

Castle of the Counts

Once upon a time...

The Gravensteen means 'castle of the counts' and indeed it owes its existence to the counts of Flanders. Their history started off as something of a fairytale. Baudouin I was in love with Judith, the daughter of the West-Frankish King Charles the Bald, who held sway here around the year 860. Though their love was mutual, marriage was out of the question. Daughters of kings were too important a pawn in royal diplomacy to marry courtiers. So Baudouin saw no solution other than to elope with Judith to Rome and seek the Pope's support. The Pope managed to win over Charles the Bald and eventually in 863, the couple received his blessing and were allowed to marry. Thereafter referred to as Baudouin Iron Arm, he was count of the area around Bruges and Torhout which was then known as the 'Vlaanderengouw' or the county of Flanders.

The Vikings

Baudouin I died in 879 and was succeeded by his son, Baudouin II. Almost immediately after that the Vikings invaded what is today Flanders with a substantial military force. All summer they went around plundering before setting up their winter camp in Ghent's St Bavo's Abbey in November 879. The king was busy waging war against East Francia and left the Vikings to it. Most of the counts took flight but Baudouin stood his ground and his 'gouw', or county, was largely spared. So when the Danes eventually left the territory of the Franks in 892, he was the only person fit to take control. He appropriated the royal domain and also the agricultural land belonging to the abbeys and gradually extended his territory to the north of what is today France.

Fortifications

To protect that area, he, and after his death in 918, his son Arnulf I built fortifications in all the most strategic sites in their kingdom. In Ghent, at the confluence of the rivers Lys/Leie and Scheldt, Count Arnulf I built his stronghold on the place where the Gravensteen stands today. It was a wooden rectangular structure with a two-storey main building and several outbuildings, including a grain store. The stronghold soon became the region's new hub for trade and industry, and Ghent the largest city in the brand-new Flanders.

Building work

In the eleventh century the wooden structure was replaced by a luxurious residence in costly Tournai limestone, which consisted of three rooms one on the top of the other with a monumental staircase, recessed fireplaces and latrines. The wooden outbuildings served as warehouses, for the building was not only the residence of the count when he was in town but also the centre of a prestigious farm where the produce of the count's estates in the surrounding region were centralized and processed by artisans.

The Gravensteen, a moated castle

In the twelfth century the Gravensteen began to look distinctly more like a fortification. Indeed, it became a moated castle. An embankment approximately three metres high was constructed around the building. So what had been the ground floor became a cellar and what had been the first floor was now the ground-floor level. A stone wall was also built around it. A gatehouse was erected separating the inner bailey from the outer bailey, which we now know as Sint-Veerleplein.

Thierry of Alsace

Until the end of the eleventh century, the counts became increasingly powerful and managed to keep the peace in the county. However, this came to an end in 1127 with the murder of the Flemish count, Charles the Good. In the absence of heirs, the king of France put forward a potential successor to Charles, but the cities did not believe the king's candidate had their interests at heart. They favoured another claimant: Thierry of Alsace (a son of Duke Theoderic II of Lorraine) who enjoyed the support of King Henry I of England. Fortunately for the cities, through a whim of fate the rival candidate for count died and Thierry eventually ascended the throne. During his reign, and later that of his son Philip, the Flemish cities, and Ghent and Bruges in particular, became important pawns on the political map of the county of Flanders.

The Alsace family's political gene

Both father Thierry and son Philip had political acumen. England and France badly needed them as an ally and the Flemish cities, and Ghent in particular, were among the most important in Europe. Moreover, through a shrewd arranged marriage, the family gained control of the inheritance of the houses of Vermandois and Boulogne.

Crusades

In those days a crusade was considered an obligation for every self-respecting nobleman. Crusaders gained prestige and furthermore the Church forgave them all their sins. Both Thierry and Philip undertook repeated expeditions to Palestine and Syria. Thierry four times, Philip twice.

