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A History of Brussels

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Introduction

Brussels, the capital city that now sits at the crossroads of Europe, has a history that stretches back more than a thousand years. Its journey from a small settlement nestled on the banks of the Senne River to a vibrant and cosmopolitan hub is as complex as it is fascinating. The story of Brussels is one of resilience—defined by its ability to endure and adapt through centuries marked by trade, turmoil, innovation, and cultural flourishing.

The origins of Brussels are obscured by the mists of time, with traces of prehistoric habitation and Roman footsteps woven into the soil beneath its busy streets. From humble beginnings as a marshland outpost, the city’s official birth is most commonly traced to the late 10th century, when a fortress arose on a strategic island and the relics of Saint Gudula found a new home. Over the ensuing centuries, the city’s fortunes would rise and fall in step with dynastic intrigues and economic tides, its boundaries continually evolving along with its populations and institutions.

Trade and commerce fueled Brussels’ expansion in the Middle Ages, attracting merchants and artisans, and giving rise to its iconic guilds and lineages. But prosperity was not without its perils—rivalries, rebellions, and invasions left indelible scars upon the city's landscape and psyche. The grandeur of the Burgundian and Habsburg periods was shadowed by conflict, from religious wars to devastating bombardments that transformed the very heart of Brussels.

The modern era brought unprecedented change. Waves of revolution and conquest swept the city into the orbit of France, Austria, and the Netherlands, before the eruption of the Belgian Revolution in 1830 gave birth to a new nation with Brussels at its helm. The 19th and 20th centuries were marked by industrial transformation, explosive growth, two world wars, and the gradual, sometimes painful, melding of identities and languages. Restoration and innovation walked hand in hand in the drive to shape the modern metropolis.

In the aftermath of the world wars, Brussels emerged not only as Belgium’s capital but as a linchpin of European and international governance. The arrival of the European Union and NATO transformed the city into a crucible of policy and diplomacy, attracting a diverse population and etching its name permanently on the map of world affairs. Brussels today is a city of contrasts—deeply rooted in history but unmistakably modern, local in flavor yet unmistakably global in its outlook.

This book sets out to chronicle the tapestry of Brussels’ past, weaving together the threads of its political, economic, cultural, and social evolution. Through each chapter, readers will discover the turning points, personalities, and passions that have defined the city’s journey. Whether you are a visitor strolling its winding streets for the first time or a lifelong resident seeking to connect with your heritage, this history seeks to illuminate how Brussels became the living, ever-changing capital it is today—a city shaped by marshes, monarchs, revolutionaries, and visionaries alike.

CHAPTER ONE: Dawn on the Senne: Prehistoric and Roman Brussels

Long before the first stone of a fortress was laid, or the name "Brussels" even whispered, the land that would one day cradle a European capital lay slumbering, shaped by the slow, deliberate hand of nature. The Senne River, then a wilder, more capricious artery, meandered through a valley characterized by damp, marshy lowlands and drier, forested heights. This was a landscape of subtle contours, a tapestry of greens and browns, an untamed realm where the story of human presence was yet to begin in any significant, city-shaping way. Understanding this primeval setting is key to appreciating the long journey from ancient soil to bustling metropolis.

The earliest whispers of human activity in the Brussels region date back to the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age. These were the days of hardy hunter-gatherers, small, nomadic bands following herds of mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, and reindeer across a landscape recovering from the grip of ice ages. Their toolkit was rudimentary but effective: flint hand-axes, scrapers, and choppers, painstakingly chipped into shape. Direct evidence from within the precise boundaries of modern-day central Brussels is scarce from this remote period, often buried deep beneath millennia of subsequent development or swept away by the shifting Senne.

Yet, the broader region of Brabant has yielded tantalizing clues. Finds of flint implements in river gravels and ancient quarry sites suggest that these early humans were indeed present, adapting to the prevailing tundra-like conditions. They would have sought shelter in natural overhangs or constructed temporary dwellings from animal hides and branches, always on the move, their lives dictated by the seasons and the migration of game. The Senne valley, with its promise of water and the animals drawn to it, would certainly have been part of their foraging territories.

Imagine the landscape they traversed: vast, open plains interspersed with pockets of hardy woodland, the air crisp and clean. The concept of a "settlement" as we understand it was alien to them. Their legacy is not in structures, but in the scattered stone tools that speak of fleeting camps and successful hunts, a testament to human resilience in a challenging world. For these pioneers, the future site of Brussels was merely another stretch of wilderness, perhaps a good spot for tracking prey or finding drinkable water.

