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Arelate (Arles)

MARC HEIJMANS

Arelate (Arles) is an important ancient city situated in southern France, on the RHÔNE River currently located about 40 km from the Mediterranean coast.

The earliest traces of human occupation found so far date to the first half of the sixth century BCE. From 540–530, ceramics indicate a more Mediterranean influence, probably a result of the foundation of an emporion by the Greeks of MASSILIA (MARSEILLES), called Theline. However, from the fourth century onwards, the indigenous population became more important and the town took its Celtic name, Arelate.

In 49 BCE, during the civil wars, Caesar had twelve galleys constructed in the Arles shipyards. In 46/45, he ordered the foundation of a Roman colony for the veterans of the sixth legion, and endowed the settlement with a large

portion of the territory of Massilia. AUGUSTUS provided the new colony, *Colonia Iulia Paterna Arelate Sextanorum*, with important monuments, most of which still survive: the street grid, the city wall, a theater, the forum with its cryptoporticus, and several other public monuments. Necropoleis developed beside the main roads, especially on the southeast (Alyscamps).

In the Flavian period, the city wall was partly destroyed and an amphitheater was constructed on its remains on the northern side; in the mid-second century CE, a huge circus was constructed southwest of the city, near the Rhone.

Due to the importance of its rural economy and river-borne trade, the city prospered during the second and third centuries. On the right bank, a suburb (now called Trinquetaille) developed, with ports and docks, as well as luxuriously decorated villas with mosaics and marble floors. Christianity certainly developed early,

Figure 1 Plan of Arles with the principal monuments. 1. Forum; 2. Theater; 3. City walls; 4. Amphitheater; 5. Circus; 6. Late Antique baths and “Aula palatina”; and 7. Early Christian cathedral. Illustration by Marc Heijmans.

and bishops are attested from the middle of the third century CE.

At the end of the third century, most villas were destroyed by fire and not reconstructed. However, this decline did not last long, and in the early fourth century, the city recovered thanks to CONSTANTINE I, who organized the first Christian council there in 314. Constantine is probably responsible for the construction of the imperial baths as well as the reconstruction of the forum and the circus.

During the fourth century, Arles became one of the most important cities in Gaul, the second after Trier. Around 400, the praetorian court was moved from Trier to Arles and, on this occasion, an important *aula palatina* was built. Arles was, for a time, one of the imperial residences of the western empire, but in 476, it became part of the Visigothic kingdom. In 507/508, it was besieged by the FRANKS and Burgundians and finally conquered by the Ostrogoths, who, in 536, decided to give up their Gallic province, which then became definitively part of the Frankish world.

During Late Antiquity, the bishops of Arles tried to obtain metropolitan rights. The most important was CAESARIUS OF ARLES (502–542), who in 513 was named the vicar of Gaul by pope Symmachus. Christian archaeological remains include an assemblage of marble sarcophagi (fourth century) and an important church, probably the cathedral of the sixth century, currently being excavated.

SEE ALSO: Augusta Treverorum (Trier); Gallia Narbonensis; Gaul (Tres Galliae); Hilary of Arles; Visigoths.

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