

(...-1200)

from settlements to medieval trading town

The medieval city arose in an area with numerous settlements dating from earlier periods. Although archaeological and historical research constantly provides fresh understanding of the past, there are still many unanswered questions about the origins of Ghent. Four nuclei played an important part in the development of the medieval city.

A Blandijnberg is a hill bordered to the east by the river Scheldt and to the west by the Lys. From around 9600 BC there is evidence of human habitation on the sides of the hill. The missionary Amandus converted the population of the Ghent region to Christianity in the seventh century. He founded the Blandinium monastery, which later became St Peter's Abbey.

B A second important settlement is located to the east of the confluence of the Scheldt and the Lys. In the Roman period this was the site of the trading post 'Ganda'. Amandus converted its inhabitants and founded a church there – the future Ganda monastery, which in turn became St Bavo's Abbey. The people who lived in Ganda, the settlement next to St Bavo's, were involved in trading on the abbey's behalf.

C When the Vikings began to raid the Scheldt region in the late ninth century, the monks of St Bavo's fled to France. Shortly afterwards a group of what were probably former inhabitants of Ganda settled half a kilometre up the Scheldt, where St Bavo's Cathedral now stands. This led to the creation of a third nucleus – the new trading community 'Portus Gandavum'.

D By the middle of the tenth century this had spread across the river Lys. The *portus* gradually merged with a fourth inhabited zone, which grew up around a fortress – the future Counts' Castle – in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Together the four settlements formed the basis of the early medieval town. Around 1100 this amounted to an area of about eighty hectares, enclosed by waterways comprising the Lys, Scheldt, Ketelvest and Houtlei and corresponding with the *kuij* or basin of the modern city centre.

(1200–1600)

the medieval metropolis

Ghent developed between the eleventh and the late thirteenth century into one of the most important cities in North-West Europe. After Paris, it was the largest and most densely populated city north of the Alps, with an area of more than 644 hectares and over 60,000 inhabitants. It owed its status primarily to its booming textile industry, which employed more than half the population. Power was initially concentrated in the hands of an urban patrician class, an elite made up of wealthy families descended from the first 'free' merchants. The patricians controlled the cloth trade and sat on the city council. They owned most of the land in Ghent, where they lived in high, stone-built houses or *stenen*. There were more than two hundred such buildings in thirteenth-century Ghent symbolizing the power and wealth of the bourgeoisie. Around 1280, members of the craft guilds began to resist the political and economic dominance of this elite. Through a series of strikes and rebellions they eventually managed to break its monopoly on power. The guilds won seats on the city council in 1302, enabling them to play an active role in municipal life. The immense importance of the Ghent textile industry meant that the weavers and fullers, as the most powerful professional groups, enjoyed particular influence over the city council. Other Flemish towns followed Ghent's 'democratic' example. Assembly rooms for the city's aldermen, the Belfry, the Cloth Hall and the headquarters of the crossbowmen's Guild of St George were built around Botermarkt, known then as the *Plaetse*. The square became the undisputed centre of political, economic and military power in Ghent. The many guild houses, churches, abbeys, hospices, roads, bridges, locks and the Bijloke Hospital testify to the city's development into a self-confident and independently-minded medieval metropolis.

(1200–1600)

the headstrong city

The burghers of Ghent sat on their own city council from around 1100, independent of the Count of Flanders and no longer under the tutelage of the abbeys. The city fathers didn't take long to clash with the authority of the count. A power vacuum arose in Flanders following the murder of Count Charles the Good in 1127. In 1128, Ghent chose to support Thierry of Alsace, who was willing to respect the city's communal privileges, rather than the Norman nobleman William Clito, the French king's preferred candidate. The relationship between the city and the count was to remain a tense one. Serious conflict was avoided as long as municipal interests coincided with those of the count. But when the latter attempted to assert his authority, he ran into fierce opposition from Ghent. There were regular armed clashes. Several other Flemish towns, in their pursuit of political autonomy, threw in their lot with rebellious Ghent. The Dukes of Burgundy began to crush such ambitions militarily in the fifteenth century in their drive to establish a more centralized state. After a series of confrontations in the course of the century, they eventually brought Ghent to its knees: precious charters were torn up and municipal banners confiscated. In the wake of the 1540 rebellion, Emperor Charles decided to put paid to the medieval ideal of municipal liberty once and for all. Ghent's civic privileges were declared null and void and the city's defences were wholly or partly dismantled. St Bavo's Abbey was largely demolished and replaced by the New Castle, a fortress whose cannons were trained permanently on the heart of the town.

