (such as saints' lives) that prove that the city was still inhabited. The archaeological finds come from the city centre and the former Roman cemeteries around the city, which probably went out of use from the seventh century onwards. Most striking within this discussion of the continuity of habitation is, of course, the site of the present-day Church of Our Lady, where successive monumental building phases have been found dating back to the fourth century. An important question remains, however, what the role of Tongeren was in this period. In the fourth century, the city was the capital of the *civitas Tungrorum* and the seat of a bishopric. That seat moved to Maastricht at the latest in the 6th century (probably followed by the official institutions, as far as there were any). However, what was left in Tongeren? Did the church keep a symbolic function? Was there a representation of the king (a count?) present in the settlement? And so on. What is clear is that Tongeren's Roman past continues to live on. People were buried in places symbolically or spatially crucial in Roman times, materials were reused, and the Roman past entered into legends. In addition, the episcopal function remains symbolically linked to the Church of Our Lady until the end of the eighteenth century.

This story, however, contrasts with what Gregory of Tours told us about Tongeren in the sixth century, or what we can read in the oldest saint's life of Servatius, namely that the city had fallen into ruins and that there were only wolves left. However, historically we see that Tongeren is not alone in this. The discussion about the continuity of habitation started decades ago and is still being conducted in cities such as Cologne, Metz, Arras, Reims, ... always speaking in favour of continuity.

## **2. From Romans to Franks – wolves or men?**

The place in Tongeren to make the transition period from Roman times to the Middle Ages understandable is the site around the Church of Our Lady. The Gallo-Roman Museum reveals the city's Roman past, and in the city itself, there are plenty of traces from, say, the thirteenth century. However, it is precisely that in-between period, formerly known as the Dark Ages, that is just as interesting. During this period, our Western European society was formed, grafted onto the Roman past. This period is essential to our present-day society, cities, and even trade networks from the fourth century until the Carolingian period. Nevertheless, this period has always been neglected. Take the current topographical structure of Tongeren as an example. The town is centred around the Grand Market and, in particular, the Church of Our Lady. However, this situation only arose from the thirteenth century onwards. Before that, this location was peripheral within the Roman city.

Bearing this context in mind, we decided to digitise the data from the excavations in the Church of Our Lady and to make reconstructions using 3D models and virtual and augmented reality. We decided to reconstruct the late Roman basilica, and two early medieval church building phases, with the surrounding area, existed on the same spot as the current Church of Our Lady. Additional data from older excavations was added to make it possible to reconstruct this part of the city in the timespan of circa 300 to 900 AD.

It was also crucial that these reconstructions had a scientific basis. The starting points were, of course, archaeological excavations - not only those in the Church of Our Lady but also excavations that have taken place in the city centre over the past 150 years - and historical sources. These had to be compared with architectural examples from the Euregio and elsewhere to see what was structurally possible to reconstruct. It also meant that confident choices had to be made. Some choices were easier to make, such as the entrance to the Roman basilica, which was not archaeologically determined but is suspected based on other traces. Other features were much more difficult to reconstruct (e.g. the monument in the church's apse), and others were chosen not to be reconstructed despite finds. E.g. from the interior of the basilica and churches, hundreds of plaster fragments were found, but reconstructing them would have been too suggestive because, for the time being, too little is known of the interior decoration.

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### **3. Historical information about the late Roman period and the early Middle Ages concerning the excavations in the Church of Our Lady**

Around 330 AD, a basilica was built on an insula that housed until the end of the third century a magnificent domus. The function of that basilica is not clear, and the recent excavations have not shed any new light on the possible usage. It could have been a civil or administrative building, a representative hall, or military use, but it could also have been the church of bishop Servatius.

During the 1998-2013 excavations, a non-finished basilica to the east of the current apse was found. For some reason, people decided to abandon this building project five to ten meters wider than the basilica built around 330. Several building features were found from the latter, the most visible being significant parts of the twenty-five metres long northern exterior wall. Other features were pillar-shaped foundations between the northern side of the aisle and the nave and between the southern side of the aisle and the nave, parts of the eastern exterior wall and the apse and multiple fragments of floors, decoration, window glass, etc. Astonishing is that the basilica remained in use until the

Merovingian church was built in the sixth century. The apse was reused (its window glass still intact), the roof was intact, and the floor was intact.