As the last Ice Age retreated, around 10,000 BCE, the climate warmed, and the environment transformed, ushering in the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age. Forests of pine and birch, later oak and elm, spread across the land, replacing the open tundra.

The large herds of Ice Age megafauna disappeared, giving way to smaller, more solitary animals like red deer, roe deer, and wild boar. This environmental shift demanded new strategies from the human inhabitants.

Mesolithic hunter-gatherers developed more refined toolkits, characterized by smaller, more specialized flint implements known as microliths. These tiny, sharp blades could be hafted onto wooden or bone handles to create arrows, spears, and harpoons, better suited for hunting in the dense new forests and fishing in the increasingly abundant rivers and lakes. The Senne and its tributaries would have become important sources of fish and waterfowl, supplementing a diet of game and foraged plants.

The Sonian Forest, or Forêt de Soignes, which even today forms a verdant southern boundary to Brussels, is a relic of these ancient woodlands. Archaeological finds within and around the forest, including Mesolithic flint workshops and campsites, suggest that this area was a favoured haunt. People lived in small, mobile groups, perhaps establishing seasonal camps in locations offering good hunting, fishing, or gathering opportunities. The marshy islands within the Senne, later to become so crucial for the city's founding, might have served as temporary fishing platforms or hunting blinds.

Life in the Mesolithic period was still a constant dialogue with nature, a pattern of skilled adaptation to the available resources. The population density remained low, and their impact on the landscape was minimal. Yet, these were the ancestors who possessed an intimate knowledge of the local flora, fauna, and terrain – a knowledge that would be foundational, in ways they could never imagine, for those who came much later. Their footprint was light, but their presence marked a continuous human thread in the story of the Senne valley.

A profound transformation began around 5000 BCE with the arrival of the Neolithic, or New Stone Age, from the east. This wasn't an invasion of armies, but a slow diffusion of new ideas and technologies, fundamentally altering the human relationship with the land. The most significant of these was agriculture – the cultivation of crops like wheat and barley, and the domestication of animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. For the first time, communities could produce their own food, leading to a more sedentary lifestyle.

This shift, often called the Neolithic Revolution, had far-reaching consequences. People began to clear patches of forest to create fields for their crops and pastures for their livestock. They built more permanent dwellings, often grouped into small hamlets or villages. The landscape of the future Brussels region, while still predominantly wild, started to bear the subtle marks of this new way of life. Higher, better-drained ground, away from the most flood-prone parts of the Senne valley, would have been preferred for these early farming settlements.

The "New Stone Age" also refers to advancements in stone tool technology. Axes were now often made of polished stone, more durable and effective for felling trees. Pottery appeared for the first time, crucial for storing grain, cooking food, and carrying water. These ceramic vessels, however simple, are invaluable to archaeologists, as their styles and decorations can help trace cultural connections and chronological developments. While grand Neolithic monuments like megalithic tombs are more characteristic of other parts of Europe, the presence of early farming communities in Brabant is well attested.

Archaeological evidence for Neolithic settlement in the immediate vicinity of what would become Brussels includes finds of polished stone axes, flint sickles used for harvesting grain, and fragments of early pottery. These discoveries, often unearthed during construction projects or agricultural work, paint a picture of small, scattered farming communities slowly taming the wilderness. They would have lived in timber-framed longhouses, their lives revolving around the agricultural calendar, the rhythms of planting and harvesting marking their years.

These early farmers were not entirely divorced from the old ways; hunting and gathering likely still supplemented their diet. But the primary reliance on cultivated foods allowed for a gradual increase in population density and the development of more complex social structures. The concept of land ownership, or at least territoriality, began to take root. The Senne valley, with its fertile alluvial soils along the riverbanks and wooded uplands, offered a promising environment for these pioneers of agriculture.

The subsequent Bronze Age, beginning in the region around 2000 BCE, introduced another technological leap: the art of metallurgy. The ability to smelt copper and tin to produce bronze revolutionized tool and weapon making. Bronze axes were more efficient than stone ones, bronze daggers and swords offered new forms of personal armament, and bronze ornaments signified status and wealth. This innovation didn't happen in isolation; it was part of a wider network of trade and exchange that stretched across Europe.

The raw materials for bronze – copper and tin – were not always locally available, necessitating the development of trade routes. This, in turn, fostered greater interaction between different communities and cultures. While direct, spectacular Bronze Age finds from the very heart of Brussels remain elusive, it is highly probable that the inhabitants of the Senne valley were participants in this broader cultural and technological shift. Scattered discoveries of bronze tools or weapons in the wider Brabant area support this.

