PHOEBUS FOCUS XXV

ST BEGGA

On Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678), the Beguines and their Fictional Foundress

LEEN KELCHTERMANS

The past sets the context for the present. Understanding the past gives us a better insight into who we are today, as individuals and as a society. That's something we at The Phoebus Foundation care about. One of the ways to access the past is through the artefacts and works of art our forebears created.

The Phoebus Foundation art collection is structured around five diverse clusters that have evolved over time. They range from archaeological textiles of the pharaonic period and twentieth-century Latin American art to works from the CoBrA movement and even to port heritage. And to a collection of works of art from our own part of the world – the Low Countries – by masters of the Middle Ages with resounding names like Memling and Van der Goes and celebrity artists of the Baroque such as Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. The list of local lads made good continues with late-nineteenth-century originals like Emile Claus, Léon Spilliaert, James Ensor and Edgard Tytgat, and the artists of the Sint-Martens-Latem schools – Gustave Van de Woestyne, Valerius De Saedeleer and George Minne, Frits Van den Berghe, Constant Permeke and Gust. De Smet. And thus, via the winding ways of art history, we arrive at the present.

Whether it's an early-Christian tunic, a Bruegel drawing, or a Karel Appel painting, every object attests in its own unique way to the context in which it was made. Each volume in the *Phoebus Focus* series tells the story behind the artefact or work of art, bringing what might seem merely a relic of the dim and distant past back to vivid and often surprising life.

THE
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FOUNDATION

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FOREWORD

In 1998, Unesco designated thirteen Flemish beguinages as world heritage. Not because they are such charming and picturesque sites in the middle of the bustling city. But because they testify to an emancipatory, socio-economic experiment that is highly characteristic of the Low Countries. It was here, in the prosperous cities of Flanders and Brabant, that the phenomenon of the bourgeoisie arose – a completely new social class, alongside the nobility, the clergy and the peasantry. Citizens making a living from trade. They developed an entrepreneurial spirit and sense of individualism, and considered possessions to be important. When their wealthy daughters entered the convent, their money went to the Church. However, the newfangled beguine movement allowed the women to keep their possessions – for themselves, and, after their death, for their family. Beguines did not enter the beguinage for eternity and did not take eternal vows. The women retained their social and economic independence, as a kind of protofeminist counterweight in the Late Medieval world of men.

During the religious wars in the turbulent sixteenth century, the beguines suffered blows too, probably literally in many cases. But the movement was given a boost in the seventeenth century, under the rule of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella. The beguines were so successful that they needed a foundress to serve as a role model – a kind of icon that could visually symbolise the standards, values and ideals of the beguines. Baroque theologians were in their element. Enter Begga who, to ingratiate herself with the Archdukes 'just happened' to also have the right bloodline, being the great-great-grandmother of Charlemagne.

The result almost begs for Jacob Jordaens. The artist epitomised the bourgeoisie. His themes alone refer to a predominantly civilian clientele. Moreover, his use of materials betray the frugality of an entrepreneur, his recognisable painting style attests to a commercial spirit, and his home may have been rather grandiose, but it was the perfect fit for a cosy family. It's no wonder that Jordaens did not paint Begga as a Merovingian princess, but as an amiable businesswoman. His Begga knows what she wants, and is not a dreamer, but a doer – it is no coincidence that the churches of Andenne founded by Begga are displayed in the background. This Begga is the kind of lady that a woman can identify with, in all sympathy.

After years of art-historical and archival research, Leen Kelchtermans knows Jacob Jordaens' private life almost as well as his oeuvre. She only needs to glance at a painting and knows almost instinctively which saint it concerns – even if, as in this case, the saint had been incorrectly identified for years. Notarial deeds and letters were connected until an ingenious story emerged, abound with deeply human concerns – about God and money, husband and wife, brother and sisters. This edition of *Phoebus Focus* restores both St Begga and Jacob Jordaens to flesh and blood human beings.

I hope you enjoy reading this *Phoebus Focus* as much as I have.