On the spot of the basilica, in the middle of the sixth century, a church was erected, measuring 21 by 11 metres. This church remained in use till around 900. During this relatively long period, the building was renovated multiple times. A total of five building phases are documented. During the excavations of 1998-2013, numerous features of this church were recorded, some of them highly decorated. Parts of the exterior walls were found, a dividing wall between the apse and the nave, floors, traces of the interior decoration and a commemorative monument. Interesting is that also outside the church, remnants of buildings and structures were found. There are also indications that the area around the church was fortified (or demarcated) by ditches and earthworks from the middle of the sixth until the ninth century. Burials have been found around the Merovingian church, the oldest ones dating to the middle of the seventh century. Nearby the church, these are mainly the remains of men (clergy?), while further away from the church, we see a mixture of men, women and children.

Around 900 AD, the Merovingian church seems to have been rebuilt or renovated. It looks as though the first project tried to monumentalise the old Merovingian church, although probably the southern part of the building could have been dilapidated. However, this project was cancelled, the church was demolished and replaced by a larger building. Almost immediately after the latter's demolition, a new project started resulting in a church that became bigger than the late Roman basilica. The reconstructed floorplan shows a church with a nave and two aisles of 40 metres in length and 30 metres wide and an apse on the east side. During the excavations, parts of the exterior walls were found, chain walls and a peculiar type of kiln probably used to make roof tiles. However, again, this building project was abandoned, and an Ottonian church replaced the latter. This one survived until it was replaced in the thirteenth century by the current gothic building. Three building projects followed each other chronologically in such a short amount of time, probably has to do with the role the Church of Our Lady (and the chapter of Our Lady) played for the Carolingians and the bishop residing in Liège.

#### 4. Different perspectives

To think about:

1. What are the oldest and youngest Roman occupation traces?
2. Is there continuity from the Iron Age to the Roman period and from the Roman period to Franks or other Germanic groups? If so, is there a distinction in the choice of materials and typology of the habitation?
3. Are there traces of the urbanisation of a settlement: a network of streets, public buildings or other urban elements?
4. Why did the settlement grow in that place? (geography, economic factors, ...)
5. Is the Roman topography still recognisable in the current or recent topography?
6. How does the Roman settlement core compare to the present one? (more prominent, smaller, overlapping, different location?..)
7. Are there traces of water supplies from the Roman period?
8. When were the city and the region Christianised?
9. What was the function of your town in the early Middle Ages, c.400-900 AD?

#### Perspective of Maastricht (by Eric Wetzels):

##### 1. What are the oldest and youngest Roman occupation traces?

**Maastricht:** the oldest Roman remains date from shortly after the birth of Christ. During Julius Caesar's invasions, Roman troops must have 'visited' the area, which is shown by the hiding of a gold and silver coin hoard in Amby, discovered in 2008 (dated ca. 54 BC). The first physical remains are part of the infrastructure (road, bridge) across the Meuse and connecting the east and west side of the now called Via Belgica. Logically can be expected that every transport to Tongeren from the east (soldiers, goods), went through Maastricht. Also everything transported via the Meuse will have arrived via Maastricht, eventually via de Jeker/Geer/Jeer/Jaar.

Settlements are known from the middle of the first c AD. An elongated strip settlement (lintnederzetting) can be dated around the end of the first c. AD. Around 100 AD a sanctuary was built next to the road (Derlon excavation) and a bathing house occurred (Op de Themren). The civil strip-settlement stayed intact at least until ca. 274 AD, when Germanic raids are to be expected. Shortly after 275 AD a military castellum was erected (dendro date of 333 AD). During this period soldiers might have lived in Maastricht, as well as a civil



population (outside of the small fortress). Outside of Maastricht a villa landscape existed, with villae rusticate, aimed at a surplus production. Almost every 500 meters, at the higher westbank and higher eastbank, traces of these villa's are known (westbank: Louwberg, Goudkust, Daalhof, Dousberg, Smeermaas (Meuse vally); eastbank: Willetienne, Bemelen, Rothem, Borgharen (Meuse vally)). These villa's were in use/re-used in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> c. The transfer from the Roman into the Merovingian period can be archaeologically tested in Maastricht because of the continuous habitation.