Society during the Bronze Age likely became more hierarchical. The production of bronze required specialized knowledge and access to resources, potentially leading to the emergence of chieftains or elites who controlled trade and craftsmanship. Burial practices sometimes became more elaborate, with individuals interred with valuable grave goods, suggesting a belief in an afterlife and a differentiation in social standing. Small farming communities probably continued to dot the landscape, but perhaps with greater organization and under the influence of emerging power centers.

The Senne and its surrounding lands would have continued to provide sustenance, but now also potentially served as conduits for trade, with dugout canoes or simple rafts transporting goods along the waterways. The forests provided timber for construction and fuel for smithing, while the cleared lands were cultivated. The rhythm of life was still tied to the seasons, but the introduction of metal added a new layer of complexity and dynamism to human existence in the region.

The Iron Age, commencing around 800 BCE, brought with it the mastery of ironworking. Iron ore was more widely available than copper and tin, making iron tools and weapons more accessible, though the process of smelting and forging iron was more complex. This period in Western Europe is largely associated with Celtic peoples, a diverse group of tribes sharing related languages and cultural traits. The dominant Celtic tribe in the region encompassing future Brussels was the Nervii, renowned for their fierce warrior culture and resistance to outsiders.

Iron Age society was characterized by settled agriculture, with communities living in larger, often fortified, settlements known as oppida or hillforts, though the most prominent Nervian strongholds were likely located in areas with more pronounced defensive topography than the immediate Brussels basin. Nonetheless, smaller farming hamlets and isolated farmsteads would have been widespread. Iron ploughshares allowed for more efficient cultivation of heavier soils, leading to increased food production and supporting a larger population.

Craftsmanship flourished, with skilled artisans producing not only iron tools and weapons but also distinctive pottery, intricate jewelry, and textiles. Trade networks became even more extensive, connecting the region with communities across Gaul and beyond. The Nervii minted their own coins, a sign of a developing economy and political organization. Their society was likely aristocratic, led by warrior chieftains and a landowning elite.

The Senne valley, with its mix of marshland, fertile plains, and wooded areas, would have been an integral part of the Nervian territory. They would have fished its waters, hunted in its forests, and farmed its more arable lands. While they left no grand stone cities, their presence shaped the cultural landscape that the Romans would encounter. Their language, a form of Brythonic Celtic, was spoken throughout the region, and their religious beliefs, focused on nature deities and sacred groves, imbued the landscape with spiritual significance.

This was the world, a land populated by resilient Celtic farmers and warriors, that faced a momentous turning point in the mid-1st century BCE: the arrival of Roman legions under the command of Julius Caesar. Caesar's Gallic Wars (58-50 BCE) aimed to conquer all of Gaul, bringing the region under Roman control. The Nervii, alongside other Belgic tribes, put up a famously stubborn resistance, described by Caesar himself in his "Commentarii de Bello Gallico."

In 57 BCE, at the Battle of the Sabis (often identified with the River Selle or Sambre, though the exact location is debated), the Nervii launched a surprise attack on Caesar's forces and came perilously close to annihilating them. Caesar praised their bravery, noting they fought to the last man. Despite their valor, the superior organization, discipline, and resources of the Roman army eventually prevailed. The lands of the Nervii, including the future Brussels area, were incorporated into the Roman province of Gallia Belgica.

The Roman conquest marked a profound rupture with the past. While Celtic culture and identity did not vanish overnight, the region was now part of a vast, multicultural empire, subject to Roman law, administration, and economic systems. The initial impact was undoubtedly one of upheaval and subjugation, but over time, a new Gallo-Roman society began to emerge.

Following the conquest, Rome set about consolidating its control and integrating the new territories. A key aspect of this was the construction of an extensive network of roads, facilitating troop movements, communication, and trade. While no major Roman city developed on the exact site of what would become Brussels, the area was certainly traversed by this Roman infrastructure. One important Roman road, connecting Bavay (Bagacum Nerviorum, the Roman capital of the Nervii) to Cologne (Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium), passed to the south of the future city. Another, an east-west route linking Asse to Elewijt, ran closer to the north, effectively skirting the marshy core of the Senne valley.

The Roman presence in the Brussels region was primarily rural in character. Scattered across the landscape were agricultural estates known as villas – substantial farmsteads, often with luxurious main residences for the landowners and ancillary buildings for workers, storage, and crafts. These villas, owned by Romanized Celtic elites or Roman settlers, produced grain, livestock, and other goods for local consumption and for export to other parts of the Empire. Archaeological evidence, such as remnants of foundations, mosaic floors, pottery, and coins, points to the existence of such villas in the wider Brussels periphery.

