BRUSSELS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

2. THE FACE OF THE CITY
3. THE CITY’S POWER

The Brussels Files
Jean-Luc Petit
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What was Brussels like in the Middle Ages? How did it gradually come into being? Which of its buildings enhanced its prestige? What did its homes look like? All very natural questions if one is interested in taking a practical approach to life in a great mediaeval city, but hardly easy to answer. Although major historical studies of a number of emblematic monuments have been made, a great deal remains to be done concerning the other aspects of the city’s physiognomy. There are few iconographic sources, and what documents there are require a measure of caution, as they are taken from the work of artists whose primary objective was not a faithful rendition of reality. Although the extant information can be complemented by archaeological excavation, contemporary texts and comparisons with other, more intensively studied cities, we are still all too often forced to resort to pure speculation and many areas still remain unexplored. As for the handful of mediaeval buildings scattered across the city, they have undergone frequent transformation over the centuries.

In view of these limitations, the sole purpose of the second part of Brussels in the Middle Ages is merely to briefly retrace the city’s changing face in the hope that further research will enable it to be complemented and improved in the future. The emphasis, then, is on the city’s most characteristic features. As for its structure, it is, for the sake of consistency, modelled on that of the previous section, which summarises the development of Brussels in a series of major phases (first traces, pre-urban complex, growth of the city and continuing development). Indeed, the original country villages have little in common with the sprawling 15th century conurbation defended by a mighty wall, inside which prestigious monuments could be viewed.
To complement this section, we have drawn up an itinerary to enable visitors to seek out Brussels’ chief mediaeval remains and imagine their original aspect, as well as note their more remarkable features.

The third section discusses the example set by Brussels as a city gradually gaining independence from the authority of sovereign power. This issue is all the more interesting as it has been regularly used as an example since the 19th century by partisans of highly decentralised municipal authority. Indeed, the list of the powers exercised by the mediaeval city authorities does not differ so very greatly – with a few exceptions – from the current situation. However, the reader should remember that the exercise by the City of its administrative and fiscal powers was far more limited than today, while in the context of the non-separation of powers in the Middle Ages, the judicial role played by the aldermen was a major pillar of its authority. It should also be borne in mind that the mode of election of the members of the city authorities was in no way comparable to the present-day system. However, the fact remains that the increase in representation throughout the Middle Ages was a major development in our history. The same may also be said of the inclusion of city delegates in the assemblies representing Brabant, which led to the formation of the first centrally organised counter-power.
2. THE FACE OF THE CITY
Details of scale models of homes in the Merovingian era

These didactic models, which depict hamlets in our region in the Merovingian era, are probably similar to their Carolingian counterparts. They provide an imaginative reconstruction of the first hamlets in the Brussels area in the early Middle Ages. This village includes a number of wattle-and-daub homes with thatched roofs. Whereas some are half buried, others are built at ground level.

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A changing village habitat

By the early Middle Ages, small family groups of farmers and stockbreeders were living on the territory destined – at a much later date – to become the city of Brussels. Gradually – most likely in the 9th and 10th centuries – clusters of homes and farm buildings had begun to form. These modest communities tended to be located on the banks of the River Zenne as well as on the heights.

The lack of archaeological information makes it impossible to do anything but guess at their appearance. It would seem that originally they were not homogeneous, which makes it likely that several distinct clusters protected themselves behind their own earthworks or palisades.

The buildings were made of wood and earth depending on requirements (homes, workshops, barns, silos, etc.). Some of them were small and partly buried, and were probably peasant homes. Others were rectangular in outline and higher (even if they did not boast an upper floor); their size depended on the use that was made of them. The method of construction used was to plant poles in the ground to bear the weight of the walls and roof. Generally, roofs were thatched with straw or reeds, or possibly shingled, whereas wattle-and-daub – a method in which a lattice of branches was daubed with a mixture of wet clay, straw, hay, stones, etc. – was the preferred method of building walls. The result was a sturdy, weatherproof dwelling.

Gradually, some of the clusters in both the valley and on the heights began to develop. Paths were probably trodden between them, and although still separated by construction-free areas, they came to form de facto pre-urban complexes. It can be hypothesised that the inhabitants then built earthworks and palisades to protect their communities.

The first churches

TO SERVICE SEVERAL HAMLETS

Standing on a hilltop on the right bank and in the valley of the Zenne, the churches of St. Michael and St. Géry may have been Brussels’ first places of worship. At first, they may have been small single-nave oratories made of wood and rebuilt in stone at a later date. The church dedicated to the St. Michael the Archangel was very probably (re)built in the middle of the 11th century, when its management was turned over to a chapter of canons by Lambert Baldric, Count of Louvain. Due to its resulting collegiate status, it then appears to have acquired the remains of St. Gudula, whose name it has also borne since that time.

On the other hand, it is impossible to date the construction of St. Géry with any degree of certainty.

The Coudenberg Hill was being serviced by the chapel of St. James by the beginning of the 12th century at the latest. This latter foundation may have been the work of the castellan of Brussels or even the Count of Louvain himself, both of whom resided in the neighbourhood (see below); at any rate, the Count’s appropriation of the church was well-established by the 12th century.
ROMANESQUE BUILDINGS

The Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula is fairly well-documented as a result of archaeological excavations, whereas a number of later depictions of St. Géry are available, albeit to be treated with the usual precautions. Both buildings were in the style of the year 1000, i.e. the first Romanesque period of the Carolingian age. The rectangular nave caused the congregation to gaze at the choir to the east, which housed the main altar and was bisected by a transept which gave the whole the symbolic shape of a Latin cross. Whereas St. Géry has a single nave, the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula is divided into a central nave and two collateral aisles. The chevet of St. Géry was flat, whereas that of the collegiate church was prolonged by three small apse-like chapels. It would appear that the portal of St. Géry was located at the centre of the west front and that a bell-tower was built atop the intersection between nave and transept. It is not known whether St. Michael and St. Gudula was entered through the west front and/or the arms of the transept, and the presence or otherwise of a bell-tower on the nave/transept remains a point of dispute.

As for the first Chapel of St. James, the characteristics of its Romanesque version remain unknown to us.

THE KEYNOTE: SIMPLICITY

The facades remained undecorated, save by rows of blind arcatures.

In the case of St. Michael and St. Gudula, we know that the blocks of stone used were rough-hewn and concealed by a white lime mortar used to unify the whole.

As far as the churches’ interiors are concerned, nothing is known to us, except that the nave of St. Michael and St. Gudula had a flat wooden ceiling and that its white-washed walls were partly ornamented with murals. On the basis of other religious buildings of the time, these may have been trompe-l’œil stone, plant-based motifs or historical scenes.
Throughout the Middle Ages, St. Géry retained most of its original Romanesque features. Its reconstruction in a late-Gothic style only took place in the 16th and 17th centuries. It would appear that both these highly similar depictions show the church as it was in the 16th century prior to reconstruction. Of modest dimensions – with a single-span nave and a double-span choir – the building, which was shaped like a Latin cross, had a single nave and a flat chevet. The walls had projecting bases and the four gables and bell-tower were surmounted by crosses. The building was chiefly lit by windows in the upper part of the walls and in the tower. The church was accessed through a high door in the centre of the west front. If the engraving is to be believed, the church may have been ornamented at cornice level with a row of blind arcatures, a commonly used motif in Romanesque architecture.
Public areas
dedicated to trade

At the latest in the early 11th century, it was a proven fact that trade was taking place in Brussels, even though its exact nature remains unknown. Such activities unquestionably contributed to its pre-urban identity.

Although the exact date at which the port began to operate is not known, its beginnings were modest. A wooden bridge was built across the Zenne, the planks of which could be lifted to allow the flat-bottomed boats below to be loaded or unloaded.

A marketplace developed on the right bank of the Zenne which enabled merchants and the inhabitants of Brussels and its environs to congregate. Another market may also have formed on the heights, either on top of Coudenberg Hill or half-way down its side.

1 Later known as the “Boat Bridge” (and located roughly at the current intersection of Rue du Marché-aux-Polets and Rue de la Vierge Noire) or, according to other historians, as the “De Munter Bridge” (at the current intersection of Rue de l’Évêque and Rue de la Vierge Noire).

2 Subsequently known as the nedermerct or Lower Market. First mentioned in 1174, it was located next to the Church of St. Nicholas, on Rue au Beurre.

3 Site: roughly Place de la Vieille Halle aux Blés.
The fortress of the castellan and the ducal residence of Coudenberg

It would seem that Brussels’ most important civil buildings were located on Coudenberg Hill, which was naturally defended by the ravines of the Coperbeek and Ruysbroeck streams and enabled its occupants to keep watch on the valley below.

Prior to the end of the 11th century, a major family belonging to the local aristocracy occupied a fortified dwelling there. This may have been of the motte-and-bailey type – a wooden tower on an earth mound, surrounded by palisades and ditches. Its occupants were granted the title of “castellans of Brussels” by the Count of Louvain, who had begun to extend his sovereignty over the area in the first half of the 11th century. As the title shows, the castellan was in charge of the fortress and served as the Count of Louvain’s official representative in Brussels.

Close by, the Counts of Louvain – who would ultimately adopt the more prestigious title of Dukes of Brabant – also decided, at the latest in the 12th century, to build their own residence. It would appear that in the 12th century this was a rectangular building with walls of stone, which was occupied by the Count/Duke on each of his visits to Brussels. On such occasions, assisted by henchmen, he managed his property, governed his territory and handed down judicial sentences. The Coudenberg Palace unequivocally affirmed his authority over Brussels and its environs in the minds of all.
2. The face of the city

Wood was the basic material used for most buildings and was cut from the nearby forests. The more infrequently used “white stone” is a whitish-ochre calcareous sandstone from the Lutetian (or Bruxellian) and Ledian geological strata quarried in Brussels and its environs.

Local materials

Wood was the basic material used for most buildings and was cut from the nearby forests. The more infrequently used “white stone” is a whitish-ochre calcareous sandstone from the Lutetian (or Bruxellian) and Ledian geological strata quarried in Brussels and its environs.

It can be assumed that the roofs of important buildings such as churches were covered with Roman-style clay tiles rather than thatch or shingled.

North wall of a cellar in the former Coudenberg Palace

Today, this cellar is the sole remainder of the first residence built for his personal use on Coudenberg Hill by the Count of Louvain/Duke of Brabant. The dressed stone walls probably date from the 12th century and enclose a space 12 metres long and 7 metres wide. The north wall shown in the photograph probably served as a foundation for the building facade which overlooked the Coperbeek ravine. Its relative thinness (58 cm) suggests that the original residence did not appear to be particularly fortified. The stone pillars and vaulting were built at a later date, in the 13th or 14th century. At that time, the facades of the palace were strengthened for defensive purposes.

© COUDENBERG ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE
An urban entity in the making

With new facilities and buildings (12th-13th centuries)

Detail from the instructive scale-model providing the main features of Brussels in the middle of the 13th century, built by Claire Louis in 2001.

This (East-facing) bird’s eye view of part of St. Géry Island and the adjoining triangular island, help us to imagine what developments along the banks of the River Senne were like. Apart from the rather rural houses and annexes, river-activated water mills can also be seen. On the left is the “Boat Bridge”, whose wooden panels could probably be removed, and which in all likelihood served as the first port facility.

© BRUSSELS CITY MUSEUM
2. The face of the city
Expanding neighbourhoods

It was during the 12th century that documents began to refer to Brussels as a city in its own right. A number of early neighbourhoods had expanded and others were developing. All of them were linked by a network of dirt roads.

However, the city still remained largely rural. Wide expanses of land remained construction-free and were used for pasture and cultivation as well as artisan activities.

Extension was made possible in the valley of the Zenne by reinforcing the river banks and draining marshland. Several water mills were also built upstream of the “Boat Bridge”. To improve their water supply, it is likely that the river underwent a number of transformation works which may have led to the formation of three small islands\(^1\). New bridges were also built across the Zenne.

\(^1\) St. Géry, Overmolen and Hergoedshot. See Section 1.

An increasing number of homes

There are scarce information sources concerning this transitional period. It is probable that due to the large amount of space available, homes continued to be built according to the traditional rural pattern, on a single level and separate from each other (which also reduced the risk of fire). However, it is quite possible that multi-level dwellings, with business premises on the ground floor and residential upper floors, had already come into existence and were jostling each other along the main roads. In all cases, the basic principle of construction remained the timber frame. To prevent them from rotting, studs were increasingly isolated from the soil by flashing in the form of a partly buried low wall rising several dozen centimetres above ground level. The walls were filled with daub and required regular upkeep. Facades were flat and roofs were thatched or shingled.
Several important families, some of whom appear to have been close to the ducal family, began to form an aristocratic urban elite and accumulate wealth through trade as well as the real estate they owned in Brussels and its environs. They then displayed their status by building fortified residences in the city. In the historical literature, these are usually referred to as steen (the Dutch word for stone). The earliest references of this type are to the Meynaertsteen and Cantersteen. Although the references date from the 13th century, it is quite possible that the buildings themselves had been built several decades earlier or even during the previous century. The number of the first Brussels stenen is unknown and was probably quite small. Although in-depth studies on this subject are lacking in the case of Brussels, it is likely that they were massive, multi-level stone edifices with a fortified aspect, somewhat similar to seigniorial keeps.

1 Site: roughly the House of the Dukes of Brabant on the Grand’Place
2 This was occupied in the 13th century by the Pipenpoy and later the Saint-Géry families. Site: roughly at the corner of Rue de la Madeleine and Boulevard de l’Empereur.

Drawing mentioning “des Cansters steen”, a detail of the map of Brussels by Gilles van der Hecken, 1535

This schematic illustration is taken from a page written and illustrated by a canon of the Priory of the Seven Fountains near Brussels and depicts the city in the symbolic form of circles divided by radii. A number of Brussels’ most important buildings are sketched in, from which it can be assumed that this was their appearance at the beginning of the 16th century. The Cantersteen is shown from the front, a heavy building, the main facade of which – identifiable by its entrance porch – is flanked by two side walls at acute angles. The building is lit by windows, rests on a visible foundation, and is topped with an overhanging battlemented platform.

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New places of worship in developing neighbourhoods

The population increase led to the construction in the lower city of the chapels of St. Nicholas¹ and St. Catherine².

To the south of the city, the Duke of Brabant built a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary³, which he donated in 1134, together with vast surrounding lands, to the Benedictine Abbey of Cambrai. In turn, the abbey delegated a provost who lived in a neighbouring house on the north-west side of the church.

These three new – if modest – religious edifices were made of stone and built in the Romanesque style; however, their precise characteristics are not documented.

¹ Site: roughly Church of St. Nicholas on Rue au Beurre. Earliest known mention: 1152
² Site: roughly Rue Sainte-Catherine. Earliest known mention: 1201
³ Site: roughly Church of Our Lady of the Chapel

Seal of a dean of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, 1251

The seal offers a very schematic depiction of the Romanesque west front of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula. This feature, known to historians as Westbau, dates from Carolingian times and is a feature of various churches in the Holy Roman Empire, especially in the Meuse basin. In this case, the front includes a square central section on two levels – the second with aperture windows – flanked by two higher towers topped with wide bays. This is a hypothetical reconstruction, the details of which are unverified.