**2. Is there continuity from the Iron Age to the Roman period and from the Roman period to Franks or other Germanic groups? If so, is there a distinction in the choice of materials and typology of the habitation?**

**Maastricht:** continuity from Celtic into Roman? Yes. Prehistory is well present in Maastricht. Late Iron Age as well. Not many house plans (yet), but many traces, finds and grave yards. Also some settlement parts. The hoard find of 2008 proves that the area was well inhabited and not only with poor farmers. The oppidum of Caestert, just south of Maastricht is supposed to have been the oppidum of the Eburones and a settlement nearby (Maastricht?) then should have been their village or even their capital. Caestert was used by the Romans as their legion's camp from which exploring tours were made. This camp was enlarged by the Romans in northerly direction, for luggage depot. It is even possible that the slaughter of the Roman troops by the Celt Ambiorix, is to be situated in the Jekerdal, in front of nowadays Chateau Neercanne.

The introduction of Germanic tribes in Maastricht in 274 is archaeologically unproven, but to be expected, because of all the historic data concerning their invasion. The early Merovingian (Germanic) groups that entered the former Roman area in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> c can be recognized. The most striking examples are the antler combs that were introduced during the middle and late 5<sup>th</sup> c. Also the workshops of Merovingian/Germanic antler-craftsmen are proven by half-products and production waste.

**3. Are there traces of the urbanisation of a settlement: a network of streets, public buildings or other urban elements?**

**Maastricht:** the first infrastructure of Maastricht is a South-North-route on the eastbank (Oude Molenweg) dating in the wider prehistory. In Roman times it consists of a road (east/west and v.v.) and a bridge, dated ca. 20 AD, on both banks of the Meuse. The road stayed in function during the Roman period and early Middle Ages. On some places even

for two millennia (Grote Staat, Vrijthof Noord). The bridge moved 200 meters to the north shortly before 1000 AD. The first Roman settlement was an elongated strip settlement (lint nederzetting), following the contours of the early road. The location of the 4<sup>th</sup> c military fortress became the location of the oldest city centre (Stokstraatgebied), with the later OLV-church as southwestern icon. This centre remained the administrative and public centre of Maastricht for at least nine centuries. Next to that centre a second religious centre was established at the location of the old Roman graveyard, the current Servatiuscomplex. The change of this location - from graveyard into church plus a monastery - took place starting in 560 AD. The Carolingians presumably started the first Servaas-monastery. The public buildings were all situated in the Stokstraat area up to 900 AD. Only then, the first outplacement of public functions and administrative institutions took place. These functions were: local government, court of law, the jail, markets, slaughterhouse, coinage, etc. Maastricht is known for its radial road net, starting in the centre (Stokstraat area) and radiating out to nearby towns like Liège, Tongeren and Heerlen.

#### 4. Why did the settlement grow in that place? (geography, economic factors, ...)

**Maastricht:** the centre of Maastricht grew alongside the road and very next to the bridge and the Meuse. That was the location where the traffic ran along and an earning could be made by tradesman, craftsmen and the like. Also the religious centre started in that area, already in Roman times (sanctuary with Jupiter/Jove statue). In the early Middle Ages we know of a St. Mary's church (as predecessor of the current Church of Our Lady), that must be located in the immediate area, or preferably underneath the current church. So this location (Stokstraatkwartier) held all religious, administrative and trade functions of Maastricht. No wonder that the habitation was clustered here. After 1000 AD a clear shift in northerly direction is visible (towards the current Market square and the current town hall), next to the development of the religious centre point around the Saint Servatius complex. These three nuclei grew together and merged into one coherent small town, which was as large as the medieval town of the 13<sup>th</sup> c.

#### 5. Is the Roman topography still recognisable in the current or recent topography?

**Maastricht:** yes, it is, although the Roman level is situated some 3 to 6 meters below the current city centre. The Roman road is soemtiems still in use, although on an raised level (Plankstraat, Havenstraat/Wolfstraat, Grote Staat, Vrijthof Noord). The old Roman riverbank

is visible in the flight of stairs going down in the extension of the Plankstraat towards the Meuse.

