

## A THOUSAND YEARS OF CITY ON THE SHOVEL



3 / A strong breeze blows against the black fur hats of the royal escort, while King Baudouin waves from a black Cadillac to the crowds of thousands. The young monarch, crowned the previous summer, sits next to experienced Field Marshal Edmond Carton de Wiart and has a busy schedule ahead of him. Today, Saturday 24 May 1952, the procession will visit the Royal Palace in Meir, the stately city palace where the Belgian monarchs receive overseas guests. Later in the day, the royal escort will travel to Middelheim Park, where the Biennale started a year earlier, before laying the foundation stone for the 'Boudewijns-luis' in the growing port. With this Joyous Entry, Baudouin continues a medieval tradition of royal visits to cities within his realm. Antwerp, a proud port city and therefore the economic engine of modern and progressive Flanders, absolutely must be one of the stops. The city spares neither expense nor effort to impress the young monarch. For his part, Baudouin solemnly but approvingly overlooks the crowds and the city undergoing change.

When the monarch and his retinue drive up the quays of the Scheldt under a clear sky, few can suspect that important excavations are underway in the cellars of the centuries-old Steen. The day before the royal visit, under the guidance of the young Adelbert Van de Walle, workmen are busy uncovering vulnerable wooden remnants at a depth of three metres below the basement floor. Van de Walle, at the time not much older than the new Belgian monarch, has been carrying out archaeological soil research here for several weeks, with the aim of finding out more about the origins of the city. The Antwerp city council was not the first to appoint this excellent excavation leader: this driven architect, also a doctor in art history, has already carried out excavations in Enne during and shortly after the war years. At the same time as the Antwerp soil survey, he also carries out excavations in the Gravensteen in Ghent. His fascination for the Middle Ages leads him to field research into the evolution of medieval timber construction.





4 / A multilayered archaeological section reveals the origins of the city. 1952-1961 excavations led by Van de Walle

4 / With the Antwerp city soil, Van de Walle has a real challenge on his hands: since the start of the excavations, dozens of boxes have been filled with numerous shards of medieval pottery and fragments of bone and antler. He has his hands full teaching and instructing the excavation team, which is made up of labourers with rough hands and draughtsmen with an eye for detail. Layer after layer, spade thrust after spade thrust, more wooden remains come to light. The excavation pits, sandwiched between cellar walls, offer a glimpse into the time when Steen Castle did not yet exist. The carefully cleaned pit walls show alternating layers of sand and clay, decayed wood, grey-white ashes, containing various broken crockery and other artefacts that rapidly fill up the artefact cases.

When the king and his retinue drive past the excavation site, Van de Walle does not yet fully realise the significance of his detective work. In the days and weeks that follow, he will speak to interested newspapers in cautious, hesitant terms about what he and the team have found under and next to Steen Castle. On 6 November 1952, *Het Laatste Nieuws* reports on how the foundations of Steen Castle were constructed: shallow, up to barely twenty centimetres below the cellar floors, which may explain the various wall cracks. The newspaper article also mentions 'wooden scaffolding, erected around 850... probably the remains of the wooden stronghold'. There are also 'hundreds of crates and boxes in

*which an impressive amount of jugs, coins, dishes and bones were brought together*'. It seems peculiar that the excavation team finds objects that had been dug up in the same place a few decades earlier, during the major demolition of the stronghold area in the late nineteenth century, and had been thrown back.

This major demolition of the old city centre of Antwerp took place in the 1870s-1880s but did not come as a surprise. For decades, the city centre, with its weathered facades, bumpy streets and narrow alleyways, had been begging for a new lease of life. The centuries-old 'rede', or port, a succession of malodorous 'vlieten', or inlets, and old facades, shoulder to shoulder, merited a new face. To allow large ships to dock, which were often many times the length of medieval vessels, the old course of the right bank had to be straightened.