© ARCHIVES GÉNÉRALES DU ROYAUME
The beginnings of a more imposing religious architecture

A new, more elaborate architectural style came into being in the second half of the 12th century, when the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula and the Church of St. Nicholas both acquired stately new west fronts in the Romanesque style, comprising two towers housing a staircase and bell tower on either side of a three-level quadrangular structure. The rough stone used in earlier times was replaced with dressed stone, a far more elegant and prestigious material.

It is also on record that at the end of the 12th century a decorative stained-glass window depicting the ducal arms was added to St. Michael and St. Gudula.

A

Tentative reconstitution of the west front of St. Michael and St. Gudula

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B

Tentative reconstitution of the Romanesque west front of St. Nicholas

The Romanesque west front of St. Nicholas is very similar to that of St. Michael and St. Gudula, albeit on a smaller scale (approximately eight-tenths).

© J-C GHISLAIN
None of the religious edifices built in Brussels in the 11th and 12th centuries have survived. Nevertheless, archaeological excavation has brought a number of interesting remains to light and made it possible to reconstitute the Romanesque floor plan of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula.

Its shape is that of a Latin cross comprising a choir, a transept (width: 13 metres) and a main nave with a length slightly over 25 metres, separated from the collateral aisles by square pillars supporting semicircular arches. Although the rectangular apse lacks an ambulatory, it is fitted, like the transept, with small semi-circular side chapels with secondary altars. The choir is raised to ensure a good view of the main altar; underneath is a similarly shaped crypt intended to house the relics of St. Gudula. The transept and nave are on different levels and connected by staircases. A bell-tower was very likely built on top of the intersection of the nave and transept. As shown by traces remaining in a small apse in the crypt, the latter was decorated with murals. It is quite possible that the rest of the church was also partly ornamented with painted murals of decorative motifs or figurative scenes.

The original west front was entirely remodelled in the second half of the 12th century and connected to the nave by an extra bay. The congregation entered the church through the side doors opening on to the transept, as the new front did not include a portal. On the ground floor of the new west front was a square baptismal chapel roofed with a stone groined vault (i.e. an intersection between two semicircular vaults) supported by four corner columns set in the wall. This construction technique was also used inside the west front of the Church of St. Nicholas, and both are probably the first exemplars of this style of building in Brussels.
Charitable institutions

Three “hospitals” (in the parlance of the times, these were institutions offering hospitality) were set up at the latest in the 12th century by wealthy and generous inhabitants of Brussels concerned with saving their souls. They were intended to supply accommodation for a few days to the city’s homeless as well as to pilgrims and impecunious passing travellers. The Hospital of Our Lady and the Twelve Apostles was founded near the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, while the hospitals of St. Nicholas and St. James were set up close to the eponymous churches in the lower and upper city respectively. The appearance of these buildings is undocumented and it may well be that during the first stage of their existence they were built of wattle-and-daub. At any rate, their size should not be exaggerated as they could accommodate only a small number of guests. The interior arrangements probably included at least a dormitory and a dining hall.

A new hospital founded at the end of the 12th century and shortly thereafter placed under the protection of St. John would later specialise in taking in the sick and the lame. Although nothing is known of the early facility, it is probable that the buildings of the hospital complex evolved over time, increasing in size at the same time as the larger of the original thatched, wattle-and-daub constructions were replaced by stone edifices.

If one includes the Chapel of St. John attached to this institution, Brussels numbered no less than seven Romanesque religious buildings by the end of the 12th century, which confirms the importance acquired by the city at that time.

1 Site: area between Place Saint-Jean, Rue Duquesnoy, Rue de l’Hôpital and Boulevard de l’Empereur.
The first stone city wall

A wall with a length of approximately 4 kilometres was built to strengthen the city’s defences, most probably in the first decades of the 13th century and possibly to replace an earlier system of earth berms and ditches, the layout of which had evolved over time.

The new stone fortifications were battlemented and supplied with arrow loops, and supported by arches buried in an earth berm. They included around fifty horseshoe-shaped towers linked by a sentry walk, itself supported by arches. The city could be entered and left through seven fortified gates as well as a number of secondary postern gates. The gates comprised two towers flanking a rectangular building with an upper floor, through which ran a vaulted passageway. A deep moat inside the rampart supplied additional protection. Wherever possible, it was filled with water from the Zenne or its tributary streams. Where dry, it was wider (40 metres rather than 20). The moat could be crossed over drawbridges to access the city gates and ultimately the roads that connected Brussels with the surrounding villages and other cities.

Although the wall encircled the older settlements on the heights and in the valley, it did not include the areas of La Chapelle and Overmolen to the south, or that of Orsendaal to the north.

Designed with the purpose of ensuring both the city’s defence and law and order, the wall gave Brussels added prestige by drawing a clear line between the actual city and its suburbs and the surrounding countryside.
2. The face of the city
A wide variety of town buildings
And public areas forming a typical urban complex (13th-15th century)

View of Brussels from the west, engraving by Jan Uyttersprot, 1574
© BIBLIOTHÈQUE ROYALE DE BELGIQUE - CABINET DES ESTAMPES S. II 40691
2. The face of the city
A complex urban fabric

Between the mid-13th century and the end of the Middle Ages, Brussels expanded considerably as its population grew from 5-10,000 inhabitants to an estimated 35-40,000. Trade, food production and artisan activity (especially in the area of luxury textiles) soared to formidable heights.

While the early residential areas became even denser, new areas emerged and developed gradually. The network of streets continued to spread, forming internal grids within the various areas and connecting them with each other. The city’s main thoroughfares led to the fortified gates and highways (some of which were already paved) leading to the surrounding villages and neighbouring towns, themselves linked to more distant cities and regions. Most urban streets were narrow and winding, although the main streets were generally wider and, when they had been planned, fairly straight. All lacked pavements and many were dirt roads, which caused mud to form as soon as it rained or snowed. Only a handful were paved, such as the Chaussée (Steenweg) connecting the lower city1 to Coudenberg Hill. A few side streets on the latter were built in the form of staircases in order to compensate for the steep slope.

Markets were organised along several of the busier streets as well as on wide open spaces that ended up forming squares.

1 Near the fish market. Site: roughly intersection of Rue du Marché-aux-Herbes and Rue de la Colline.
As of the second half of the 14th century, Brussels was once more surrounded by a new city rampart. A number of neighbourhoods excluded by the first wall were enclosed, as well as newer quarters and vast, unbuilt up tracts of land. The latter were used for agricultural and artisan activities and also served as a land reserve. At the end of the Middle Ages, many areas of the city remained unbuilt upon: fields, orchards, market gardens, animal pens, land used for the textile industry (fulling, dyeing, spreading, bleaching, etc.) or by tanneries. Other areas were used for military training and an extensive wooded area adjoining the Coudenberg Palace served as a game reserve for ducal hunts.

The second wall was approximately 8 kilometres long, i.e. twice as long as the first, and was furnished with approximately 70 towers – all horseshoe-shaped, with the exception of two noticeably higher round watchtowers. It also included two locks at the entrance of both arms of the Zenne into the city.

The modes of construction of the first and second walls appear to have been largely similar, except that this time brick appears to have been used for the core masonry (at any rate at the Porte de Hal; it may well, although this has not been established, also have been in the rest of the wall). The arched foundations were buried in berms built with the earth dug from the moats. Wherever possible, the moats were filled with water; if not, they were made wider. The main difference between the first and second rampart was the latter’s thicker walls (rendered necessary by the apparition of artillery) as well as the markedly more defensive characteristics of the seven new gates. With the exception of the Porte de Flandre, built according to the traditional model of a rectangular building flanked by two corner towers, these generally took the form of massive horseshoe-shaped constructions to which a projection was often added.

Until the end of the mediaeval period, however, the city’s physiognomy was still defined by its first wall, now an inner rampart, which gave access to the heart of the city yet continued to function as a complementary resource for the purpose of defence and the maintenance of law and order.

A second city wall

As of the second half of the 14th century, Brussels was once more surrounded by a new city rampart. A number of neighbourhoods excluded by the first wall were enclosed, as well as newer quarters and vast, unbuilt up tracts of land. The latter were used for agricultural and artisan activities and also served as a land reserve. At the end of the Middle Ages, many areas of the city remained unbuilt upon: fields, orchards, market gardens, animal pens, land used for the textile industry (fulling, dyeing, spreading, bleaching, etc.) or by tanneries. Other areas were used for military training and an extensive wooded area adjoining the Coudenberg Palace served as a game reserve for ducal hunts.

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The modes of construction of the first and second walls appear to have been largely similar, except that this time brick appears to have been used for the core masonry (at any rate at the Porte de Hal; it may well, although this has not been established, also have been in the rest of the wall). The arched foundations were buried in berms built with the earth dug from the moats. Wherever possible, the moats were filled with water; if not, they were made wider. The main difference between the first and second rampart was the latter’s thicker walls (rendered necessary by the apparition of artillery) as well as the markedly more defensive characteristics of the seven new gates. With the exception of the Porte de Flandre, built according to the traditional model of a rectangular building flanked by two corner towers, these generally took the form of massive horseshoe-shaped constructions to which a projection was often added.

Until the end of the mediaeval period, however, the city’s physiognomy was still defined by its first wall, now an inner rampart, which gave access to the heart of the city yet continued to function as a complementary resource for the purpose of defence and the maintenance of law and order.

A second city wall

As of the second half of the 14th century, Brussels was once more surrounded by a new city rampart. A number of neighbourhoods excluded by the first wall were enclosed, as well as newer quarters and vast, unbuilt up tracts of land. The latter were used for agricultural and artisan activities and also served as a land reserve. At the end of the Middle Ages, many areas of the city remained unbuilt upon: fields, orchards, market gardens, animal pens, land used for the textile industry (fulling, dyeing, spreading, bleaching, etc.) or by tanneries. Other areas were used for military training and an extensive wooded area adjoining the Coudenberg Palace served as a game reserve for ducal hunts.

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The growth of Brussels triggered a construction boom as well as the remodelling of existing buildings. Modest ground-level cottages were still to be found along with utilitarian structures such as barns, stables and workshops; however, new, deeper and higher constructions were now going up, with a ground floor surmounted by one or two floors and usable attic space. Such houses often served a number of different purposes, the ground floor being used for an artisan or commercial activity (with sales taking place indoors or from a stall in front of a street window), while the intermediate floors served as residential areas and the cellar and attic were used for storage purposes. Some houses were also used as meeting-places for confraternities – brotherhoods with a religious and social purpose – or by guilds, i.e. professional organisations of individuals engaged in the same trade.

Timber-framed structures with daubed walls were still in common use. When they were built with several levels, their facades could be either flat or include overhanging upper floors supported by corbels. The latter trend, which began to spread in the cities of Europe in the 14th century, saved space and limited the quantities of rainwater running down the facade, as each level protected the one below.

It may well be that weatherboarding – which was to become widespread in the 16th century – was already in use. Wooden planks were nailed to facades in order to cover them, or inserted between the studs.
On the Grand’Place, the houses known as “The Wolf” and “The Horn” are easily recognised by their respective signs. The twice-depicted horn also encircles the image of a ship, the emblem of the shipping guild, which had been using the house as its headquarters since the second half of the 15th century. The appearance of the buildings dating from the end of the 16th century is close to that of the Brussels houses of the previous century, except that the weatherboarding used on the upper floors may not yet have been extant. In this case, one should imagine timber-framed upper floors with daub walls. Here, the ground floors appear to be built entirely of stone and brick, as well as the side walls between the houses. The overhanging upper floors are supported by corbels and the windows are numerous. The entrance porches are protected by wooden canopies. The roof ends are carved with multi-foil fretwork and topped with finials.

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Facades were whitewashed for protection; a building’s features might be picked out by using one colour for the wood and another for the daub. Alternatively, a thicker coating, white or coloured, could be used to cover the whole structure.

Brick and stone gradually began to be used in wattle-and-daub buildings. In Brussels, the use of brick, which was cheaper than stone and easy to use, appears to have begun in the second half of the 13th century and only truly come into its own in the 14th century. At first, ground floors, or at any rate their lower sections, were increasingly built of brick or stone, which solved the problem of studs rotting in the ground and helped prevent rising damp and fire. Later houses were built with side walls of brick to prevent the spread of fire from neighbouring buildings, and ultimately also with brick street facades. It then became the fashion to add a number of structuring features in stone (base, windows, trim). At the end of the Middle Ages, this trend still had its limits; although middle-class residences used brick and stone in their ground floors and side walls, their upper floors were often still built of wood. Wood also continued to be used in flooring, staircases and house frames.

Thatched and shingled roofs also began to give way to earthenware tiles – occasionally glazed – or slates. This was encouraged by the municipal edicts issued as of the mid-14th century to prevent the propagation of fire; nevertheless, the practice had not yet become fully generalised by the end of the following century.

In timber-framed houses, the pitched roof usually jutted over the facade and protected it against the weather; the triangular ends were sometimes ornamented with sinuous and often multi-foil – i.e. involving the use of several circle segments – fretwork trim. On the other hand, the

Virgin and Child, oak sculpture, 1st half of the 15th century.
Anonymous
This originally polychromatic statue once stood at the corner of two streets in the Marais Quarter. As well as painted or carved signs, the facades of some houses were also home to religious figures in niches or on consoles. These served to protect the house owners and as objects of popular devotion, as well as city landmarks.

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roofs of masonry houses did not overhang the gable, which could be triangular or stepped. In the latter case, the roof was completely concealed by the gable.

The gables of both wooden and masonry houses were often topped with a decorative earthenware or metal finial.

The windows that let in light and air became larger and more numerous. They might be divided in two by a vertical bar known as a mullion, or, in accordance with a fashion that took hold in Europe in the 14th century, by a mullion and crossbar forming a Latin cross. Windows were usually covered with canvas or oiled parchment set in a frame, or closed by wooden shutters. Although glazed windows made of plates of glass joined together with lead were occasionally to be seen, their use remained confined to the upper sections of cross-barred windows.

Finally, houses were often identified by distinctive names, especially those in which an activity was performed (workshop, shop, inn, bath-house, etc.). This name was regularly to be found on a painted or carved sign on the facade.

