

# The Case of Early Christianity in the Northwestern Provinces: Archaeological Evidence versus Written Sources

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The emergence of Christianity in the north-western parts of the imperium romanum is not very well documented. Only few written sources illuminate the spread of Christian beliefs into these areas. Writings from the beginning and the middle of the 4. century mention bishops in some towns along the Rhine such as Cologne, Mainz, Worms, Speyer, Strasburg and Augst together with Trier, Metz and Tongeren in the hinterland. Thus written sources have for long time set the agenda for archaeological research in this area. Recent analyses of some important excavations from the Rhine area have produced results that may change some views about early Christianity in the Rhine region. Contrary to the results of most archaeological research in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. century no ecclesiastical buildings can be identified in the majority of the towns mentioned. In Cologne only the site of the Cathedral yields traces of buildings that may have served as church in late antiquity. Places like St. Gereon in Cologne, St. Victor in Xanten and St. Cassius and Florentius in Bonn, which are associated with the worship of martyrs belong to the Theban Legion are first mentioned in written sources of the Merovingian period. Their cult has no roots in Late Antiquity, since no churches of the 4<sup>th</sup>. or 5<sup>th</sup>. century can be identified at these sites.

A glance on a few selected sites from Germania prima shows a similar picture as in the northern Rhineland: At Kaiseraugst, which is said to be the see of Justinianus Rauricorum, who took part in the Synod of Serdica, a small church has been excavated, but the dating of its first building phases remains uncertain. Archaeologically the existence of this church again can only be attested in Merovingian times. From the hinterland little is known with one exception: the imperial capital of Treveris / Trier is well known for its numerous late antique findings with Christian context and also for at least one monumental church beneath the present-day cathedral. The presence of Christian graffiti shows the existence of a church at this place from the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup>. century onwards.

Archaeological sources show that the Rhineland was truly christianized in the Merovingian period and not in Late Antiquity. This conclusion may not only be valid for the Rhine Area but also for northern Gaul and Britain. Unlike other parts of the empire the spread of Christianity in the north-west took several centuries. It presumably started in late 3<sup>rd</sup>. century and was finished not before the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup>. century.

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