Though his grandfather on his mother's side was king of Jerusalem, Philip, who succeeded his father Thierry as count of Flanders in 1169, didn't play an important role in the Holy Land. In 1175 Philip took his crusader's oath rather reluctantly, but eventually in 1177 he did set out on the difficult and costly journey to the Holy Land. He did it as a pilgrim and had no intention whatsoever of performing duties there which would delay his return to Flanders for long.

Meanwhile in Ghent

Wool production made Ghent a prosperous city in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The rich cloth merchants sought power and grandeur as a demonstration of their wealth. At a time when everyone was still living in wooden houses, they had luxury stone houses built in Tournai limestone. These were their status symbols.

All too aware that his kingdom owed its economic prosperity in no small part to these merchants, Philip did everything in his power to defend and further the commercial interests of the Flemish cities, while at the same time trying to preserve his authority. On returning home from his first crusade, he responded to the merchants' stone houses by converting the counts' stronghold into an imposing stone castle to – as a chronicle of the time put it – “curb the arrogance of the people of Ghent.”

More building work

Philip added to the height and width of the moated castle. The central building became a massive, 30-meter-high donjon, which was also renovated on the inside. A wall was built around the inner bailey with 24 *guérites* and a protruding gatehouse, where an inscription still reads: “*In the year of our Lord 1180, Philip, count of Flanders and of Vermandois, son of Count Thierry and of Sibylla, had this castle built*”. To achieve a richer and more colourful architecture, several different sorts of stone were used, but otherwise the decoration was kept to a minimum. The castle's construction puts one in mind of the Krac des Chevaliers, the famous castle in Northern Syria which is inextricably linked to the crusades. Perhaps that is where Philip found his inspiration.

Philip and the Grail

Philip of Alsace was also the first count associated with implementing an active cultural policy to stimulate the arts. He inherited his passion for relics partly from his father, Thierry, who is said to have taken the Holy Blood to Bruges. He and his first wife Elizabeth of Vermandois shared an interest in the chivalric romance literary genre, which was hyped in the twelfth century by the court of Philip's nephew Henry Plantagenet and his wife Eleonora of Aquitaine. Chrétien de Troyes himself, the most influential *trouveur* or poet-musician in the Middle Ages, spent some time at the Flemish court. Philip commissioned him to write ‘*Le Conte du Graal*’ (The Story of the Grail) about King Arthur and his knights. Though Chrétien died before the book was finished, it became a bestseller by medieval norms and it still fires the imagination today.

An end to Philip's rule

In 1189 Philip, together with the king of France Philip II (Philip Augustus) and the king of England Richard the Lionheart, set off for the Holy Land again, more specifically to Acco in Palestine. Philip died there of an infectious disease. As Philip had no children, his sister Margaret of Alsace, took over the county together with her husband, known from then on as Baudouin VIII of Flanders. When Margaret died three years later, her husband renounced the throne of Flanders in favour of their son Baudouin IX.

The Gravensteen, an unenviable residence

The Gravensteen was never a permanent residence. From the time of Philip of Alsace, the castle had served as the county's administrative centre. Justice was also administered there. Only when the courtly household was in Ghent, did they actually stay in the castle. Ghent was not exactly the count's favourite place of residence; the people of Ghent

were too rebellious for that. And not all counts were enamoured of the Gravensteen either. In the thirteenth century, after court-day the counts preferred to stay in St Peter's Abbey, St Bavo's Abbey or the Bijloke Monastery. Robrecht of Béthune, who was count of Flanders between 1305 and 1322, even found an inn on the nearby Sint-Veerleplein preferable to the Gravensteen, which was always very cold even with the fires burning.

The Gravensteen, centre for the administration of justice

In 1340 Count Lodewijk Van Male (Louis II of Flanders) relocated the court residence to Hof ten Walle in the Prinsenhof. The governing body, the forerunner of the Council of Flanders, continued to meet at regular intervals in the Gravensteen and in 1353 the count's mint was also transferred there. In 1407 the Council of Flanders, the highest court of law in the county (which had jurisdiction over serious offences and lese-majesty, etc. and served as the court of appeal for the verdicts of lower courts), began sitting primarily in the Gravensteen, making the castle the epicentre of the administration of justice in Flanders. By the end of the seventeenth century, no fewer than four courts of law were in operation in the castle, though the Council of Flanders was by far the most important.