LARGE RESIDENCES TO ENSURE THE PRESTIGE OF PROMINENT CITIZENS AND THE ARISTOCRACY

It is generally assumed that the brick and/or stone residences occupied by the urban elite – commonly known as steen (stone), but also referred to as borg, poort, toren and even simply huis (house) – began to appear in the 12th century or at the beginning of the 13th century. By the 14th century, they numbered a dozen or so in Brussels. At first, it would appear that they were built exclusively of stone. From the 14th century onwards, brick was also used, at least in part, in some of them. By the end of the Middle Ages, while several of these buildings had preserved their original fortress-like aspect, others had undergone in-depth remodelling. Some grew larger through the construction of annexes or by absorbing neighbouring buildings. Others were divided into several distinct sections. New residences were also built, many by converting a row of older houses into a single dwelling. Gradually, the stone and/or brick homes built or remodelled by the Brussels elite lost their fortified aspect in a quest for increased space, comfort and lighting and melted into the urban landscape; since stone and brick were also being increasingly used in ordinary wooden houses; the notables’ residences were distinguishable less by their materials than by their height or size.

The most sought-after areas appear to have been those bordering main thoroughfares and commercial areas – including the Chaussée, the port and the Grand’Place – as well as the neighbourhoods of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula and the Coudenberg Hill.

1 This has been demonstrated by the archaeological study of the large home of the Priem family. Site: roughly Church of the Rich Clares.
Several members of the Brabant nobility also elected to live in these areas of the upper city, and their large residences were often referred to as “courts” (hof, hôtel). For instance, the de Berghes family acquired the fortress-like residence of the Lords of Evere near the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula. The Lords of Gaasbeek lived half-way up Coudenberg Hill. Higher still, Willem van Duvenvoorde occupied a manor-house in the 1340s which was inherited by the Nassau family in the early 15th century and remodelled at the end of that century. Close by, in the 14th century, the Meldert family owned a residence which probably had a fortified aspect before being converted at the end of the 15th century into a far more modern ensemble by its new owners, the family of Clèves, Lords of Ravenstein. After the Dukes of Burgundy inherited the Duchy of Brabant in 1430 and became the rulers of a group of principalities known as the Low Countries, a number of other aristocratic families (such as the de Croÿ) also flocked to Brussels, as did Anthony of Burgundy, the illegitimate son of Duke Philip the Good.

2 Site: roughly Galerie Ravenstein. This residence was remodelled in the 16th century to form the Granvelle Palace
3 Site: roughly Royal Library of Belgium on Mont-des-Arts
4 Site: roughly corner of Rue Ravenstein and Rue des Sols
5 Site: roughly Court of Auditors of Belgium, Place Royale
6 With its neighbour, this house would serve as the base for the Hôtel d’Hoogstraeten-Lalaing. Site: roughly rue Villa Hermosa

Sketches of the stone/brick residences of the Brussels elite, taken from the map of Brussels by Gilles van der Hecken, 1535

At any rate, they bear witness to the survival at the end of the Middle Ages of several ancient stenen in the city’s fabric. Awe-inspiring in design, they were square, rectangular or polygonal, with a stout base in which openings might or might not have been made. In the latter case, an outer staircase led up to the entrance door. In several cases, corner towers or turrets with conical roofs might also have been added, and the building might be topped with a battlemented platform or pitched roof.

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Photograph of the remains of the base of the steen of the Clutinc family, early 20th century.

In mediaeval times, the Clutincs were one of the most powerful families in Brussels; they owned vast tracts of land and several of them served the Duke of Brabant. Their stone and brick residence stood on the Blindenberg or Montagne des Aveugles (Blind Men’s Hill). At the end of the 14th century, it was taken over by the Witthems, Lords of Beersel. It then fell out of fashion and was replaced by a new aristocratic town-house in the 16th century. During the extensive North-South junction works undertaken at the beginning of the 20th century, the remains of the lower part of the mediaeval steen were exposed, only to be cleared away for good. Unfortunately, their dating has not been sufficiently investigated, although some historians favour the 13th century. The Clutinc residence must have resembled a keep, one side of which measured at least 15 metres, and was built in stone, with a few brick sections which may have been added later. The lower part of the building as it appears on the photograph has no windows and is supported by buttresses, which suggests that the inside rooms were vaulted.

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Besides these secular families, some prominent churchmen such as the canons of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula also lived in pleasant homes. Moreover, in the 15th century, several Brabant abbeys acquired high-quality housing known as “refuges” or “inns”, which they used as occasional residences as well as city refuges in time of unrest.

At the end of the Middle Ages, the Brussels residences of the urban or ecclesiastical elite or belonging to the nobility of the Low Countries were highly diverse in appearance, a fact explained by the various times of construction, the space available and the remodelling performed over time. Their floor plans were equally diverse.

One prestigious design became dominant: this comprised a series of wings around an inner courtyard. In general, these wings were spacious and included large, regularly-spaced, mullioned bay windows. They might comprise one or several levels and contained many rooms with different functions, including a ceremonial hall and a private chapel. Gables were usually stepped. Towers and turrets featured frequently; they were highly symbolic components derived from defensive architecture and contained spiral staircases. Wooden or stone galleries were also used to connect the main buildings and provide access to the upper levels.

During the 15th century, brick was more frequently used in high-end residences, while stone, which was less sensitive to the damp, was used for the base, and also to strengthen the building as a whole. In particular, it was used in the horizontal trim employed to mark the separations between the various levels, as well as the quoins on the corners and the surrounds, mullions and cross-bars of the windows.

Hôtel de Croÿ, Detail of a painting of the Coudenberg area, attributable to Lucas Gassel, 1540s

*Since the 1430s, the Croÿ family, who were closely allied to the Dukes of Burgundy, had occupied a residence facing the esplanade which gave access to the Coudenberg Palace. In this 16th century depiction, their residence comprises several buildings around an inner courtyard enclosed by a wall with several windows and a porch. The main wing on the left comprises several levels, large mullioned and crossbarred windows, stepped gables with dormer windows as well as an ornate gate-house jutting out on to the street. To the rear, the last level of the large square tower, with its windows and low-slope roof, rests on corbels and overhangs the remainder of the building. Adjoining it is a building with the same design as the main wing, albeit smaller. Next to it, the viewer can make out low houses probably used as outbuildings.*
This view serves as a background to a religious composition known as the Pastoral Sermon. As it was not designed to accurately reflect the landscape it depicts, it requires a certain amount of caution. Even if it does rearrange or alter some components, it supplies a close enough rendition of the type of building to be found at the end of the Middle Ages in the prosperous neighbourhood close to the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula (the north tower of which was then still under construction).

To the left of the church, the castle-like residence with its two round towers – the roofs of which are adorned with dormers – is probably the former steen of the Lords of Evere, which had passed into the hands of the De Berghe family. In reality, the towers were most likely connected by a wall rather than a footbridge, which in this case – although such constructions may have existed – is a figment of the artist’s imagination. The latter has also clearly embellished and increased the proportions of the building. In the background stands one of the towers of the first city wall, which has been topped with a conical roof and stepped gable, as well as the bell tower of a small Chapel. At the foot of the De Berghe residence are houses, one of which – the one furthest on the left – is distinguished by its high, square, tower-like shape.

Further down, on the left-hand side of the street leading to the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, are two adjoining houses, each with its own entrance door. They are differentiated by their top levels, one battlemented, the other a stepped gable. The one closest to the viewer is formed by two wings in an L shape surrounding an interior garden closed by a high buttressed wall. The house as a whole is built of brick with stone trim (base, decoration of the entrance door, window surrounds, mullions and crossbars, horizontal trim, quoins) and slate roofing.

The same design can be found on the other side of the street in a building with a central porch and double stepped gable. The turret on the house next door – at the top of the street on the right-hand side – is that of the chapel of the former Hospital of Our Lady and the Twelve Apostles, which since the second half of the 13th century had been functioning as an old women’s hospice run by a religious order dedicated to St. Gertrude. The artist probably increased the chapel’s visibility by shifting it slightly towards the street.

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Brussels in the Middle Ages

Drawing believed to be of the Sleeus steen, artist and date unknown

This illustration is taken from a volume of 17th century texts, most of which were written by Conrad de Prince, a member of the Sleeus lineage. According to the author, this undated drawing was copied from an older painting of the Sleeus steen in Brussels. In view of the lack of evidence to substantiate this claim, a great deal of caution needs to be exercised. To the right, behind a high battlemented wall decorated with carvings, stands a small rectangular building which appears to be an annex of the large adjoining building. The latter is rectangular and several levels high; its windows are large and fitted with mullions and crossbars. The large entrance door is surmounted by a pointed arch above which stands the owner’s coat of arms. At the top, battlements and corner turrets on the street facade supply a military touch, while the side walls end in stepped gables. All this suggests that the building was painted at the end of the 15th century or in the 16th century. With all necessary reservations, it is quite possible that this was, at least in part, a realistic depiction. At any rate, it shares traits with other Brussels residences at the end of the Middle Ages.

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Detail of a triptych of the Martyrdom of Saints Crispin and Crispinian on wood, attributed to Aert van den Bossche, circa 1490

This building stands in the background of a wing of an altarpiece painted for the altar owned by the Brussels guild of shoemakers in the former Church of St. Catherine. Although it probably does not correspond to any particular building, this image supplies a good illustration of a type of aristocratic residence which had become common at the end of the Middle Ages. In this exemplar (other versions of which can be found in other paintings produced in Brussels at the time), a vast multi-level building comprising two perpendicular wings is lit by large mullioned and crossbarred windows and dormer windows. Its street facade is topped by a stepped gable and flanked by a stairway turret. At the rear, the building is connected to another tower by a two-level gallery (the lower level is built of stone, the upper of wood). The residence as a whole encircles an inner courtyard closed off by a battlemented wall with a single door. In the right foreground, a secondary door can be seen under an exterior staircase leading to a wooden gallery.

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Drawing believed to be of the Sleeus steen, artist and date unknown

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Built-up areas gradually became denser; this was particularly noticeable inside the first city wall. To ensure direct access to the roads, houses tended to be built alongside streets and squares. As in the most sought-after areas the available space was limited, so houses tended to form terraces, or at any rate to be separated only by narrow lanes known as *zoe* or *zoeden*. Together, they came to form city blocks, inside which the land might be occupied by gardens, further housing, workshops, storehouses, etc.

Buildings alongside streets tended to occupy space in two ways. Either their facades stretched along the road, their rooftops being parallel and their gables perpendicular to the road; or – an increasingly common design in the more densely built-up areas – the street facade remained narrow and the house extended deeper, so that their roofs were perpendicular to the street and one gable ended up fronting the house. In this way, gabled houses became a characteristic feature of the urban landscape.

Together with the 1560 map engraved by Van Deventer (see Section 1), this version by Braun and Hogenberg is the oldest document which provides a fairly accurate idea of the topography of Brussels. If one takes into account later developments such as the digging of the Willebroeck Canal and further construction, it constitutes an excellent tool for understanding the appearance of the city at the end of the Middle Ages. Both details show a densely built-up central area and a fairly rural area near the second wall, which confirms the highly contrasted physiognomy of Brussels at the time. In the first case, the manner in which the buildings occupy the area, even if schematically rendered, is evocative. Although the buildings are lined up along the street, some have been erected inside the city blocks, in which a number of green areas also survive. The houses facing the street are either long or gabled. In the second detail, there are many green areas, some used for agricultural purposes and others occupied by more or less geometric shapes which were probably racks used to spread fabrics.

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Brussels in the Middle Ages

Detail of an illuminated letter from a manuscript of 1462
This miniature ornaments an inventory made by Adrien Van der Ee, keeper of the ducal charters. Brussels is easily identified by the tower of its Town Hall – surmounted by St. Michael vanquishing the Devil – as well as the twin towers of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula.

In the left background, the huge multi-level building with the stepped gable and slate roof is most likely the ceremonial hall of Coudenberg Palace, the Aula Magna.

In the foreground stands one of the city gates, with two double-crowned towers flanking a central section with a vaulted passageway protected by a portcullis. The solid-red arms of Brussels are displayed prominently. The curtain wall includes defence towers with conical roofs.

Just behind the rampart, the artist has sketched in a number of ordinary houses with whitewashed facades and red-tiled roofs. Their gables face the street and are overhung by the wooden frames of the roofs, with their multi-foil carving and decorative finials. In view of their characteristics, these houses, or at any rate their upper level, must have been built of wattle-and daub and whitewashed.

Behind them, on the left-hand side, another type of construction can be seen, a square tower with an overhanging upper level topped by a slate roof.

Finally, several churches – recognisable by their bell-towers – are depicted lengthwise, a reminder of the importance of religious life in the city.

Of course, the purpose of this miniature was not to supply a faithful rendering of Brussels, and its interest lies in the fact that it schematically concentrates the components deemed by the artist to have been most representative of the city at the time of painting.

© ARCHIVES GÉNÉRALES DU ROYAUME, BRUXELLES - CHARTES DU BRABANT, 2ÈME SECTION, N°66, FOL. 47R

Detail of a painting depicting the Coudenberg area, attributable to Lucas Gassel, 1540s
These houses line a street later known as Montagne de la Cour, which leads to the esplanade in front of the Coudenberg Palace. The Hôtel de Nassau stands in the background. The view clearly shows the diversity of the types of houses to be found in a prosperous neighbourhood in the mid-16th century, and is probably much the same as the view in the late Middle Ages, if one discounts the top of one of the gables and possibly the use of weatherboarding on the facades. A very narrow house with stepped gables is built of brick, while others have stone bases and wooden upper floors, some coated with light-coloured lime mortar. Either the houses stretch alongside the street, or they have a smaller gable facade. Two facades of the corner house, one with a gable and the other without, overlook the streets. Several houses are fitted with awnings under which a stall might be set up, and all of them have many windows.

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Inside the houses

There is little documentation concerning the interiors of Brussels’ houses prior to the 15th century, when painters and sculptors took to depicting Biblical episodes in contemporary settings and left a trove of evocative illustrations. This scene, carved, painted and gilded by Brussels craftsmen, shows the Virgin Mary and Archangel Gabriel in a setting much like that of a bedroom in a luxury residence. The state bed, with its carved wooden headboard, bolster, pillow and coverlet, has been placed on a dais and is surmounted by a canopy with curtains. To the right, a chair with a high carved wooden back stands on a floor of coloured earthenware tiles in a chequered pattern. On the other side, the room is heated by a large fireplace, the mantel of which is ornamented with a religious carving. The lower part of the mullioned and crossbarred windows in the background is closed by wooden shutters, while the upper part is glazed with small lozenge-shaped panes of glass.

The walls of luxury homes were coated with white or coloured, lime-based whitewash, or might be panelled, covered with fabric, or hung with tapestries.

In simpler dwellings, the furnishings were few (a bed, a trestle table, a few chairs or a bench, a chest), the walls were simply whitewashed and the street level had dirt floors. The wooden upper floors were also coated with beaten earth.
Downstream of the Boat Bridge, a landing-stage (werf) was built on the banks of the Zenne and fitted with a crane, which greatly increased activity in the harbour.