Dr Katharina Van Cauteren
Chief of Staff, Chancellery of The Phoebus Foundation

Jacob Jordaens
St Begga, *c.*1635
Oil on canvas, 127 × 101 cm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

ST BEGGA

A woman dressed in a habit stands in front of a red velvet curtain and a number of church buildings, fixing us with her gaze. A halo of powdered gold leaf hovers above her head. A putto descends from heaven holding a gold crown in his chubby little hand. His other hand grips an ochre-yellow loincloth, which has flown upwards as a result of his downward momentum, but strategically remains in place between his little legs. This painting from The Phoebus Foundation's collection appears to be one of the many hundreds of depictions of saints produced during the seventeenth century. However, appearances can be deceiving.

The Flemish Baroque master Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) painted *St Begga* in around 1635, when his career was taking off. The work breathes the Baroque: just look at the splendid vibrating colours and dynamic folds in the fabric. This opulence contrasts with the saint's calm but compelling, rather stern demeanour, as she points to the crucifix on the table. The veneration of St Begga (*c.*620-*c.*693) experienced a revival in the 1630s: she was officially appointed as the foundress of the flourishing beguine movement. An event that was as coloured as Jordaens' painting, but in the religious and even political sense. Jordaens' *St Begga* abounds with captivating stories. This *Phoebus Focus* whisks you away to between the seventh and seventeenth centuries, explores Begga's family, as well as that of Jordaens, examines strong, religious women and their devotion, and Catholic and dynastic displays of power. So if you think this is an ordinary painting of a saint, you're in for a surprise!

Detail, *St Begga* (pp. 6-7)

BEGGA PIPINI FILI BRABANTI DVX. II.

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FROM A WOMAN OF NOBLE BIRTH TO A SAINT

Begga was the daughter of Itta of Metz (*c.*592-652) and Pepin the Elder (*c.*580-639), a descendant of a noble family from the Meuse valley.[1] He earned his place in the history books as the powerful mayor of the palace of the Merovingian Kings Chlotarius II (584-*c.*629), Dagobert I (*c.*605-639) and Sigibert III (630-656). It was no coincidence that the last two were called the 'lazy kings': it was Pepin who was firmly in control in Austrasia, an empire that stretched across the Benelux as we know it today (not including Friesland), north-east France and West Germany. To say that Begga's family was religious is quite an understatement: her father was beautified, and her mother Itta of Metz and sister Gertrude (626-659) became saints. Before acquiring that exalted status herself, Begga married mayor of the court Ansegisel in 643. He was the son of Doda (born *c.*584) and Arnulf (*c.*582-640), the later bishop of Metz who would also become a saint. After they wed, Ansegisel and Begga lived in Chèvremont Castle in Chaudfontaine, Liège.[2]

While out hunting one day, Ansegisel discovered a foundling and took him home. Although Begga had received a divine warning that the boy would be trouble, they raised Gonduinus, as they called him, as if he were their own child. One day, the power-crazed Gonduinus murdered his foster father and wanted to marry his foster mother. Begga fled, but came to a deep river. She prayed to God and suddenly a deer appeared and led her to a ford. After this miracle she set off on a pilgrimage to Rome. She visited the seven main Pilgrim Churches there and met the pope, who gifted her relics. She decided to devote the rest of her life to serving God and founding a convent.

Erasmus Quellinus II
Begga in *Les effigies des souverains princes et ducs de Brabant*, *c.*1653
Chalk, pen and ink on paper, 175 × 119 mm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

Upon her return, Begga had a church built, but it collapsed three times. Then, God showed her the way. When a swineherd lost a sow, a heavenly voice told him that Begga should build her convent on that exact spot. A couple of days later he found his sow, along with seven piglets. In the same area Begga's son Pepin of Herstal (*c.*645-714) saw a chicken with seven chicks while out hunting. His dogs charged towards the poultry, but a divine force held them back. Begga was convinced: God wanted her to build seven churches in Andenne, Namur, based on the design of the Pilgrim Churches in Rome. In 691, Begga became abbess of the convent she founded, which became a Canons and Canonesses chapter in the eleventh century.

In the background of Jordaens' *St Begga* on the left you can see a fragment of an impressive interior with a coffered ceiling. It might refer to her convent. On the right the painter depicts the seven convent churches (or were they chapels?). Each tower and dome is clearly different. In the eighteenth century, the buildings in Andenne were demolished and replaced by the current Church of St Begga.

According to Begga's vita, a blind English princess and a deaf-mute girl came to her grave to pray and were healed. She became patroness of stutterers and of people with rheumatism and broken bones. Cautiously from the fifteenth century and with far greater enthusiasm in the seventeenth century, she was viewed as the patroness and even the foundress of the beguine movement.