The Gravensteen, a court of law

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the regional council of the Castellany of Oudburg also made the Gravensteen its one and only seat. This court exercised authority mainly in the so-called 'lower administration of justice', which related to civil actions or fines for, for example, illegal tree felling or theft. And then there was also the Court of Summons, a one-man tribunal which settled civil cases with Ghent citizens. In 1694 the Council of Flanders also took over the admiralty court and so was responsible for maritime affairs.

Needless to say, the castle had to be reorganized to accommodate the many courts. Spaces which had previously been at the disposal of the count and his household were turned into courtrooms and offices for the clerk to the court.

The Gravensteen, a theatre of horror

Prison sentences as such did not exist until the end of the eighteenth century. However, there was a need for a prison for those suspected of a crime who were in custody and for interrogation purposes. People were also imprisoned while awaiting trial. So as well as being a court of law, the Gravensteen was also a prison.

The semi-underground cells were damp and draughty and very cold, particularly in winter. The underground dungeons were the most feared. As, of course, was the torture. Though the legal procedure governing torture in the early Middle Ages died a quiet death, it was reintroduced at the time of the Council of Flanders. From the fifteenth century torture or 'harsh interrogation', like flogging and being stretched on a rack, were far from unusual.

The Gravensteen up for sale

By 1778 the duties of the Council of Flanders were extensive and the Gravensteen too small to accommodate them all. The court relocated to the former Jesuit monastery in Volderstraat which had been empty since the abolition of the Jesuit order in 1773. The regional council of the Castellany of Oudburg continued to sit in the Gravensteen until its abolition in 1795 with the arrival of the French revolutionaries.

The Gravensteen was put up for auction in a bid to feed first the Austrian coffers and, approximately twenty years later, the French coffers. At the first auction, the architect Jean-Denis Brismaille purchased the former rooms of the Council of Flanders, the office of the clerk to the court and the prison. The second lot went to Ferdinand Jan Heyndrickx, industrialist and brother-in-law of the entrepreneur Lieven Bauwens.

The Gravensteen, a factory complex

Jean-Denis Brismaille built himself a 'directeurswoning' – a house fit for a director - next to the Gravensteen entrance gate. He turned the buildings into an industrial complex housing cotton mills and a metal fabrication workshop. On the free land within the curtilage of the castle, he built dwellings for some fifty workers' families. In his part, Heyndrickx also set up a cotton mill.

Cité Hulin

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the counts' residence was unrecognizable. The old medieval castle did not look so very different from Ghent's other typical working-class districts. Only the old entrance gate survived as a reminder of its medieval origins. At the time, the Gravensteen was known as the Cité Hulin, after the son-in-law of Jean-Denis Brismaille who now owned most of the houses in the Gravensteen.

The medieval castle a residential district?

The antiquated buildings no longer met the strict safety norms and at the end of the nineteenth century the companies moved to the outskirts of the city.

For the people of Ghent at that time the Gravensteen was a symbol of the abuse of power, feudal oppression, horrific torture and inquisition. There were those who wanted to see the dilapidated building demolished and sold as building land. The plan to parcel the land would involve demolishing the castle, levelling off the motte and constructing two streets straight through the site. Fortunately, there was no interest in the project.

The Gravensteen, a restoration project

So Ghent city council together with the Belgian state bought back the site in several stages from private ownership. In 1888 the dismantlement process got under way. Nearly everything that was not built of Tournai stone disappeared under the demolition hammer, freeing up imposing remains of the medieval castle.

In 1893 the actual restoration work began. Architect Jozef De Waele opted for a romantic interpretation of Philip of Alsace's castle.

The Gravensteen, a tourist attraction

In 1907 the restored parts of the Gravensteen were opened to the public. The 1913 World Fair launched the Gravensteen's reputation as Ghent's biggest tourist attraction.