The thoroughfare between Coudenberg Hill, the city port and the St.-Nicholas market became a major axis of the city’s commercial activity. It hosted various specific markets, including the fish market. Close by, the area now known as the Grand’Place was redesigned to enable it to accommodate a large general market. It was paved and gradually enlarged and restructured at the initiative of the city authorities until it formed a more or less regular rectangle. It also became Brussels’ premier public venue and was used for local festivities. In that and other areas, streets and open spaces specialised in various trades (such as the firewood market near the Cantersteen, the livestock market behind the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, the horse market in the Sablon area, etc.). Several market spaces were permanently occupied by rows of small stalls rented to vendors, while others made space available for temporary stalls.

Outside the general or specialised markets, some merchants and artisans also conducted their business from their own homes, and a number of houses and cellars served as alehouses, inns or bath-houses.

The soaring growth of trade made it necessary to develop new infrastructures. At the initiative of the Duke of Brabant, who intended to keep control of these activities, several covered markets were built in the 13th century: a corn hall and a complex comprising a meat, cloth and bread hall. Although their appearance is not precisely documented, these were probably large rectangular wattle-and-daub buildings with stone bases.

Later, the walls of the triple-exchange complex between the Spiegelbeek and the Grand’Place were partially rebuilt of brick and stone and roofed with slate. It can be deduced from the sources that the lower level was made

1 Site: roughly Parking 58 building between Rue de la Vierge Noire and Rue des Halles

2 Site: roughly Place de la Vieille Halle aux Blés

3 Site: roughly Rue du Marché-aux-Herbes, 61-63 - Rue du Poivre – Bread house (Maison du Roi)

4 Site: roughly Rue du Marché-aux-Herbes

Detail of a 17th century engraving of the centre of Brussels

Although of a somewhat later vintage, this document shows the Cloth Hall – dating from the second half of the 14th century – next to the Town Hall, which was built several decades later. The sheer size of the building comes as a surprise, as does its vast roof ornamented with Gothic motifs. The ingenious sawtooth layout of the windows enabled sufficient light to enter without damaging the wares on show. The Cloth Hall was destroyed during the bombardment of Brussels by the troops of the King of France in 1695 and replaced by the current rear wing of the Town Hall alongside Rue de l’Amigo.

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up of small rooms, whereas the large commercial hall was on the first floor and could be entered directly via outdoor steps. The top level under the roof was divided into a number of rooms and attics. During the 14th century, a ducal meat hall also opened in the area of Our Lady of the Chapel and another was built by the City next to the harbour; and during the second half of the 14th century, as the first ducal cloth hall no longer met increasing requirements, a second, larger building with stone facades was erected which specialised in wholesale trading. This time, it had been built at the initiative of the City and the drapers’ guild and stood near the Grand’Place, on the site of a number of houses which had been demolished for the purpose.\(^5\)

A few decades earlier, the City had installed its weighing (waghe) facility on rue des Pierres, in a property it had purchased and remodelled for use as a warehouse and to perform the controlled weighing of merchandise.

At first, water was supplied to the various areas of the city by wells and water points (borren), then by a network of fountains on the public streets. Gradually, at the initiative of the city authorities, these were embellished as a means not only of decorating the city but also of displaying the quality of the management of urban affairs. Reservoirs (poelen) were also developed at various sites.

\(^5\) Site: roughly Rue de l’Amigo, rear wing of Town Hall

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**Sketches of fountains, details of the map of Brussels by Gilles van der Hecken, 1535**

*These are rough sketches of a number of Brussels fountains at the beginning of the 16th century. The author inserted them into his symbolic map of the city as they were considered the seven most emblematic of their kind at the time. They are named in Latin or Dutch and are respectively: the fountain near the fish market, the fountain next to the Church of St. John, the fountain near the Carmelite convent, the fountain near the French school, the blue fountain, the fountain at the St. Nicholas market and the Grand’Place fountain. The water flows from several spouts set in a central column or pillar which may be decorated; and runs into one or more variously-shaped basins (rectangular, quadrilobal, polygonal, circular or square). The appearance of the Grand’Place fountain differs from its original aspect in 1302, as its central section then terminated in a spire surmounted by a statue of St. Michael.*

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An increasing number of schools

Brussels’ first school was founded in the 11th century by the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula and run by a canon known as the écolâtre or schoolmaster. By the 14th century, demand so far exceeded supply that a series of new elementary schools called petites écoles were opened under the authority of the écolâtre. A total of 13 such schools operated in various areas of the city. Although research is lacking on this subject, it can be supposed that they blended into the urban landscape and were no different in appearance from other houses.

New hospitals and hospices

Between the 13th century and the end of the Middle Ages, some 20 charitable institutions were founded at the initiative of wealthy members of the laity (both individuals or grouped into confraternities or corporations) in various areas of Brussels.

They complemented the facilities already available, in this case the Hospital of Our Lady and the Twelve Apostles and the Hospital of St. Nicholas – which over time had evolved into hospices – as well as the Hospital of St. John, which treated the sick, and the Leper Hospital of St. Peter. The latter had been created in the 12th century as a communal living place for lepers and was originally relegated to an uninhabited area south of the city; it now found itself inside the second city wall.

Four new hospitals, or what could be more accurately called guest houses (gasthuizen), were intended to provide the destitute of Brussels as well as passing visitors with temporary accommodation: St. James (near the Coal Market), St. Cornelius, St. Julian and St. Lawrence.

For their part, these hospices (godshuizen) supplied long-term shelter to the needy (the elderly, abandoned children, the disabled, etc.) who met the specific criteria determined by each institution. Some of them also took in wealthier guests for rent. They could also be used as meeting places for the local inhabitants and certain confraternities and corporations.

1 Site: roughly Hôpital St-Pierre, Rue Haute
As well as accommodation, hospitals and hospices had kitchens, storage areas, staff rooms, etc., and in general their own chapel. It can be surmised that the type of construction varied according to the period and that hospitals, like urban dwellings, evolved from wattle-and-daub to stone and brick. Most such institutions took the form of a large house or several contiguous buildings with annexes. However, the Leper Hospital and Hospital of St. John occupied vast tracts of land in which a number of buildings were constructed around courtyards and gardens. St. John in particular boasted a long, high rectangular, single-level room lit by large bay windows, which was used as a sick ward.

Mediaeval hospice at Neder-Over-Heembeek, 2015

The Hospice of the Five Wounds of Christ, better known as the Kluis, was founded at the end of the 15th century. The long building comprised five small dwellings intended for the destitute elderly. Though comprehensively restored and located in what was then only a hamlet in the vicinity of Brussels, it supplies an idea of the possible appearance at the end of the Middle Ages of this type of social institution, which is also – and especially – to be found in cities.
Churches and religious communities: a strong presence

THE REBUILDING OF ANCIENT CHURCHES

To meet the needs of an increasing population and with the financial means supplied by a prosperous economy, most of the extant religious buildings were gradually demolished and rebuilt in a much larger format. They were also a great source of pride to their respective congregations.

The Churches of St. Michael and St. Gudula and of Our Lady of the Chapel were the first to undergo this process.

Due to the increasing size of its congregation, the small chapel dedicated to the Virgin in the Rue Haute was replaced by an imposing church. Work began on the nave at the turn of the 12th-13th centuries, followed by the choir and transept in the 13th century. Following a fire, the nave and collateral aisles were rebuilt in the 15th century; however, the west-front tower would only be completed during the following century.

Work on St. Michael and St. Gudula began at the same time, starting around 1225 with the choir, the new layout of which was inspired by French churches. The ambulato-

ry providing access to several radiating chapels was one of the first of its kind in the Low Countries. Reconstruction was performed in several waves and took a great deal of time, as work was only completed at the end of the 15th century with the west-front – indeed, it was only partially completed as the two spires intended for the towers were never built.

In the Coudenberg area, the Chapel of St. James, which at the beginning of the 13th century had been entrusted to an Augustine convent directed by a provost, was rebuilt as of the end of the 14th century.

In the lower city, the Chapels of St. Catherine and St. Nicholas were rebuilt during the 14th and 15th centuries. St. Nicholas, however, retained its 12th century front, which was only elevated and used as a base for a two-level octagonal spire.

The transept of the Chapel of St. John – which belonged to the eponymous hospital – was remodelled and its choir completely rebuilt.

Stone sculptures from the apse of the Church of Our Lady of the Chapel, circa mid-13th century

Both these monsters, one grimacing horribly, the other half-man-half-ape, served as supports for the terrifying gargoyles connected by a carved frieze – of leaves, animals and grotesque human heads – which decorated the apse (the outside of the choir) of the Church of Our Lady of the Chapel at cornice level. This carved ornamentation, the oldest known in Brussels, was made when the choir was rebuilt in the mid-13th century in a style which retained strong Romanesque characteristics. Originally, the frieze was painted. Today, it has been replaced in situ with an unpainted 19th century reconstitution. It may be that these monstrous figures were considered to be diabolical and served as a warning in that they embodied the vices against which believers had a duty to struggle.

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Detail of a painting of the Crucifixion, Anonymous, circa 1470

In this imaginary urban background to a biblical scene, the painter, a follower of Dieric Bouts, has included not only typical wooden or brick houses, but also several existing Brussels monuments, which he has stylised and some details of which have been changed. From left to right, the Town Hall, the Porte de Flandre and the Chapel of St. Nicholas are identifiable. The latter’s west front is visible. The lower part of the square facade and the adjacent tower correspond to the original Romanesque west front, later remodelled during the Gothic period (an extra level with high windows – as can be seen in this painting – was added and surmounted by a parapet). The new platform was itself surmounted by a many-windowed, two-level octagonal spire which ended in a small pointed slate roof. The adjacent tower (like its double on the other side of the building, which cannot be seen in the painting), is also topped by a pointed roof. Although it should not be taken as gospel, this artist’s impression renders the imposing appearance of St. Nicholas at the end of the Middle Ages.

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Fragment of the decor of a side chapel of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, Gothic period

This carved and formerly polychromatic work was made to decorate the walls of a chapel on the south (right-hand) side of the church. As well as the pointed and multi-foil arches typical of the Gothic era, it includes a graceful veiled female head and a vine, the symbol of God. Medieval churches comprised many chapels, some of which were dedicated to prominent families or organisations (religious confraternities, military bodies, trade guilds) and were decorated in a variety of ways. Such chapels played a part in the intense life of the church.

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Fragments of a funeral monument from Our Lady of the Chapel, circa mid-14th century

Both these carved and formerly polychromatic fragments, together with a missing central section and epigraph, composed a stone votive tablet commemorating a dead man who had the privilege of being buried inside the Church of Our Lady of the Chapel. This table must have been set in a wall or pillar opposite the grave, which was identified by a stone slab or engraved-metal plate on the ground. Both figures – one of them the dead man – are richly garbed and address prayers to a now missing figure – which may well have been the Virgin Mary, the Holy Trinity or Christ – and incite passers-by to meditation.

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AN IMPORTANT NEW RELIGIOUS EDIFICE IN THE SABLON AREA

A number of modest chapels were also built in Brussels, such as that dedicated to St. Eloy by the eponymous confraternity or to St. Michael near the collegiate church of the same name. One in particular, which had been built in the Sablon area in the 14th century by a body of crossbowmen organised in a “serment” (a military organisation of burghers which helped defend and keep order in the city), was to have an uncommon destiny. Too small to hold the faithful who came to worship a statuette of the Virgin considered to be miraculous, it was replaced by a much larger edifice. Construction began with the choir at the end of the 14th century and ended with the west front in the mid-1500s. The size of the new chapel, despite the fact that it was not a parish church, probably expresses the wish of the urban elite at the head of the military “serments” to make an ostentatious display of their power in Brussels society.

1 Site: roughly the lower part of Rue de l’Ecuyer, building currently occupied by Muntpunt

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A

Detail of a painting on wood, Anonymous, circa 1480

To the left of the man, the right-hand side of the Church of Our Blessed Lady of the Sablon – which now faces Rue de la Régence – can be seen. From left to right, the viewer can see a small part of the nave, the side entrance to the transept in front of the central spire atop the slate roof, and finally the choir. The building is as yet unfinished. Generally speaking, this painting supplies a reasonably faithful rendition of the state of the church at the time, with the exception of a number of details such as the shape of the choir windows and the star-shaped tracery of the rose window in the transept, which are figments of the artist’s imagination. In the right background, the painter has added a landscape which in reality was that seen at the time when looking in the direction of the area now occupied by the Petit Sablon which, with the exception of a few houses, had not yet been built up. Beyond a low wall lies a crossroads with a well in its centre. A path leads to the second city wall and its towers, one of which is much higher than the others and was known as the Wollendriestoren (Wool Meadow Tower).

© THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON - NG 2612

B

Spandrel in the side nave of our Blessed Lady of the Sablon, 15th cent.

This carving serves as a reminder that the church of Our Blessed Lady of the Sablon was founded by the Serment of Crossbowmen.
2. The face of the city

**NUMEROUS CONVENTS**

Other chapels of varying size were built in different places in the wake of the installation in Brussels of many religious communities, both male (Franciscans, Carmelites, Saccite Brothers, Brothers of the Wolvengracht, Alexian Brothers, Brethren of the Common Life, Dominicans) and female (White Ladies, Clares, Black Sisters, Ladies of Saint Elizabeth). These places of worship formed a part of larger convent complexes built to house community rooms (chapter house, refectory, dormitories, kitchens, etc.) and individual cells. The total size and appearance of these religious institutions (to which should be added the monastery that had annexed the former Chapel of St. James on Coudenberg Hill) varied according to the community’s importance in the city. Their gradual development took the form of new construction projects or the purchase of existing houses which were then integrated and remodelled to suit their new purpose. The largest monasteries often comprised long rectangular single- or two-level buildings, and as a whole tended to be organised around one or more courtyards or cloisters, as was usual in monastic architecture. By occupying a sizeable area of the city’s space, religious orders made a noticeable impact on the urban landscape.

**THE BEGUINAGE**

Communities of pious lay people who had not taken holy vows, also settled in Brussels: the Beguines (women) and Beghards (men). During the second half of the 14th century, the latter, who had close links with the weaving community, finally adopted the Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis; their buildings, which comprised a chapel and a hospice, were comparable in structure to the city’s other monasteries. Unlike the Beghards, the Beguines maintained their status as a community of pious laywomen observing rules of chastity and obedience. Most of their income was derived from textile manufacture and they also spent a great deal of time nursing the sick. The Brussels Beguinage began to form in the mid-13th century and included individual and collective housing, community areas (gardens, infirmary, mill, etc.) and a chapel dedicated to St. John the Baptist. Altogether, it grew into a vast 84,000 square-yard enclosed complex housing several hundred women. Although the chapel and some of the buildings were built of stone, it is probable that the Beguines first lived in wattle-and-daub constructions into which stone and brick were later incorporated in the same way as into other urban dwellings.

1 Site: roughly Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Rue du Midi and Rue des Bogards
2 Site: Place du Béguinage area, between Rue de Laeken, Rue du Canal, Quai à la Houille and Quai du Bois à Brûler
THE DEVELOPMENT OF GOTHIC RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE...