Erasmus Quellinus II
Ansegisel in *Les effigies des souverains princes et ducs de Brabant*, *c.*1653
Chalk, pen and ink on paper, 177 × 120 mm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

ANSEGIVS MAN VAN S. BEGGA

3.

Detail, *St Begga* (pp. 6-7)

ROOTS OF A SOUTHERN NETHERLANDISH MOVEMENT

Although in the seventeenth century, St Begga was thus regarded as the foundress of the beguine movement, we now know that this is not true. It is difficult to establish the exact point in time when the movement began.[3] In response to the many abuses running rife in the Church – read: power, money and sex – all kinds of reform movements emerged in the twelfth century that wanted to return to the core of the faith. One of these concerned the *reclusae* (recluses) or *mulieres religiosae* (pious women). They lived in poverty and in isolation, in forests or in a cell next to a church or convent. Initially the Norbertines and the Cistercians took care of them, which resulted in double cloisters. But it wasn't such a good idea for the brothers and recluses to live side by side. After all, it is best not to put the cat among the pigeons. Not all pious women lived in a cell next to an abbey, because they had to pay for the privilege, which was also the case if they entered a convent. This gave rise to 'unauthorized' recluses (*oneigenlijke recluzen*): women who set up their home as a hermitage in the city, among ordinary citizens.

Detail, *St Begga* (pp. 6-7)

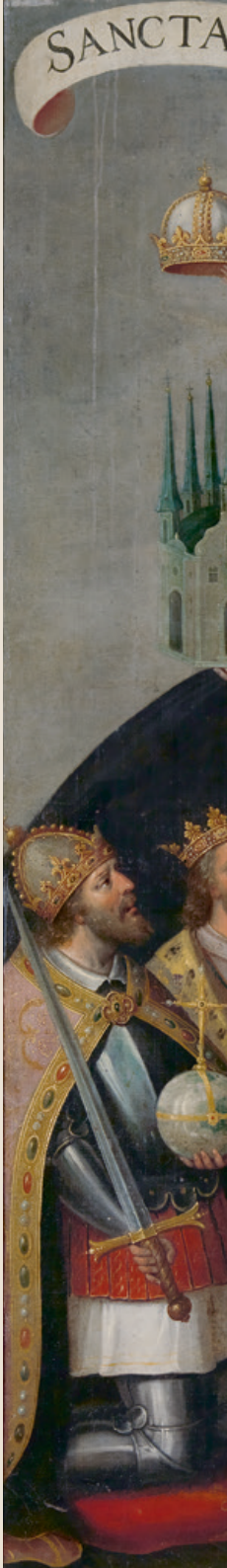

EGO QVASI
TEREBINTH
TENDI
RAMOS
MEOS
ET RAMI
MEI
HONORI

The beguine movement arose in the beginning of the thirteenth century from the searching groups of spiritual women. Life was not easy for these 'uncontrolled' religious women since they aroused suspicion among the ecclesiastical authorities. Nevertheless, in 1216, Pope Honorius III verbally issued his approval of the beguine movement as it existed in the Netherlands. Thanks to the papal fiat the movement spread from Liège and Brabant to the whole of Western and Central Europe. In 1311, Pope Clement V turned against the German beguines; the French and Northern Netherlandish beguines were also persecuted as heretics, and eventually disappeared as a result. The fact that the Southern Netherlandish beguines were largely spared was down to Clement's successor, Pope John XXII. In 1318, he issued a papal bull in which he condoned them, given that 'although they are called *beghinae*, they lead irreproachable lives.'[4] A year later, the same pope granted protection to all the Brabant beguines, at the request of the Brussels beguines. Therefore, seventh-century Begga, who was not associated with the beguines until the fifteenth century, has nothing to do with their origins whatsoever!

Detail, *St Begga* (pp. 6-7)

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Where does the word 'beguine' come from? There are several theories. The most plausible explanation is the phonetic relationship between 'beguine' or *beguina*, the French *bégayer* (to stutter) and the Middle Dutch *beggen* (to murmur prayers). Jokingly, this refers to the continuous muttering of the 'unregulated' religious women in the thirteenth century. The Church did not know what to do with them and they were soon accused of false piety.[5] Another option is that 'beguine' is derived from the colour of their habit. It was produced from undyed textile, the colour of which varied from greyish-white to greyish-brown. In thirteenth-century France it was called *bege* – now 'beige.'