Within the area that would eventually become historic Brussels, direct evidence of significant Roman structures is less common. This is likely due to the marshy nature of the terrain around the Senne islands, which was less suitable for large-scale Roman construction compared to the better-drained plateaus nearby. However, it is highly probable that there were smaller Gallo-Roman farmsteads or perhaps even a minor vicus (a small civilian settlement) in the vicinity, benefiting from proximity to the river and the Roman roads further afield. Finds of Roman coins and pottery within Brussels itself, though not indicative of a major settlement, confirm that the area was inhabited and connected to the Roman economy.

Romanization was a gradual process. Latin became the language of administration, trade, and the elite, though Celtic dialects likely persisted among the rural populace for a long time. Roman gods were introduced and often syncretized with local Celtic deities. New agricultural techniques, crops, and architectural styles were adopted. The region experienced a period of relative peace and stability under the Pax Romana, fostering economic prosperity. The Senne itself, though perhaps not a major commercial waterway at this point, would have been a local resource for fishing and water supply.

Life for the ordinary Gallo-Roman inhabitant of the Brussels area would have revolved around agriculture. They tilled the land, tended livestock, and perhaps engaged in small-scale crafts. The marshes of the Senne valley, while challenging for large settlements, provided resources like reeds for thatching, peat for fuel, and opportunities for fowling and fishing. It was a landscape shaped by both nature and the increasing, though still relatively light, touch of human activity under Roman influence.

However, the stability of the Roman Empire was not to last indefinitely. From the 3rd century CE onwards, the Empire faced increasing internal pressures and external threats, particularly from Germanic peoples migrating from beyond the Rhine frontier. Gallia Belgica, being a border province, was particularly vulnerable to raids and incursions. Frankish and Alemannic groups began to press into Roman territory, sometimes as invaders, sometimes as foederati (allies enlisted in the Roman army).

This period, often termed the Late Roman Empire, saw a decline in the security and prosperity that had characterized the earlier centuries. Some villas were abandoned or refortified, trade routes became more precarious, and the authority of the central Roman administration weakened. The Brussels region, though perhaps not on the front line of major conflicts, would have felt the ripples of this instability. There might have been a shift in settlement patterns, with people perhaps seeking more defensible locations or clustering together for safety.

The Roman military presence in northern Gaul was strengthened in an attempt to hold the line, but the pressures were immense. By the early 5th century, Roman control over the region was rapidly collapsing. In 406 CE, a large contingent of Vandals, Alans, and Suebi crossed the frozen Rhine, sweeping through Gaul. Frankish groups, who had already been settling within the Empire, began to establish their own kingdoms and assert their dominance.

As Roman administration crumbled, so did the extensive infrastructure and economic networks it had supported. Roads fell into disrepair, long-distance trade declined, and many urban centers shrank. The Brussels area, never a major Roman urban hub itself, likely reverted to a more localized, subsistence-based economy. The villas, symbols of Roman agricultural prosperity, were largely abandoned or fell into ruin, their stone perhaps repurposed for humbler structures.

The population itself likely underwent a transformation. The Gallo-Roman inhabitants remained, but they were increasingly intermingling with, and often ruled by, Germanic newcomers, primarily Franks. This fusion of cultures and peoples would lay the groundwork for the societies of the Early Middle Ages. Latin evolved into local Romance dialects, while Germanic languages also gained a strong foothold. The Christian religion, which had been spreading within the Empire, began to take deeper root, though pagan beliefs undoubtedly persisted for some time.

By the time the traditional founding of Brussels is considered, with the arrival of Saint Gaugericus in the late 6th century, the immediate landscape around the Senne islands was likely a sparsely populated area. Patches of cultivated land on the drier ground would have existed, interspersed with woods, heath, and the ever-present marshes. The legacy of Rome was fading, its roads overgrown, its villas crumbling, but its influence was not entirely erased. It lingered in the language, in agricultural practices, and perhaps in the memory of a more ordered, unified past. The stage was set for a new chapter, one where a small settlement in the marshes would begin its slow, improbable rise. The dawn on the Senne had been long, witnessing the patient cycles of nature, the fleeting camps of ancient hunters, the first furrows of Neolithic farmers, and the distant echo of Roman might. The land now awaited the spark that would ignite its urban destiny.

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