From the 13th century to the end of the Middle Ages, around 30 religious buildings were erected in Brussels, all in the Gothic style. They remained traditionally longitudinal and ended in an apse. They might or might not include a transept; the nave might be single or bordered by two collateral aisles. They varied a great deal in size and ornamentation. For instance, the chapels of the mendicant orders (Franciscans, Carmelites and Dominicans), although large, tended towards simplicity and might lack a tower on the west front or even a transept.

The Gothic style, which originated in Northern France in the mid-12th century, was first used in Brussels at the beginning of the 13th century for the reconstruction of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula as well as that of Our Lady of the Chapel. Whereas the remodelling of the latter began in the 1210s with the construction of a purely Romanesque nave, the initial plans were altered in the 1220s to include Gothic touches inside the nave and, during the last quarter of the 13th century, in the choir generally. Changes to St. Michael and St. Gudula began in 1226 with its choir, which was Gothic in design from its inception. The new Gothic trends would be even more visible in the rest of the building, work on which continued in several phases until the end of the Middle Ages.

Among the specific Gothic features are a taste for verticality as well as for letting in a great deal of light, considered to be a symbol of divinity. Such impressions of uplift and luminosity owed their existence to a series of ingenious devices. Vaulted ceilings were supported by ribs, which distributed their weight on corner columns or pillars. The arches on either side of the ribbing were pointed rather than semi-circular, which improved the transfer of forces to the base. Outside, the thrust of the vaulting was contained by reinforced buttresses or countered by flying buttresses. All this made it possible to construct taller buildings and open large stained-glass windows in the walls. Some churches, like the Church of the Franciscans, were built on a single level; the more majestic comprised several levels: an arcaded ground level, an open-work intermediate gallery known as the triforium, and high windows on the top level. Their style might be uncluttered or richly ornamented with figurative carvings (statues, consoles, gargoyles, keystones) or geometrical and plant-based designs (pinnacles, niches, daisies, finials, crockets, foliage, etc.).

Tentative reconstitutions of the Church of Our Lady of the Chapel in the 14th century: exterior (partial) and interior of the transept.

© R.M. LEMAIRE
... AND ITS EVOLUTION ........................

The Gothic style used depended on the date of construction. Until the middle of the 13th century, it was characterised by a transitional aspect and still included Romanesque features, for instance semicircular arches side by side with pointed arches. It then evolved from its early massive simplicity – known as the Transitional Gothic style – to the more delicate Radiant Gothic, and finally to the ethereal, exuberantly decorative Flamboyant Gothic.

Certain characteristics were more specifically to be found in Brabantine churches, such as massive interior columns, the capitals of which were carved with kale leaves; entrances surmounted by high pointed-arch windows rather than rose windows; or an imposing west front with a single bell-tower at the entrance to the nave. In Brussels, however, the latter was only used at the end of the Middle Ages in Our Lady of the Chapel, whereas the collegiate Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula adopted the French fashion of twin towers on the west front and other religious buildings dispensed altogether with a façade and simply added a small bell tower on the roof of their nave.

At the end of the Middle Ages, there were scarcely any traces of Romanesque religious art in Brussels left, with the notable exception of the Church of St. Géry, the lower part of the front of the Church of St. Nicholas and the west front and nave of the chapel of the Hospital of St. John.
Throughout its existence, the ducal residence known as the Coudenberg Palace was repeatedly transformed and extended. During the 13th century, the walls of the original manor-house were made thicker and defensive features were added so that it could be integrated into the first stone city wall, the purpose of which was to protect Brussels. As of the second half of the 13th century, the castle’s importance increased as Brussels became the principal residence of the Dukes of Brabant, to the detriment of Louvain, while the neighbouring castellan’s fortress lost some of its aura as the importance of its owners declined, and had finally disappeared by the end of the Middle Ages.

Further to the building of the second city wall in the second half of the 14th century, the castle lost its defensive purpose and comfort became the occupants’ new priority. It would appear that at this time the castle complex included a series of buildings around a courtyard. On the north side, the original main building, which contained the living quarters and government offices, was extended; to its rear lay a green area known as the warande (warren), with a wooded game park, a vineyard, an orchard and a pleasure garden. To the west stood various constructions, including a private chapel, while the outbuildings (kitchens, storehouses, etc.) lay on the east side. There are fewer certainties concerning the aspect of the south side, but it may already have been occupied by buildings which closed off the inner courtyard.

From the 1430s, when the Duchy of Brabant passed to the Dukes of Burgundy and Brussels sought to become the main residence of the itinerant court, prestige construction work was undertaken which remodelled the palace complex in depth. Only the low outbuildings to the east and south-east of the courtyard remained more or less unchanged. The main building on the north side was remodelled, enlarged and supplied with new dressed-stone facades. The warande to its rear was considerably extended. To the south-west, the inner courtyard was bordered by a new multi-level building containing the service quarters and various other facilities. A wide porch in this building connected the courtyard to a broad public esplanade adjoining the church of the Priory of St. James and surrounded by a fence which turned it into a forecourt and conferred dignity to the palace complex. With the exception of the chapel, the west wing was mostly demolished and replaced with a building completed in the early 1460s, the imposing size of which was yet another statement of ducal power. It housed a huge ceremonial hall 16 metres high which was accessed by an ornamented staircase, while the exterior was faced with dressed white stone and Brussels-blue stone window surrounds. Commonly known as the Aula Magna, this new building majestically dominated the palace complex, and the city of Brussels in general.

Keystone with the Burgundian firesteel, 1450s
This decorative stone feature adorned the vaulted cellars under the palace reception room commonly known as the Aula Magna. It was uncovered during archaeological excavation work and is now on display at the Coudenberg archaeological site. This keystone is ornamented with stylised firesteels surrounded by flames. A firesteel was a metal implement which, when struck against a flint, produced sparks. It was chosen by Duke Philip the Good as his personal emblem.

© COUDENBERG. ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE
The Coudenberg Palace, detail of a painting on wood attributable to Lucas Gassel, 1540s

This bird’s-eye view is the oldest extant image of the Coudenberg Palace complex as seen from its gardens to the north. For a closer approximation of its appearance at the end of the Middle Ages, the building comprising a level atop a pillared gallery in the left foreground should be discounted, as should, in the right foreground, the chapel apse, since both buildings dated from the 16th century. Between both post-mediaeval buildings, the viewer can see the main residential building on the north side of the inner courtyard, which had been remodelled and extended several times and stood on the site of the original ducal castle. The long multi-level building with its large mullioned and crossbarred windows includes several projecting wings with stepped gables. A vaulted passageway on the ground floor leads to a terrace from which the gardens can be entered. The right (west) side is dominated by a tall building with a pitched slate roof and ornamented with turrets and stepped gables: the famous Aula Magna, which measured approximately 41.5 by 16.5 metres. The inner courtyard is closed off on the other sides by low outbuildings as well as, on the south-west side next to the Aula Magna, a maintenance building. A vaulted passageway through the latter led to an esplanade known as the Bailles, the carved stone fence of which is post-mediaeval (16th century). To its left, a number of houses in the Borgendael area can be seen, as well as the convent church of St. James on Coudenberg. At the time of the painting, this church had been remodelled; on the left end, the central nave can be seen, topped by a small bell-turret and ending in a hipped choir; a side nave, almost as wide and as high, had also been built as well as a massive bell-tower with a pointed roof.

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Administrative and symbolic buildings in the vicinity of the Grand’Place

THE TOWN HALL

At the beginning of the 14th century, the Brussels aldermen elected to settle on the vast market square in the lower city now known as the Grand’Place. Together with the port on the Zenne, it became the city’s main trading hub. The aldermen purchased an old steen (a stone dwelling with a fortified aspect) built in the previous century by the De Meerte family, which they used to hold meetings in and carry out administrative work. Later, this first acquisition was complemented by the purchase of adjoining buildings. In the 15th century, the whole disparate ensemble was replaced by a brand new town hall (stadhuys), which was built in two phases. Not only did the city authorities increase their available workspace; the new building was also a clear affirmation of their political importance as well as their role as a court of law.

For the design of the new building, the project supervisors were able to refer to other aldermen’s houses already extant in the Low Countries, in particular the one in Bruges. At first, the complex begun in the 15th century comprised only the current left wing, which was L-shaped and adjoined the Cloth Hall at the back, as well as part of the tower. The tower itself was shaped like a belfry – belfries were themselves inspired by fortress keeps and church towers – by then a common feature in Flanders and, to a lesser extent, in Brabant, and which symbolised the independence of cities. The facades included a large number of high windows, a battlemented parapet at the base of the roof, stepped gables and decorative Gothic niches. On the ground floor, a vaulted gallery was supported by pillars; a staircase gave access to the administrative departments. The first floor was mainly occupied by the aldermen’s meeting room as well as by a vast hall which could be used for receptions.

Part of the background of a preliminary sketch for a tapestry cartoon, Bernard van Orley, circa 1531-1533

This is the oldest known panoramic drawing of Brussels from the east. The Town Hall clearly dominates the city, whose buildings appear to be very closely packed behind the first city wall. The artist has also schematically depicted the tower of the Church of St. Nicholas. Here and there, a few high, square or rectangular buildings emerge; these are probably the residences of the city’s elite.

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2. The face of the city

Original statue of St. Michael, removed from the Town Hall spire and now preserved inside the building

This statue of St. Michael vanquishing the Devil once stood atop the Town Hall. It was restored several times and finally replaced in 1996 by a replica. The patron saint of Brussels has symbolised the city authorities’ power ever since he was first depicted on the City’s seal in the 13th century. The Town Hall statue stood on a mobile globe and also served as a weathervane. From the Devil to the tip of the sword, the figure measures almost five metres, and was made by Maarten van de Rode from plates of hammered copper originally assembled on an iron frame, to which were added a number of solid bronze accessories such as the sword. St. Michael was gilded and the Devil painted in a dark colour.

© BRUSSELS CITY MUSEUM
During the second stage, which began two decades later and ended in 1455, a new wing – which although it included a number of specific architectural features was consistent in style with the earlier wing – was built on the right-hand side of the tower. The tower was elevated and its new open-work octagonal spire, complete with a statue of St. Michael, rose almost 97 metres above ground level. Despite its location in the lower part of the city, the Town Hall was thus taller than both the Coudenberg Palace and the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, the competing symbols of the ducal and religious authorities.

THE “DUKE’S HOUSE”

On the other side of the Grand-Place, all the ducal covered markets were reorganised. The former cloth covered market was demolished at the beginning of the 15th century and replaced with housing. As for the bread house, it gradually began to be used by a number of judicial and financial institutions within the jurisdiction of the Archishopric of Cambrai and – more especially – of the Dukes of Brabant in the second half of the 14th century and in the 15th century. Its new common name, the Duke’s House, was the sign of the ducal house’s intention of establishing a strong symbolic presence at the very heart of the city, opposite the Town Hall. Although the building, which dated from the 13th century, had become rather shabby-looking by the end of the Middle Ages, it was only rebuilt in stone and given a more prestigious appearance at the end of the 16th century.

1 Site: roughly Rue du Marché-aux-Herbes
2 Site: roughly Bread house/Maison du Roi, Grand-Place
3 The current Bread house/Maison du Roi which stands in its place is a Neo-Gothic reconstitution dating from the last quarter of the 19th century.

This Avesnes-limestone figure is one of a group of eight depicted in a seated position and holding a phylactery. They are prophets from the Old Testament, the symbol of wisdom inspired by God. Made in the International Gothic style, they form a part of the carved decor designed to ornament the ground floor of the Town Hall during its first construction phase. Like a number of original consoles from the west wing made at the same time, they are now preserved in the Museum of the City of Brussels and have been replaced in situ with 19th-century copies. The attempted reconstitution of the colours and gilding is the result of a detailed scientific study performed by IRPA, and reminds us that the carved figures decorating medieval buildings were painted and/or gilded, as were a number of architectural features.
THE GUILD HEADQUARTERS

After a number of families from their urban elite had built their residences in the environs of the Grand’Place, the guilds also symbolically began to take root in the heart of the city in the 15th century. This may be due to the fact that as of 1421 their representatives began to play a part in the city’s government, of which the Town Hall was the most pregnant symbol. Several corporations purchased and remodelled houses on or near the Grand’Place turning them into meeting places and showcases. In general, they were similar to the burghers’ residences of the time. However, two of the guilds on the east side of the square took part in an innovative remodelling scheme implemented by the municipal authorities in the 1440s. Their buildings, as well as three others (including a former steen once inhabited by the Meynaert family), were demolished and replaced by a new set of perfectly identical and aligned houses faced with dressed stone, which gave a new majesty to their side of the Grand’Place.\(^1\)\(^2\)

\(^1\) See Section 3 of this file
\(^2\) Site: House of the Dukes of Brabant

Detail of an engraving illustrating the official entry of Archduke Ernest into Brussels, 1594

These houses, some of which functioned as guild headquarters, formed a part of a series of six identical buildings which had stood on the upper side of the Grand’Place since the 15th century. They differ only by the signs above the doors, which illustrate the names given to each of them. They are all characterised by flat facades, mullioned and crossbarred windows, wrought-iron anchors and stepped gables with small openings. The ground floors are elevated above the cellars and are accessed by steps. Decorative horizontal bands emphasise the architectural unity of this series of perfectly aligned houses, the cutting-edge modernity of which enhanced the prestige of their occupants as well as the urban authorities who had designed them.
Wood was used not only for the frame or weatherboarding of half-timbered houses, but also for their floors, partition walls, doors and door and window frames, as well as for paneling in the more luxurious residences. Although oak was the most sought-after species, other woods such as elm, ash, poplar, fruit-wood, etc. were also used. Most of this wood was taken from the Forest of Soignes and other wooded areas near Brussels. Resources from other regions – such as Hainault and even more distant lands such as Scandinavia and the countries bordering the Baltic Sea – were also beginning to be used on a more exceptional basis.

In many buildings, daub was still used to fill in wooden frames.

Stone was widely used in prestigious religious and secular buildings, as well as in the homes of the elite. Most of it was calcareous sandstone from the Ledian and Lutetian (or Bruxellian) geological strata. Generally, the former stone tends to be ochre in colour, while the latter is whiter. The stone was excavated from the many quarries in the environs of Brussels, mostly to the west – between Laeken and Dilbeek and between Affligem and Asse – and supplied in rough form or dressed on the spot. For carvings, a softer white limestone known as Avesnes limestone was brought in from the Scheldt basin. At the end of the Middle Ages, a number of architectural features were made of so-called Brussels bluestone, a bluish limestone from Brabant (Arquennes) or Hainault (Ecaussinnes, Feluy).

The use of brick probably began in the second half of the 13th century, and gradually spread to the masonry of burghers’ homes. In the 14th and 15th centuries, it was also used in large-scale buildings to face the interior side of walls, the exterior of which was faced with dressed stone (Porte de Hal, Town Hall, Aula Magna, and the row of houses on the east side of the Grand’Place). Brick was also used in the vaulting and even in the walls of a number of churches. In the 15th century, in combination with stone, it was clearly the preferred material for the facades of aristocratic residences. The building sites were supplied by brickworks in Brussels and its environs, and perhaps also by more distant producers.