(1500–1558)

charles: an emperor born in ghent

Charles of Austria was born at the Prinsenhof in Ghent at around 4 a.m. on Monday 24 February 1500. He was the second child and first son of Philip the Fair (1478–1506), duke of Burgundy, and Joanna of Castile (1479–1555), daughter of the king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. The birth was welcomed with great festivities, the highlight of which was the baptism on 7 March in St John's Church – now St Bavo's Cathedral.

Thanks to clever marital policies pursued on the Spanish and Habsburg side, Charles was heir to a large number of scattered territories. He inherited the Burgundian Netherlands in 1506, was crowned king of Spain in 1516 and three years later he became 'King of the Romans' (ruler of the German kingdom).

Charles also ruled over recently discovered territories in the 'New World', including modern-day Mexico and the Caribbean islands, together with several coastal possessions in North Africa. By 1530, Charles v was the most powerful sovereign in Europe. In Bologna that spring the Pope crowned him Holy Roman Emperor.

A quarter of a century later, however, Charles' dream of a unified Christian world lay in tatters. The 'empire on which the sun never set' was torn apart by political strife and violent religious conflict resulting from the emergence of Protestantism. Even his own native city of Ghent rose up against him in 1539–40, for which Charles was to punish it severely. By 1555 Charles v was a broken man, both physically and mentally. He voluntarily abdicated in Brussels in favour of his son, Philip II (1527–1598). He visited Ghent for the last time in August 1556, following which he departed once and for all for Spain, withdrawing into a sober residence near the Hieronymite abbey of Yuste in the mountains west of Madrid, where he died on 21 September 1558. To this day, Ghent people look back with mixed feelings at Charles v: they are proud that such a powerful emperor was born in their city, yet hurt by the humiliations to which he subjected their forbears.

(1600–1800)

ramparts and bastions

Wide earth walls were constructed around Ghent during the Calvinist regime. They were interspersed at the most strategic points with bastions based on the Italian model. The 'New Castle' that Emperor Charles had built to the east of the city to keep the population under control was now renamed the 'Spaniards' Castle' and was incorporated into the new defences. The city's fortifications gradually took on the shape of an irregular triangle. They were continually adapted during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. New elements were added, including Fort Monterrey at the Kortrijkse Poort.

The 'Ghent triangle' enclosed an area of about 644 hectares, but the zone inside the walls was far from completely built up: it still included large fields and meadows. The marshy Muinkmeersen area, for instance, long remained uninhabited, as did the area to the east of Nieuwland.

The excavation of the Coupure between 1751 and 1753 was the most important town planning project in Ghent in the eighteenth century. This straight stretch of canal links the Brugse Vaart with the river Lys at Lindenlei, enabling large ships to enter the port of Ghent. The Coupure quickly became a favoured spot for local people to stroll.

(1800–1950)

the modern city

The demolition of the city walls after 1860 doubled the built-up area of Ghent from 250 to 550 hectares by 1900. Workers followed their factories out to the edge of the city, where large working-class districts arose, including Brugse Poort, Rabot, Muide-Meulestede and Dampoort. More new streets were laid out between 1858 and 1883 than in the whole of the previous two centuries. The port was extended further to the north.

Following a cholera epidemic in 1866, work began on clearing the poorest districts of the city. Polluted waterways were filled in or covered over, slums were demolished and streets widened. The Zollikofer-de Vigne Plan (1880–88), modernized the area around the South Station, the Nederschelde district was cleared and Vlaanderenstraat was laid out to link the station with the city centre and Korenmarkt.

Engineer and mayor Emile Braun (1849–1927) was the driving force behind the transformation of the city centre on the eve of the 1913 World Exhibition. Monuments were restored and cleared of all encroaching buildings. The network of streets between St Bavo's Cathedral and St Nicholas's Church was cleared to make way for Sint-Baafsplein and the future Emile Braunplein. The World Exhibition also stimulated the development of the southern part of the city. The old fortress and its grounds had already been cleared in the 1870s to allow the creation of Citadelpark. The new St Pieters Station was built between 1908 and 1912. A residential area – the 'Miljoenenkwartier' – was constructed on the exhibition site after the First World War. The divide between the north of the city, with its factories and poor housing, and the south, with its pleasant residential neighbourhoods, was reinforced.

Ghent continued to suffer from a severe housing shortage between the two world wars. The city council and housing associations had to develop a more active policy to address the issue. Several garden districts were added on Zwijnaardsesteenweg and Steenakker, and an ambitious social housing project, 'Scheldeoord', was constructed on a site next to the Scheldt between 1929 and 1931.

Today's Ghent is one of the most important centres of education in Flanders. The university was founded in 1817 and the city has since gone on to build up a substantial educational tradition. Several university buildings, among them the Aula (auditorium) and library, with its 'Book Tower', remain a highly visible presence in Ghent.