5 / During the remorseless straightening of the quays of the Scheldt, innumerable archaeological finds see the light of day. This comes as no surprise to many collectors, amateur archaeologists and antique dealers - the distinction between them is often blurred - and many people make their way to the workmen who sell the hundreds of finds without much discernment or conscientious objection. Illustrious names such as the Claes brothers use them to build up their collection, only to resell them afterwards. These same collectors also play an



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

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

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





21 / Nonetheless, the recent interpretation of the excavations along the Jordaenskaai breathe new life into the hypothesis that Antwerp once had a Roman fort. What's more, the trenches, postholes and potholes drawn up may be remnants of the layout of the camp, with parallel and right-angled barracks erected according to common architectural principles. Pits appeared

between the soldiers' barracks, for the disposal of waste. The camp is situated near the later medieval stronghold. Which quarter of the camp we cut across near the Jordaenskaai is not clear, further investigation of the contemporaneous traces from the other sites under the city centre is needed in this regard. The traces near the Jordaenskaai have a more or less north-south orientation. It does not

seem unlikely that the medieval stronghold moat would go back to a defensive moat from the Gallo-Roman period, around the camp. But this too is an assumption; since the medieval excavations have affected the original moat structure (over the years the stronghold moat widens and deepens), the chances of finding an older, Gallo-Roman predecessor seem slim.

If we are dealing with a camp, it's possible that a civilian settlement soon grew up there, like a vicus. What could such a settlement have looked like? Hundreds of years later, during the course of the tenth century, it was decided to erect a structure within the early medieval ramparts, based on originally Roman, recycled hard building materials: natural stone, mortar chunks, roof tiles and brick. Petrographic research shows that the natural stone chunks, together accounting for around 70 kg, are fairly diverse in terms of composition and origin. They are primarily limestone and shale from Tournai. There are also white-yellow limestone from the Dender and Lede regions, coal sandstone from Liège, limestone from Boulogne and/or Cap-Gris-Nez, porous limestone from Hesbaye and dolomitised limestone from northern France. A number of stone fragments show machining traces, others carry mortar residue, indicating that they were previously used as building material. The mortar chunks, more than 5 kg in total, consist of crushed *tegulae* (ceramic roof tiles), bound with a mixture of sand and lime. This originally Phoenician building material is called *opus signinum* and is widely used in the Roman Empire in the floors of houses, bathing infrastructure and villae. If the building materials indeed date from the Roman era, they contribute to the importance of Gallo-Roman Antwerp: stone building is a rare phenomenon in northern Flanders in Roman times and is mainly restricted to military and rather elite architecture. Like several pieces of natural stone, the mortar fragments show traces of secondary burning. This means that the tenth-century construction made of old building materials burned down. When and why this happened is unknown. Perhaps in 1055, when Count Baldwin of Flanders besieged the Antwerp stronghold of his rival Duke and Margrave Frederik of







## A TRADING CENTRE AWAKENS

**44 / 45** It takes a bit of imagination, but picture what Antwerp looks like around the year 900. As a Frisian skipper, you are carrying a boatload of fur, wood and precious amber from the far north. You are your own boss, own your own ship and sail alternately north and south from your Heimat on the Frisian coast, the base for your trading activities. Shipping and trading goods is in your blood, and has been for many generations. The journey to the north takes you along indomitable seas and cold waters to ancient trading centres such as Ribe, Haithabu (present-day Hedeby in northern Germany), and many other places of the Danes, who will later be called Vikings. There you load fur, antlers and wood from dense forests and amber from the coast. The Danes trust you, and you must trust them too. Trade transactions are sealed with a firm handshake and fermented liquor, often in such quantities that you have to spend the night there, to set sail southwards again the next morning. Your final destination is the *emporium* Quentovic, an important trading centre along the white coast, from where you can see land on the other side. The seas can be dangerous, the weather often unpredictable, so you keep a constant eye on the coastline and never drift too far towards deep sea. After all, there are monsters and water gods lurking there, whose wrath you do not want to incur.

The journey from north to south takes you along desolate beaches and rugged dunes,

interrupted by nondescript fishing villages. Here and there you come across a lonely, deserted hut. The coastal residents are proud and maintain their pride, even when sullen, weather-drawn faces with empty nets sail in. The sea gives and takes, and everyone knows someone with a loved one claimed by the sea.

But you know the route and every trading post along the way. Depending on your cargo, you decide where to dock. It may happen that you leave the coast and head inland. You skillfully sail your ship to where the river leads into the sea, where unusual stones in honour of the goddess Nehalennia stick out of the beach sand, and set course towards the rising sun. The waves die down, as do the tides. The water changes colour and depth, you can see different species of fish and birds. Now and then, when there is no wind, you and your companions push the ship forward with long sticks in the swampy sand. The banks are overgrown with bushes and the occasional alder wood. People greet you with different sounds but you understand what they mean. For hours you sail along green shores, salt marshes and bogs, behind which you occasionally notice a plume of smoke.

After countless bends in the river, behind the desolate wastes and swamps, a settlement looms ahead. You know this place because you have been here before, as have many before you, as you know from the sto-