The mortar used to cement the stone and brick was a mixture of lime (produced by heating limestone in Brussels’ kilns; much of this was quarried in an area to the north-east, between Evere, Vilvoorde and Steenokkerzeel,) and sand (available in Brussels itself and in its environs).

Wood, daub, stone and brick could be coated or whitewashed in a tint which might or might not be similar to that of the underlying material. Another option was to conceal it under a thick coating of mortar applied in several layers. This might be white or coloured, and motifs might be added, often imitating stone or brick ornamentation. Interior walls might be decorated in the same manner, or with ornamental compositions and even figurative scenes.

Roofs were thatched or tiled. The initial Roman tiles gave way to a flat, rectangular version which might be glazed. For prestigious buildings, slate from the Ardennes was sometimes preferred.

Wrought iron was sometimes used to strengthen building frames, either at the core of the masonry (as is largely the case for the Town Hall) or in the form of facade anchors. It was also used for decorative finials.
2. The face of the city

These paintings form a part of a triptych commissioned by the guild of the Four Crowns (comprising masons, stonemasons, slate roofers and sculptors) to decorate an altar in the former Church of St. Catherine. The mid-16th century construction techniques shown had barely changed since the Middle Ages. On the left-hand wing, two masons are mixing mortar with a trowel and a bucket by pouring water on to a mixture of sand and lime, while a third, standing on scaffolding, pours the prepared mixture into a bucket into which a fourth worker is dipping his trowel. In the background, men carve blocks of dressed stone with mallets and chisels. In the foreground, two “jurors” (executives chosen by the guilds), are depicted kneeling and praying before an assortment of carvings and chisels and a pair of compasses. On the right-hand wing a mason, a sculptor and a stonemason with a pick, are all shown working on a building under construction. The latter’s roof structure is being covered with slates nailed into place with hammers by workers on ladders. In the background, labourers bring stones unloaded from a boat, while in the foreground the jurors are surrounded by the tools of their trade (trowel, ruler, chisel, sketchbook, plumb line and line level).

Guilds comprised all practitioners of the same activity: masters, qualified workers and apprentices. As the jurors were chosen exclusively from among the masters, the guilds were controlled by the latter, and in turn supervised the quality of production, ensuring that knowledge and know-how were passed on, defended the interests of their respective sectors, organised a measure of solidarity and limited competition by applying identical wages and working conditions as well as limiting the practice of a particular trade to their members. The building sector was highly fragmented. Besides the four trades depicted here, it called upon many other skilled professions such as carpenters, blacksmiths, painters, glaziers, etc., as well as many unskilled labourers.

Project sponsors often supervised works directly. However, in the case of large-scale projects requiring theoretical and technical expertise, they used project supervisors who, with their approval, designed plans and coordinated their implementation, beginning with the foundations. The ritual of laying the first stone became commonplace in the 11th and 12th centuries. In the case of long-term projects, several sponsors and project supervisors would succeed each other, which explains the notable stylistic differences apparent in the same buildings.
The urban landscape

Together with the views from the west (p.28), south (p.30) and east (p.56), this panoramic view of Brussels supplies a view of the city in its entirety. Although the city’s layout has been altered for greater readability and the depictions’ faithfulness to reality is variable, they reflect the striking impression approaching travellers might have of Brussels at the end of the Middle Ages. The city wall clearly separates it from the suburbs and surrounding countryside. Besides the city gates, these illustrations also show the main churches, especially the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, as well as the Coudenberg Palace and the Town Hall. The emphasis on these monuments is a tribute to the importance of the religious, ducal and municipal authorities which appear to dominate the city’s fabric by their presence. A number of aristocratic residences also stand out due to their size and the presence of towers. The many trees and vacant lots also remind the viewer that the ground within the walls was far from being entirely built-up.
View of Brussels from the north, watercolour drawing by Anton van den Wyngaerde, 1558
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Map of Brussels by Gilles van der Hecken, 1535

This map is annotated in Latin and Dutch and oriented more or less east to west. Surrounded by religious figures, it is intended to be a symbolic representation of Brussels and has an esoteric flavour. It comprises three concentric rings (the first representing the first city wall and the third the second city wall) divided by seven radii representing the city’s main thoroughfares which connected it to various towns and villages, the directions of which are specified. The river Zenne flows through a lock to the south and meanders its way through the city before exiting on its north side. A square in the centre contains a shield depicting St. Michael as well as St. Gudula and St. Juliana holding a monstrance. This square is directly surrounded by the names of three locations at the heart of the city (Bread House, Grand’Place and Town Hall), as well as by the arms of the seven lineages and several families belonging to the urban aristocracy. In each segment, the artist has included – and sometimes illustrated – the names of the city’s main landmarks: the gates in the first and second city walls as well as a tower in the second wall, churches, chapels, convents, the Beguinage, fountains, fortified residences, aristocratic residences, hospices, hospitals, the ducal palace and park, the buildings housing the municipal and central administrations, markets and the military training ground.

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2. The face of the city
3. THE CITY’S POWER
In the beginning

Power is mainly in the hands of the territorial prince
As Brussels developed into a pre-urban complex in the 11th century, the existing system of government was feudal. State power (territorial defence, justice, law and order, mintage, town planning, economic development, etc.), albeit notionally held by the sovereign, was in fact largely delegated to his aristocratic vassals, who controlled extensive regional areas (principalities, duchies, counties and marches) on a hereditary basis. Locally, the territorial princes entrusted their own vassals, themselves rich secular or ecclesiastical landowners, with some forms of public authority (justice with the exception of death penalties, policing, public amenities, etc.) in the form of hereditary fiefdoms.

In the early 11th century, the Counts of Louvain, a prestigious family of Carolingian origin which had sworn fealty to the Emperor – the sovereign of the vast tract of land later known as the Holy Roman Empire – extended their domination to the Brussels area, which became a major component of the huge dominions which gradually came under the control of the Counts of Louvain with the support of the local lords. The new territory came to be known as Brabant in reference to an ancient Carolingian pagus (territorial district). Having been awarded the title of Dukes of Lower Lotharingia by the Emperor in the early 12th century, the Counts of Louvain were commonly referring to themselves as the Dukes of Brabant by the turn of the 12th-13th centuries.

In Brussels, the territorial prince was not obliged to share power with a vassal (as was the case, for instance, in Grimbergen or Gaasbeek). It is quite possible that a powerful local family (later known under the name “de Bruxelles”) exercised a measure of authority over Brussels prior to the takeover by the Counts of Louvain. However, they elected to fully acknowledge the latter’s power by having themselves appointed “castellans”, i.e. the officials representing the Count’s authority in Brussels.

The castellany of Brussels was hereditary, which made it less easy for the Counts of Louvain/Dukes of Brabant to control. The latter’s decision, taken at the latest in the 12th century, to appoint a new functionary who could then be dismissed at will was all the more understandable. The territorial prince’s new representative was known as the amman and headed the Brabant administrative district (henceforth known as an ammanie), the centre of which was Brussels. The amman gradually came to supplant the castellan, whose role became largely honorific.
Although the authority of the Count of Louvain/Duke of Brabant over Brussels appeared to be limitless, it was far from being so in judicial matters. A custom had been in place since Carolingian times, according to which the accused had to be judged by an assembly of non-professional judges known as aldermen (échevins) chosen from the ranks of prominent members of the community. Given the high speed at which Brussels was developing, it soon – at the latest during the 12th century – acquired the right to its own assembly or “bench” of aldermen. The latter handed down sentences, thus creating a body of customary law specific to their territory (Brussels law) and leading to a de facto sharing of judicial power.

Although sentences were passed by the Brussels aldermen, their courts were presided by the amman and the aldermen themselves were appointed by the Count of Louvain/Duke of Brabant, in whose name they officially handed down their sentences.

The most ancient certified reference to the Brussels aldermen dates from 1154. An 1138 text citing aldermen may also, albeit with no absolute certainty, have been referring to Brussels.

The Duchy of Brabant

This map shows the extent of the territory controlled by the Counts of Louvain/Dukes of Brabant from the 10th to the middle of the 13th century. For this purpose, they resorted to various strategies, including marriage, taking in fee, purchase, imposition of suzerainty on local lords, taking abbeys into custody, granting privileges to rural and urban communities, and outright war.

The Counts of Louvain began to refer to the greater part of their possessions as Brabant in reference to a former pagus (a Carolingian territorial district) in order to add prestige to their lineage. They achieved ducal dignity in 1106, when the Emperor bestowed on them the mostly honorific title of Dukes of Lower Lotharingia. Gradually, the old title of Count of Louvain was replaced by that of Duke of Brabant, which had become fully accepted by the late 12th and early 13th centuries.

In 1430, the Duchy of Brabant was inherited by the Dukes of Burgundy and in 1477 by the House of Hapsburg, causing it to take its place among a set of principalities commonly known as Flanders or the Low Countries. However, in Brabant, the sovereign of these regions exercised his authority only as Duke of Brabant.
This wax seal bears the image of St. Michael and was used to authenticate documents issued by the Brussels city authorities. This image, selected in the 13th century and first mentioned in 1231, was that of the city’s patron saint. In this first version of the seal (the earliest preserved imprint, it dates from 1244), the archangel still bears the insignia of a dignitary of Byzantium, where his cult first originated. At the end of the 14th century, this depiction was permanently replaced with that of a knight slaying evil in the form of a dragon or devil.

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3. The city’s power
A number of provisions of Brussels customary law, mainly concerning penal matters, were specified and written down in a charter in 1229. The Charter was an official document intended to record rights or resolve interests, and in this case was authenticated by the seal of Henry I of Brabant and his son, the future Henry II, who had granted it. As shown by the use of the term “electio” (keure) to designate this document, it had not been imposed on the burghers of Brussels, but rather “elected”, i.e. freely accepted, by them and was probably the outcome of talks, which suggests a new power relationship between the urban elite and the Duke. The purpose of this initiative appears to have been the improvement of the judicial process, the finding of a compromise further to disputes concerning the interpretation of unwritten law, and the limitation of private vengeance. It is also consistent with the general increase in the use of written documents during the period.

The Charter (keure) of 1229

The original Charter of 1229, which was written in Latin, is no longer extant. However, as one of the founding texts of the urban power in Brussels, it was copied a good many times. This 14th century mediaeval-Dutch translation was copied on parchment with great care, and was compiled with other documents in a register known as a cartulary which is now preserved in the city archives.

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The Charter also specified that the income from judicial fines was to be shared between the Duke (two thirds) and the city (one third). The city now had its own fund for “common use”. The burghers of Brussels were thus officially recognised as a judicial entity in their own right, and the authority which represented them (the aldermen, assisted at the time by a consultative body of “jurors”), was no longer restricted to judicial matters. In effect, they had been given scope for the exercise of further powers. However, these were exercised in the name of the Duke (as represented by the amman), who thus reaffirmed the legitimacy of his authority over Brussels. Initially valid for a three-year probationary period, the Charter of 1229 was extended de facto.

### Excerpts from the Charter of 1229

Henry, by the grace of God Duke of Lotharingia, and Henry his eldest son, to all both present and future, hereby state that, having taken counsel of our men and of the aldermen and jurors, have drawn up the following charter at Brussels...

1. If someone should kill a man and be convicted thereof by honourable men who have sworn allegiance to the Charter, if he be taken, let his head answer for the head of the victim...

2. That, for a limb, a limb be taken, save by the grace of the Duke, an eye for an eye, a hand for a hand...

4. That he who injures another and has broken his head pay 20 deniers, if he be convicted by two men with the power to testify and who have sworn allegiance to the Charter. If he cannot pay, he shall be banished from the Duke’s lands until such time as he has paid.

6. For an injury of small appearance, that 100 sous be paid; for a blow to the jaw or for having torn out hair or spilled blood or thrown mud, or given a kick, let 3 livres be paid, if someone be convicted by men subject to the Charter...

8. If a woman strikes a man, she shall pay 20 sous, if she be convicted.

9. If a woman strikes a woman, she shall pay 20 sous, if she be convicted, or she shall carry stones linked by a chain from her parish to another.

10. If someone enters by force into another’s home, let him pay 10 livres...

19. All burghers and sons of burghers aged 15 years and over shall swear to peace and to this Charter on the prescribed day.

30. If someone secretly bears on his person a sharpened knife or weapons of war or of attack within the City, he shall pay 5 livres if he be convicted in the requisite form...

48. Be it known that the City of Brussels has elected this Charter by our consent, to be observed for a period of three years on condition of being subject to it and having suffered from us and our agents no violence beyond that specified in its provisions; but let all be done and decided by the judgement and sentence of the aldermen. This has been conceded freely.

So that this may remain firm and stable for the city, we have granted this Charter in witness thereof reinforced with our seals.

Given this year of our Lord twelve hundred and twenty-nine in the month of June, on the fifteenth day before the Nativity of St. John the Baptist.
During the second half of the 13th century, it can be noted that Brussels’ Assembly of Aldermen began to enact a number of ordinances that did not mention the Duke, which testifies to an increasing advance toward autonomy. The latter was consecrated in 1291, when Duke John I of Brabant granted a charter which officially acknowledged the aldermen’s right to legislate, at any rate with an intervention by the amman. This charter and a further document dated 1295 also allocated new sources of revenue to the city authorities (fees for the use of the port crane and the weighing of merchandise; payment of dues at the city gates; excise duties on beer). Finally, in 1326, Duke John III allowed the City to procure by any means any sums required “for the honourable maintenance of its estate”.

To achieve this delegation of the Duke’s prerogatives, the City had a number of significant financial arguments at its disposal. The Dukes of Brabant required sufficient resources to carry out their plans and support their expansionist projects. In particular, they needed the financial support the Brussels authorities were now better able to acquire, due to the city’s economic growth in the 13th and 14th centuries.
Throughout the 14th century, the City’s area of intervention continued to expand. The amman in charge of defending ducal interests now no longer automatically played a part in the issuance of ordinances by the aldermen, although he continued to promulgate them. Moreover, the City’s administration was professionalised, in particular by the appointment of two receivers responsible for managing its finances.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Duke did, however, retain a number of prerogatives as well as a measure of genuine influence exerted through his representative the amman. He remained able to change the number of representatives in the assembly as well as their mode of election and, of course, remained in charge of appointing the Brussels aldermen, even if his powers in that respect did evolve somewhat (see next chapter).

Although controlled, the gradual emancipation of the city authorities consecrated the acknowledgement of the City as a powerful new entity in the feudal world. Indeed, similar processes were occurring throughout mediaeval Europe, at different times and to a varying degree. It took place earlier and more markedly in the more prosperous cities, especially in Northern Italy and the Low Countries, both geographical areas with a particularly dense urban habitat.

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**Coat of arms**

Brussels was identified by means of a solid red shield, in heraldic parlance “gules plain”. In this illustration, it is visibly displayed above one of the gates in the mediaeval city wall.