**6. How does the Roman settlement core compare to the present one? (more prominent, smaller, overlapping, different location?...)**

**Maastricht:** the Roman core is situated underneath the current Stokstraatkwartier, the most southern area of the old medieval town. The habitation level however, has raised a lot. The same location as the Roman centre was also the Merovingian centre in the 5-7<sup>th</sup> century. The same goes for the Carolingian and Ottonian period. That is why Maastricht can state that it bears an absolute chronological continuity on the very same spot where it once started: 2000 years of history in the Stokstraatkwartier, an area of ca. 1,5 hectare.

**7. Are there traces of water supplies from the Roman period?**

**Maastricht:** in the old centre, immediately along the road (Derlon excavation) a Roman waterwell was documented (100 AD), made of soft Maastricht limestone (mergel, sometimes known as marl, but that is a wrong name!). No traces of (public) toilets are known, nor of water supply, water drainage, street fountains or reservoirs, although they all will have existed. No traces of (bronze) water taps, led pipes or ceramic - or stone build drainage systems. Baths are known, because of the discovery of a thermal bathing complex, of which it is not clear whether that was a public provision, or a personal/private one. On a recently discovered drawing from 1840 a real bath was visible. No traces of any aqueduct exist.

**8. When were the city and the region Christianised?**

**Maastricht:** that is still unclear. The legendary Saint Servatius is said to have transferred the bishop's see from Tongeren to Maastricht, but there is no historic or liturgic proof of that. Nor is there any proof that it existed in Tongeren. The first hard Christian proof are Christian grave stones from the 5<sup>th</sup> c, but they were all re-used and reallocated and were not on their original positions. Since the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> c a first stone chapel (*magnum templum*), was built on the grave of some one important who was buried on the old Roman graveyard, west of the Vrijthof (on the location where the Saint Servatius complex is built). Possibly this was the grave of a certain (Saint) Servatius. The grave was covered by a very small wooden chapel and already worshipped by locals before Monulph appeared. Also miracles were said to have had happened on the grave (Gregorius of Tours). This chapel probably was the

familie grave chapel (eigenkerk) of the clan of Monulph. This Maastricht bishop Monulph started the worship of the legendary Saint Servatius and the location of this stone chapel was developed into the enormous, but above all important Servatius complex (church, abby house, monastery), with important relics and a rich treasury that attracted thousands (millions?) of pilgrgers throughout the entire history.

#### **9. What was the function of your town in the early Middle Ages, c.400-900 AD?**

**Maastricht:** that is already explained above. In short: a trade centre, an economic centre with coinage (6/7<sup>th</sup> c), a religious centre, a strategic small town on a very strategic location (south-north-waterway and east-west-landway), a port/harbour to the eastern side of the Meuse current Limburg + Germany and a port/harbour to the western side of the Muse, current Vlaanderen.

#### **5. Where to visit and storyline products**

In Tongeren, it is possible to 'visit' the late Roman basilica and Merovingian church (with the surrounding area) using 3D. VR glasses, movies and a 360°-panorama take you back to the reconstructed past and the excavations. The archaeological remains of the different church buildings can be visited in the archaeological site of the Teseum.

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#### **6. Research questions and output**

1. What was the function of the late Roman basilica?
2. In what manner was the basilica linked to the late Roman topography of the town?
3. How is Christianity in the late Roman period linked to the basilica and the successive churches?
4. How is the church building in Tongeren related to church buildings in the Euregio?
5. What was the role of the bishops of Tongeren-Maastricht-Liège concerning local church building?
6. Can we say more about the Merovingian burials around the church?
7. Does the material culture show a change in society?
8. What does the black soil around the church tell us about the town's evolution in that period?

Output:

- Relation archaeology-history-architecture in reconstructions, need to check if reconstructions are architecturally correct
- 3D reconstruction of data from the excavations (also parts not visible anymore)
- 3D impressions based on topography, architecture, etc. led to new insights and interpretations / also the relationship between specific features and features of different building phases
- Chronological overview of the church building in Tongeren
- Relation church building in Tongeren within context Euregio (relation with political and religious choices taken in Aachen, Liège and Maastricht)
- The relation between the church building and the evolution town in the early Middle Ages.



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