Unknown Master
St Begga as a Protective Saint, *c.*1600-1649
Oil on canvas, 154 × 116 cm
LEUVEN, M – MUSEUM


BEGGA FVNDATRIX BEGGINARVM

INDEPENDENT, RELIGIOUS WOMEN

Beguines were pious women, occupying a position somewhere between laymen and nuns.[6] Since they were not an order as such, it is more accurate to refer to them as a movement. In the Southern Netherlands they characteristically lived in beguinages. A beguinage, a walled community with a church, cemetery and houses, functioned like a small town inside, or alongside, the town itself. It had its own economic, social and even legal system. Although the beguinage fell under the supervision of the bishop, or archbishop, the Grand Mistress (*grootmeesteres*) was in charge of the ins and outs. Beguinage mistresses (*hofmeesteressen*) were responsible, among other things, for the church and infirmary, where sick beguines were cared for. All the mistresses were elected by the beguines. There was a priest to say daily Mass, act as confessor and provide spiritual guidance. This is also why the Southern Netherlandish beguines received papal support – after many inspections: they became more uniform, were guided by (male) clergy and were thus easier to control.

Any healthy, young girl aged at least sixteen with an irreproachable reputation, could apply to be a beguine. She had to pay the admission fee, but it was usually lower than the sum demanded by convents. If she was accepted by the beguinage mistress and the priest, she became a novice for one or two years. Beguines did not take eternal vows. Although it was obviously not promoted, they were free to leave the beguinage, to get married for example. When making their profession they promised to obey their superiors and the statutes of the beguinage, and live a celibate and frugal life, albeit not in total poverty. They were not obliged to give up their possessions or bid farewell to their family. There was no strict *clausura*. These constituted considerable advantages for beguines compared with regular nuns.

Beguines insisted on their autonomy, also in economic terms. That's why a candidate beguine had to prove she could support herself, with her own financial means or through a trade. Beguines had a kitchen garden, taught, performed needlework, washed linen or produced lace. In short, they provided services or produced goods that were sold by traders. They often enjoyed privileges the guilds did not have, which resulted in a number of conflicts. Thanks to their papal protection and support from secular leaders from the fourteenth century onwards, the beguine movement in the Southern Netherlands flourished, experiencing its heyday in the seventeenth century. In 1998, thirteen Flemish beguinages received Unesco recognition, due to their unique character, which also reflected their former inhabitants' extraordinary way of life. They were added to the list of irreplaceable world heritage.

BEGUINES SEEK FOUNDRESS

Due to the beguines' ambiguous status – somewhere between layman and nun, unmarried and independent, who earned a living but were not members of a guild – throughout the centuries there were times when life was tough for them. Therefore, they sought a founding saint who provided historical legitimacy, a shared identity and a spiritual model. The Church of the Counter-Reformation, which held fast to its institutions, following the Council of Trent, supported (and guided) them in this endeavour: if they had a founder these 'in between' religious women would be brought one step closer to ordinary nuns. And the more standardised they became, the easier they were to bring into line.[7]

It is not easy to establish a founder for a movement that sprung up spontaneously. So, the quest was to identify similarities: as the Poor Clares, who owe their name to St Clare of Assisi, the word 'beguine' needed to reveal something about her elusive founder. A connection was made between the beguines and St Begga in the fifteenth century. In 1588, the Archbishop of Mechelen, Johannes Hauchinus, emphasised this once more in his written preface to the statutes of the city's Large Beguinage. On 20 December 1626, St Begga was officially recognised as the patroness and foundress of the beguine movement, during a service in the Church of St Catherine in the Brussels beguinage. All kinds of prominent individuals attended: Archduchess Isabella (1566-1633), the papal representative Giovanni Francesco Guidi di Bagno (1578-1641), Cardinal Alfonso de la Cueva (*c.*1572-1655), the Archbishop of Mechelen Jacobus Boonen (1573-1655) and Marquis Ambrosius Spinola (1569-1630). Their presence afforded the appointment a touch of pomp and splendour, and added credibility and prestige. The separation of Church and state was still a century away.

Detail, *St Begga* (pp. 6-7)