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Extension of the City’s area of authority

With a few exceptions (e.g. the ducal palace and its environs, known as Borgendael), the City’s authority extended to all territory within the first, then the second city wall. It gradually spread to a number of surrounding hamlets which it controlled politically, legally and economically, to the extent that they lost their separate identity. This increased its source of excise duties (the foundation of its financial resources), which enabled it to increase its income and combat tax evasion. The enlarged area was known as the “franchise”. It formed gradually and stabilised at the end of the 14th century; at which time it comprised the following villages: Saint-Josse, Ixelles (in part), Molenbeek, Saint-Gilles, Schaerbeek, Laeken, Anderlecht and Forest.

All inhabitants of Brussels and its franchise had the same rights and obligations, even though a number of provisions might apply only within or outside the city wall (the first or second wall).

A group of inhabitants also enjoyed the privileged status of “burghers”, which gave them various fiscal and legal advantages which were specified in the 14th century. The latter notably included the right to be tried only by the Brussels aldermen in matters both civil and criminal. A man had to be a burgher to serve a term at the municipal level. This status was hereditary and could also be acquired against payment.
In a wider area known as the “suburbs” (which began to form in the 14th century and spread several leagues beyond the city wall), the City acquired the right to levy excise duties on beer and wine. As well as the villages in the franchise (with the exception of Saint-Gilles, where the right to levy excise duties on beer remained in the hands of the Duke), the suburbs came to include Berchem, Boondael, Etterbeek, Evere, Jette, Uccle and Woluwe.

Finally, in the area of criminal law, the Brussels aldermen’s reach was even greater, as it extended to all villages in the ammanie, with the notable exception of those which already had their own law courts. Beyond those limits, their jurisdiction also extended to all offences of which one of the city’s “burghers” might be accused.

The text of this lettre de bourgeoisie (“letter of burgherdom”) relates to the official granting of the status of a Brussels burgher to Gilles Jacobs in 1387. The original document is written on parchment and authenticated by the seals of two aldermen, and states that the applicant is of good moral character, has a large enough income, and has paid the requisite fee. The new burgher was expected to reside in the city for a year and a day, after which the residency obligation no longer applied.

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Changing representation

Detail of a 17th century engraving (p. 83)
3. The city’s power
In the beginning: aristocratic government

The cornerstone of the Brussels authorities was the Assembly of Aldermen appointed by the Duke of Brabant to pass a judicial verdict on cases relating to the inhabitants of Brussels. In accordance with custom, the aldermen were probably selected from among the “notables” of their community. As it acquired structure, this elite began to form a class that presented itself as an aristocracy unable to engage in an artisan trade; historians usually refer to such a group as the patrician class. It would appear that the Brussels patricians mainly originated among the great families in the entourage of the Count of Louvain/Duke of Brabant and had decided to settle in what was as yet only the germ of a city; having divined its wealth-creating potential, they acquired large tracts of land. Later, some patricians also owed their exalted status to financial investment as well as trade in wool, foodstuffs and cloth. The number of urban-aristocratic families has been estimated at about 20 in the 13th century and nearly 300 by the end of the 14th century.

Originally, aldermen appear to have served their terms for an unlimited period of time. This changed in 1235, when the Duke limited such terms to one year, renewable after a given vacancy period.

By the 13th century, the Brussels aldermen could, if necessary, convene a consultative body prior to making decisions. The first of these (mentioned in the 1229 Charter) was composed of “jurors” and at the end of the 13th century this gave way to a “Council”, the number of members of which probably varied according to the number of cases presented to them.

Both the Assembly of Aldermen and the consultative body were monopolised by the patrician class. At the latest in the early 14th century, the patricians divided themselves into seven groups known as “lineages”, membership of which was hereditary and could be transmitted by the father or mother. In 1306, the Duke decreed that each lineage was entitled to one of the seven aldermen’s posts.

At that time, it had become common practice for aldermen to propose their own successors upon expiry of their terms, according to the principle of co-optation. The Duke might, however, reject the proposed candidate. This system was abolished by charter in 1375: henceforth, each lineage would submit three candidates for its position, the actual choice to be made by the Duke. This new system enabled the central authority to retain its influence and maintain the patrician class as the sole representative of the City’s power.
Around the figure of St. Michael, this 17th century engraving depicts the coats of arms of the seven lineages which composed the Brussels urban aristocracy and alone had access to the position of alderman. Their names were Coudenbergh, Rodenbeecke, Serhuyghs (previously known as the s’Hughe Kints), Serroeloffs, Sleeus, Steenweeghe and Sweerts. The spelling of these names varied somewhat over time. As of 1375, each patrician family had to determine the lineage to which it belonged, which is how we know that at the time the Brussels lineages included 282 families.

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The struggle of the non-patrician class for power

Most inhabitants of Brussels were not patrician and therefore had no say in the management of the city's affairs. This affected not only a large mass of poor people, but a number of people who, without belonging to the lineages, had acquired sufficient riches and renown to hold the legal status of burghers. This situation inevitably created tensions and the non-patricians eventually claimed a share in power. For this purpose, they needed to petition the Duke – who alone had the official right to change the rules – to alter the conditions for appointment to the city authorities.

Their voice was eventually heard due to the formation – informal in the 13th century, then official in the 14th and 15th centuries – of organisations known as trade guilds (ambachtsgilden). The guilds united artisans, qualified workers, workshop owners and small tradesmen operating in the same activity sectors and enabled them to defend their specific interests as well as ensure a measure of mutual solidarity between them. The guilds’ clout also enabled them to funnel demands for more representative city government.

Due to the patricians’ strong resistance to any discussion of the issue, riots broke out on several occasions, usually in times of economic and political crisis, when the Duke’s power had become weakened and the patricians divided among themselves.

In 1303, for the first time, an insurrection led to the admission to the ranks of the city authorities of representatives of the non-privileged classes. However, with the Duke’s support, the patricians crushed a further rebellion in 1306 and managed to recover all of their former status.

Again, in 1357, the patrician regime was forced to cave in to the demands of the non-lineagers, who were once more given the right to participate in the city’s government. However, this lasted only until 1359, and a new revolt by several guilds was brutally suppressed in 1360.

From 1366 onwards, continuing unrest led to a slight relaxation of the patrician rules: the official leaders (“jurors”) of the guilds were given a consultative role in a number of important municipal decisions.

This essentially aristocratic regime – albeit very slightly opened to the non-privileged – continued to function until 1421, far longer than in other comparable cities in the Low Countries.
In 1421, the Brussels guilds took advantage of a dynastic crisis dividing the Brabant aristocracy and the city lineages to renew the non-patricians’ political demands. This time, they achieved an in-depth reorganisation of the city government’s composition, granted successively by Philippe de Saint-Pol and his brother Duke John IV.

This led to the inception of a new political system attempting a compromise between the patricians and the guilds. Municipal authority would henceforth be exercised by an institution known as “The Law” (De Wet or De Wethouders) which, in addition to the aldermen, comprised new officials known as “councillors” and “burgomasters”. The Law also had at its disposal the financial expertise of several municipal receivers. A total of 19 members held one-year mandates, ten representatives of whom were Brussels’ aristocratic families (i.e. one burgomaster, seven aldermen and two receivers from the lineages) and nine came from the ranks of the non-privileged (a second burgomaster, six councillors and two receivers, selected from among the trade-guild “jurors”).

All powers held by the city were exercised by The Law, with the exception of judicial powers, which theoretically remained the sole preserve of the aldermen. However, the latter now passed judgement in the presence of a number of councillors from the guilds, whose opinion they could request. Moreover, the unanimous consent of The Law was required for all sentences of banishment or death. Otherwise, The Law took its decisions by majority vote, the two burgomasters having only honorific primacy.

For the more important decisions, The Law could consult the “Grand Council”, which had replaced the former 13th century council and was composed of former members of The Law who had requested membership.

Within The Law, patrician influence remained preponderant given the fact that patricians were in the majority. Moreover, the aldermen (all patrician) increased their influence by gaining the right to select the councillors, burgomaster and receivers proposed by the nine nations on behalf of the guilds.

In order to restore some balance to the situation, the burgomaster from the lineages was selected by the guild jurors from a list of three candidates put forward by the aldermen. A new consultative body also came gradually into being, the “Council of Nations”, which comprised only non-patricians, i.e. the guild jurors, to whom were temporarily adjointed the centeniers (non-lineage officers whose task was to police the various areas of the city). Hence, the non-patricians had a body of their own through which they could make themselves heard.

During the second half of the 15th century, the approval not only of the Grand Council but also the Council of Nations would be required for proposals by The Law. Originally, their function had been purely consultative. However, their assent became obligatory for all decisions involving a certain level of expenditure. In effect, then, the municipal authorities comprised the “Three Members”: The Law, the Grand Council and the Council of Nations. Insofar as the latter had the authority to reject certain proposals by The Law, non-patricians enjoyed increased influence on municipal decision-making.

In 1477, the guilds made another attempt to increase their political role by instituting a new organisation of the city authority in which all privileges reserved for the lineages were abolished. However, this was defeated in 1480. The regime set up in 1421 was reinstated, with one difference: a new consultative body, the Rear Council – composed of former guild jurors – was formed to advise the Council of Nations.
In no way was the 1421 regime democratic. Rather, it was a compromise between patricians (who were over-represented) and plutocrats. The non-patrician members of the Three Members were chiefly drawn from the guilds, to the exclusion of the rest of the population, such as labourers, peasants, the unemployed and so forth. Furthermore, they were selected from among the jurors at the head of the guilds, who were a wealthy elite of master artisans and tradesmen, meaning that workmen and apprentices were also sidelined. Indeed, this system, which reserved municipal power for the well-off, was locked in in 1480, when access to The Law was officially restricted to those with a minimum income level. Finally, it should be remembered that, throughout the history of City representation, no voice was ever given to the women of Brussels.
This painting was produced in 1873 by Emile Wauters for the Brussels Town Hall and illustrates in a Romantic style the 1421 revolt by the guilds, which were given the right to be represented within the city government by the Duke of Brabant. The episode was much to the taste of the 19th century elected representatives, who liked to view it as a mediaeval prelude to modern democracy.

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This formerly polychromatic carving is part of a series of eight prophets – symbols of wisdom – that used to adorn the porch of the Brussels Town Hall on either side of its tympanum, which contained a further five statues on a console. The latter included St. Michael, the City’s official symbol, the City’s red coat of arms and St. Gudula, its co-patron saint. This iconographic ensemble honoured the aldermen’s work on behalf of the city’s inhabitants. The banners held by the prophets formerly bore black inscriptions painted on white backgrounds. Possibly, as on the Cologne town hall, which boasts comparable iconography, these inscriptions may have been sage advice to the City’s representatives, admonishing them to behave in an exemplary manner. At any rate, it has been established that similar recommendations, which are listed in a poem beginning with the words “Hoemen ene stat regeren sal” (“How a city shall be governed”) were included in the original decor – possibly that of the large reception room – of the Brussels Town Hall. When the building was remodelled in the 19th century, this well-known text was written on the beams of the ceiling of the wedding hall, where it can be read to this day.
In addition to their original judicial function, the city authorities considerably extended the scope of their powers between the 13th and the 15th centuries. In the Middle Ages, there was no question of separating the legislative, judicial and executive functions.

This detail of a tapestry woven in Brussels in the mid-15th century depicts the legendary Judge Herkenbald cutting the throat of his own nephew, who had been found guilty of rape, an eloquent instance of an incorruptible justice system. This composition is based on one of four paintings by Rogier van der Weyden, now lost, which were made to decorate the room in the Town Hall where the Brussels aldermen sat in judgement. The purpose of the paintings was to remind the aldermen of the virtues required for the exercise of their judicial function.

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Law and justice

CRIMINAL LAW

The original function of the aldermen of Brussels was to punish crimes and offences committed on its territory. Although this applied to all misdeeds, persons dependent on another jurisdiction (the clergy, members of the ducal court, etc.) remained immune from prosecution. No appeal could be lodged against criminal sentences before a higher court.

In practice, criminal cases were brought by the *amman* who, as the Duke’s representative, investigated the case, made arrests and acted as public prosecutor. All proceedings were oral. Further to the aldermen’s deliberations (the number of whom varied depending on the type of case), the sentence was handed down. The *amman* was then in charge of executing the sentence and assisted by a number of auxiliaries, including a deputy, sergeants, an executioner and a clerk.

The aldermen also made criminal regulations applicable within their areas of competence.

As of the mid-14th century, the aldermen delegated the resolution of conflicts (with the exception of blood crimes) which might be resolved by conciliation. The new body in charge of non-blood crimes was composed of individuals known as “appeasers”, numbering 10 in the early years and reduced to eight in the 1420s.

CIVIL LAW

The rules of civil law applicable in the City’s jurisdiction were made by the city authorities and were intended to resolve conflicts between opposing parties (e.g. in matters concerning inheritance, neighbourhood disputes, non-payment of taxes, etc.), with the exception of cases relating to property dependent on another jurisdiction due to its specific status (fiefdom, certain forms of tenure, etc.).

Appeals could be lodged against the aldermen’s sentences before the Duke’s Council, which at the end of the Middle Ages was renamed the Council of Brabant.
This 15th-century copy of a 1400 municipal ordinance was entered in a luxurious register known as “Root statuytboeck metten tatsen” (i.e. “the red, nail-studded statute book”) due to its red (root) cover and the fact that it was ornamented with large round nails (“tatsen”). The risk of fire and theft made it essential that the city authorities have copies made of their legislation. This particular ordinance concerns Brussels inheritance law. It is written in the Brabant dialect of medieval Dutch – the vernacular of Brussels at the time – which was gradually replacing Latin in official documents. The document is written on parchment and is also remarkable for the quality of its marginal illuminations and illuminated letters.

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COMMERCIAL LAW

Except in the textile sector – which was controlled by the drapers’ guild, a group of large dealers who monopolised the production and sale of high-quality woollen cloth –, the city authorities adjudicated claims relating to the application of the various trade regulations which they had issued or officially acknowledged. Failure to comply was sanctioned.

CERTIFICATION

Aldermen regularly served as witnesses to certain contracts such as deeds of sale, annuity purchases, mortgages, etc. relating to property located in Brussels (unless the property in question was dependent on another jurisdiction). Such contracts would be signed in the presence of two aldermen, who certified them by affixing their personal seals.
3. The city's power
Defence and public safety

The first city wall was built in the early 13th century by the Duke of Brabant. However, its ownership and maintenance were transferred in 1291 to the city authorities, who were thus given the task of defending the city as well as keeping order (by assisting a ducal police force composed of sergeants-at-arms under the authority of the amman). Construction of the second wall began in 1357 and took place entirely under the aegis of the City, which was also responsible for its maintenance. The surveillance of the various rampart gates was the responsibility of the lineages and later (after 1421) also of the guild nations.

The city government paid guards and soldiers as well as watchmen, who gave the alert in the event of fire or an enemy approach. It purchased the requisite military equipment (including artillery as of the second half of the 14th century).

It could also call up military reinforcements supplied by the “serments”, which were elite burgher units identified by the arms they bore (bows, crossbows, swords or harquebuses). If necessary, it could also call upon militias of burghers with personal weapons. In 1421, the latter were placed under the authority of officers (dizainiers and centeniers) drawn from their ranks, whose chief task was to keep law and order.

In the mid-15th century, the municipal authorities further reinforced internal security and fire prevention by administratively dividing Brussels into districts placed under the supervision of “quartermasters” (wijckmeester).

Besides defence and security, the City also organised the participation of its inhabitants in the armies mustered by the Duke of Brabant for the purpose of war.
Town planning and public works

STREETS AND ROADS
The city authorities were responsible for a number of traffic roads as well as the bridges over the Zenne. Several internal roads were gradually paved (including the one linking Coudenberg with the lower city’s markets and industrial areas), as well as sections of the roads connecting Brussels to its suburbs and other towns.

Marketplaces were also gravel surfaced. The largest of these, now the Grand’Place, was enlarged and regulated during the 15th century.

In practice, road management and maintenance were entrusted to a specialised body known as the Cautside, which was formed by the city authorities at the latest at the beginning of the 14th century.

WATERWAYS
The City ensured that the Zenne remained navigable to the north by having it regularly dredged. At the end of the Middle Ages, it was given the authority to carry out various works along the river up to Vilvoorde, namely to deepen it and build a lock.

To reduce the risk of flooding in the city, it maintained other locks in the second rampart wall and dug diversion channels, which were also used for the activities of various guilds and as a complementary defence system.

Moreover, in the 15th century – and despite the fact that the project only came to fruition in 1561 – the City planned to dig a canal at its own expense between Brussels and the River Rupel, to consolidate its position as a trade hub and ensure easier access to seaports. Already, the Zenne no longer enabled the speed and capacity requirements for river transport in the 15th century to be met.

WATER SUPPLY
Probably at the end of the 13th century, the City began to purchase the land surrounding a number of springs and set up a water-supply network to service the public fountains under its management. The decoration of these facilities in the 14th and 15th centuries improved public venues and helped build an image of good governance.

Reservoirs were also built for the purpose of watering livestock and firefighting.

As for the water sources set up in public areas by private individuals, they too came under the jurisdiction of the City in the mid-15th century.

PUBLIC CLEANLINESS
As of the 14th century, the city authorities issued ordinances regulating the presence of animals on the street, as well as the management of industrial and household waste. Special functionaries were given the task of removing waste and cleaning the streams used as sewers as well as the streets, squares and fountains.
REGULATION OF CONSTRUCTION AND PROPERTY BOUNDARIES

The City’s first intervention in the area of construction took place in 1342, in the form of an ordinance banning thatched roofs to prevent the spread of fire. As this order had to be renewed several times, it clearly took a while to become widely accepted. Various other regulations followed, the application of which was monitored by an official who was also in charge of the cleaning of municipal property.

In an ordinance of 1451, the City regulated the activities of the surveyors (meerers) in charge of surveying and measuring tracts of land and buildings, going so far as to appoint some of them to serve as experts in property disputes over inheritances.

CITY BUILDINGS

The city authorities undertook to build a number of emblematic buildings which were not only useful, but served as witnesses to its power, such as the Cloth Hall and Town Hall.

As well as the latter, which served as its offices, the City undertook several large-scale projects in the 15th century, notably helping to finance the towers of the Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula, the city’s main religious building. To encourage the Duke and wealthy aristocratic families to settle in Brussels, it also subsidised the construction of the ceremonial hall of the ducal palace (the Aula Magna) as well as the residences of the families of Croÿ, Nassau and Cleves.
The economy

REGULATION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

The organisation of the markets was supervised by the city authorities.

The regulations of the guilds, with the exception of those applicable to the textile sector (which depended on the drapers’ guild), were subject to its approval. Most of them were recognised in the 14th century, which formalised their obligation to comply with the stipulated manufacturing methods and working conditions. In this manner, the City made a contribution to the maintenance of quality standards and to the defence of local producers’ interests against competition from the outside.

At the end of the 14th century, the highly independent drapers’ guild which united the great textile merchants finally came under the partial control of the city authorities.

In certain sectors, the City issued its own regulations to complement those already drawn up by the guilds. In the case of metalworking and tin manufacture, it gained the authority to certify the value of precious metals with its own hallmarks at the end of the Middle Ages. It also intervened in the manufacture of the high-quality carved polychromatic winged altarpieces for which Brussels had become famous in the 15th century, to prevent disputes between the various trades responsible for producing the works (carpenters, carvers, painters, gilders, etc.) by imposing a quality inspection of their materials, which it then certified by affixing specific hallmarks.
ECONOMIC EXPANSION

Many public works (see above) were undertaken for the purpose of encouraging mobility and trade.

To support the manufacture of high-quality fabrics – a major driving force of the Brussels’ economy in the 13th and 14th centuries – the City financed the construction of a cloth hall which enabled the members of the drapers’ guild to display their wares in the best conditions and sell them wholesale.

It controlled the crane used to load and unload merchandise in the river port, as well as a tract of land on the banks, where it built a new quay.

Investments were also made in a number of other key sectors of the local economy, such as mills and lime kilns.

Further to the decline of the textile sector at the turn of the 14th-15th centuries, the city authorities endeavoured to revive the local economy by means of tax cuts. From 1430 onwards, it undertook actively to position Brussels as the de facto political capital of the Low Countries by making a generous financial contribution to the policies of the Dukes of Burgundy and their Coudenberg palace. The idea was that the presence of the Duke, his court and functionaries in the city would stimulate consumption of the luxury goods manufactured in Brussels.
SUPPLY AND INSPECTION OF FOODSTUFFS

In business areas (open-air and covered markets, artisans’ homes, inns and the river port) and some manufacturing facilities, City inspectors made sure that the goods sold complied with the applicable regulations concerning quality, quantity and hygiene.

The city government paid especial attention to bread, then the staple food of the population. To thwart speculators while taking the fluctuations of grain prices into account, it set a specific weight for loaves of bread (the principle being that, although their weight might vary, their price had to remain the same). It also constituted stocks of cereals and controlled their sale to limit the risk of scarcity.

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

In the Middle Ages, there was no consistent system for weighing goods or measuring liquids, with the result that Brussels developed its own system of weights and measures. To protect customers against potential abuses, the city authorities were entrusted by the Duke of Brabant with regulation and inspection in this area. A number of measurement standards were kept in a building known as the “City Weights”, which was also used as a warehouse. Merchants were obliged by law to have weighed there all goods in excess of a given weight.

This jug is an example of a Brussels measuring standard – i.e. a reference container – for the measurement of liquids. Its accuracy was guaranteed by the city authorities. It therefore comes as no surprise to find the figure of St. Michael engraved on this copper model, which was made in the second half of the 16th century.

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CURRENCY

Mintage – an activity essential to the development of trade – was a sovereign right exercised first by the Counts of Louvain, later the Dukes of Brabant, who operated a mint in Brussels as of the 11th century. During the 13th century, the municipal authorities took the initiative of minting their own currency, albeit for a limited time only, as ultimately they bowed to the decision by Duke John I that he would be in sole charge of currency minting in Brabant. During the brief period in the early 14th century when the guilds seized power in the city, it would appear that Brussels once more issued coins for a while. However, when the patricians regained control, this prerogative reverted to the Duke.

CIVIL TIME

The City organised local timekeeping. For this purpose, it used the bells of the Church of St. Nicholas. It is known that, by the end of the 14th century, one of these struck the beginning and end of the working day as well as break times. As of 1440, time was given by a mechanical clock on the left-hand turret of the main facade of the Town Hall.

Belfries

In the Low Countries, a belfry was a tower used by municipal authorities as a watchtower, as well as to strike the hour and store valuable items such as the municipal archives or the keys to the city gates. In Brussels, this term was first used to designate the tower of the Town Hall during its first construction phase, from 1401-1402 to 1420. However, this usage was dropped when the building was completed in 1455, probably because ultimately the city bells had not been hung in the Town Hall and had remained in the Church of St. Nicholas. For this reason, the latter’s tower began to be referred to as the city belfry in the 16th century.

This silver denier was struck in the 13th century by the city authorities and bears an unusual design, probably a stylised bridge. This may be a reference to the River Zenne and the port’s activity, a major source of economic development for the city.

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Social and cultural life

SOCIAL SECURITY AND ASSISTANCE
Hospitals, hospices, confraternities and community funds known as “Tables of the Holy Spirit” were instituted in Brussels to supply all those in need with shelter, medical care or material assistance. Although all such charitable institutions were the result of secular private initiative, the City gradually acquired a measure of control over them by drawing up regulations, making appointments to managerial positions and supervising financial management.

The City took a number of child-welfare initiatives in the 15th century, such as appointing people to take care of abandoned children and civil servants to supervise the management of orphans’ estates by their guardians.

At the end of the Middle Ages, in accordance with the new spirit of the age which stigmatised the unemployed poor, the city authorities issued several measures intended to suppress begging and vagrancy.

PUBLIC HEALTH
In the face of the epidemics which swept the population, the City found itself obliged to take a number of public health measures to curb them.

As of the 14th century, it paid a physician (a theoretical diagnostician) and a surgeon (a practitioner) to treat poor patients free of charge and regularly practice their activity – together with barber-surgeons, who performed bloodletting – at the Hospital of St. John, as well as, on an occasional basis, at the Leper Hospital of St. Peter. Later, the city authorities also organised examinations for physicians, surgeons and midwives wishing to ply their trade in Brussels.

EDUCATION
At first, as of the 11th century, children and young people were educated only at the Chapter School of St. Michael and St. Gudula. In the 14th century, the City began to support the development of a network of private schools to ensure the wider spread of elementary education.
EVENTS

The City organised various receptions, banquets and celebrations. The most sumptuous of these included the ceremonial entries of the Dukes of Brabant (known as the “Joyous Entries”), which helped consolidate the legitimacy of the reigning dynasty as well as its continuing ties with Brussels.

In particular, the authorities closely supervised the annual religious processions, which brought the local population together. In the 15th century, they granted subsidies for the Ommegang, a procession in the honour of the miraculous statue of Our Lady of the Sablon, to which, on the same day, was added a theatrical performance on the subject of the Virgin Mary. This procession became the chief opportunity for all organised bodies (clergy, religious communities, lineages, drapers’ guild, serments, guilds, etc., as well as the municipal authorities) to officially present a united front while consolidating their respective hierarchical positions in Brussels society.

During part of the 15th century, an official painter was appointed, not only to decorate public buildings, but also to design festive decorations. By the end of the Middle Ages, a City Rhetorician was also appointed to organise major events and extol them in flattering terms. The municipal authorities also paid musicians and ensured the participation of the main theatre companies, then known as the “Chambers of Rhetoric.”
Finance

To fulfil its increasingly diverse tasks, the city authorities had to raise funds. The first of these was a share of judicial fines and confiscations. Further revenue was then awarded, such as the right to levy excise duties on a number of goods and foodstuffs (such as the highly lucrative wine and beer, as well as meat, fish, wool, furs, woollen cloth, etc.). Dues were levied on goods entering the city by road or water. The City also charged for the sale of burghers’ rights, various administrative fees, the use of the harbour crane, rental of spaces in certain covered markets, the storage of goods and the use of public scales. It rented land, houses and other real estate of which it was the owner. And, of course, it regularly resorted to borrowing. Although the Brussels public authorities derived most of their income from consumption taxes, it did not tax income or property.

The City’s resources also covered its running expenses such as staff and maintenance, as well as its investments and the sums it had undertaken to pay the Duke of Brabant, either in payment for privileges transferred, or as contributions (known as “aids”), loans or gifts.

The Brussels authorities enjoyed a wide measure of de facto autonomy in the area of revenue collection and expenditure. In the 14th century, it entrusted the practical management of its finances to specialised functionaries known as “receivers”. Aided by deputies and a “changer” combining the offices of paymaster and banker, receivers were obliged to regularly report on the municipal accounts.

A notable exception: christenings, funerals and marriages

The City had many other areas of competency and could, in theory, deal with all matters concerning the well-being of the inhabitants of Brussels, provided the prerogatives of the Duke of Brabant were not infringed.

However, births, deaths and marriages were not recorded by the municipal authorities. This responsibility was gradually taken on by the Church. By the end of the Middle Ages, parishes began to keep records of burials and were obliged by Church law to record christenings; this obligation was later extended to include marriages.
The City’s part in controlling the Ducal powers

Detail of a pact of alliance concluded in 1327 by the cities of Brabant (p. 107)
3. The city’s power
Although much of the Duke’s power was exercised by his vassals and by the authorities of the various cities in the Brabant (which, like Brussels, gradually acquired autonomy); the Duke still retained a number of important prerogatives in his demesne, chiefly in the areas of defence, law and order, justice, mintage and foreign policy.

In these areas, the Duke originally made his own decisions after consulting his Privy Council, the members of which were usually chosen from the ranks of the nobility and clergy. He was also represented by a number of officials whom he could appoint and dismiss at will, such as the amman in Brussels and its environs. In particular, the amman ensured that the ducal decisions were implemented by the Brussels municipal authorities.

However, the Duke’s powers would ultimately be officially limited. The cities and aristocracy of Brabant were granted a charter at Kortenberg in 1312. They were permitted to form an assembly in charge of supervising the actions of the ducal functionaries within specified limits. Via their representatives in this assembly, the cities and aristocracy had a de facto right to oversee ducal policy. However, this new institution by no means met regularly. In 1356, a new charter known as the “Charter of the Joyous Entry” was granted by Duchess Joanna and Duke Wenceslas of Brabant on the occasion of their inauguration. This deed – which might in judicial terms be called “pre-constitutional” – appears to be well ahead of its time compared with the neighbouring principalities’ right to limit the power of the reigning prince. Henceforth, the Duke might no longer declare war, sign treaties or devalue the currency without the assent of an assembly comprising representatives of the clergy, the aristocracy and the cities of Brabant. Should the Duke fail to comply, this assembly (which in the 15th century began to be known as the “States of Brabant”) might decide not to obey him as long as the infringements to the Charter of the Joyous Entry did not cease. In 1421, the States were even given the privilege of setting aside the Duke and appointing a Regent (ruwaard) in his place. Moreover, it became common practice for the Dukes to ask the States’ opinion before creating new taxes, an ideal opportunity for the States to make known their complaints and demands to the Duke. By delegating representatives, the City authorities played a full part in this counter-power set up to review the Duke’s decisions, and were also able to use it as a channel to express their own needs and requirements.
A parchment bearing the seals of the 27 cities of Brabant, including that of Brussels (second from the left). This is a pact of alliance concluded in 1327 to enforce the Kortenberg Charter granted by the Duke in 1312, which guaranteed the supervision of ducal officials by the cities and aristocracy of Brabant.

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