The Canon of Flanders

Sixty windows into the region's culture and history

Preface to the English edition

In autumn 2020, the Flemish government commissioned an independent body to compile a canon that would introduce all residents of the area now called Flanders to the history of the Flemish region. The project has been the subject of great curiosity among the general public, but at moments also, at least for some, of intense controversy. In this preface we try to explain succinctly how the committee that compiled this Canon interpreted its task, how it went about its work and what public it hopes to reach.

Canon

The word 'canon' derives from the Greek κανών, meaning a 'yardstick' or a 'standard'. So a canon orientates and indicates what is important enough for a certain community to read, overhear, view or know. By making a choice from an endless range of things, it introduces a structure and creates a frame of reference. In so doing it inevitably claims a certain authority. Authority that can be immediately contested, so that every canon inevitably prompts a discussion on that canon. But it is precisely the debate that keeps the question of the meaning of the past alive for the present. Hence a canon challenges, but also inspires, and in that way carries the germ of change within it. This Canon is not set in stone. Undoubtedly in time changes will be not only desirable but also necessary.

Of Flanders

The Canon of Flanders takes as its starting point the Flanders region as it exists today. That is not the horizon but the observation point. Flanders as we know it today only took shape from the 19th century onwards in the context of modern Belgium. Before that time the name referred to the old county, which roughly speaking included the present Belgian provinces of East- and West-Flanders as well as Zeeland-Flanders and French Flanders. What today is called Flanders was in the past a varied amalgam of territories which had a separate existence before forming part of wider political associations such as the Burgundian, Spanish or Austrian Netherlands. The language border which today marks off the Flemish Region, had for a long time little political significance. Only in the 19th century did language become a major nation-building factor in Europe.

Present-day Flanders is not the only or inevitable result of 'the laws of history', but the result of an interplay of coincidences, ambitions, interests, conflicts and decisions, sometimes taken locally, sometimes far away. At the same time modern Flanders is also the outcome of the interaction between man and landscape, slow socio-economic processes and technological innovations. Some historical developments exhibit clear patterns. There is a dialectic between determinism (something must happen) and contingency (something can happen). In the social sciences one talks of path-dependency.

In the Canon this region figures among other things as a natural landscape without borders, as a patchwork of territories, as an area strewn with towns large and small, or as part of one area ruled from distant palaces and capitals. Present-day Flanders takes shape only gradually after 1830, partly under the influence of romantic literature on the past and through the efforts of the Flemish movement. At the same time the history of this region cannot be seen separately from its place in the heart of Europe. This area played a role as an importing, exporting and transit country for goods, services and ideas. And it has a long history as a destination and as a country of origin for people worldwide. This region was never an island, rather a hub where cultures, convictions but also armies could meet. In that respect we may express the wish that the Canon of Flanders may be joined by a Belgian, a Low Countries, a European or even a world canon.

Benchmarks from history are chronologically ordered, but this ordering has no teleological significance, as if the course of time were to lead irrevocably to a particular end. But people and movements may well have guiding aims. That does not detract from the fact that they remain partially dependent on circumstances. The result remains open.

c. 5,300 –
4,590 BC
Prehistory

The fertile Haspengouw loamy soils were a magnet for the first farmers, who originated from Eastern Europe. In Rosmeer in Limburg archaeologists discovered one of the oldest agricultural settlements in the Low Countries.

In the 1950s and 1960s archaeologists found on the Staberg in Rosmeer the remains of sixteen oblong wooden houses. The dwellings turned out to be about 7,300 years old and were part of an extensive village. It was the dwelling place of the first farmers who settled in the district. They migrated from Eastern Europe to the fertile loamy soils which extended across present-day Germany, the South-East Netherlands and Central Belgium. Archaeologists dubbed those farmers the Linear Pottery Culture (Linear Bandkeramik or LBK). The name refers to the pottery that they were the first to produce and use. Those bowls were decorated with linear bands, filled with various motifs.

3.1

THEME   **THE FIRST FARMERS**

The LBK-farmers from Eastern Europe introduced a new lifestyle into North-West Europe. Instead of hunting, fishing and gathering food they started growing crops, such as lentils, peas, linseed and grain. They also kept sheep, goats, cattle and pigs. That switch to agriculture and husbandry had taken place four thousand years before in the Middle East.

The farming families no longer led the nomadic existence of the hunter-gatherers. They lived in a fixed place near their fields and animals. In addition, both their livestock and their supplies needed protection against precipitation and wild animals. The light and easily transportable constructions which the native hunters used as shelter during their migrations, were not suitable for that. Instead, the farmers built durable wooden houses and storage sheds.

The lifestyle of the immigrants did not immediately have a great impact on the hunter-gatherers who had lived there for centuries. There were, though, contacts between the two groups. That is clear from the LBK-adzes found in the territory of the hunter-gatherers. DNA research also showed that marriage partners were exchanged between the two communities. Gradually the local population also took the first steps towards a full-time farming existence.

3

3.2

3
LBK pottery from Limburg used by the first farming communities, who immigrated from Eastern Europe (8 cm high, 9 cm diameter).

3.1
Wheat ears (left) and ears of einkorn wheat (right). Einkorn was one of the first kinds of wheat to be cultivated by human beings. The LBK farmers who settled in the valleys of the Meuse, Jeker, Heeswaterbeek and the upper reaches of the Dender grew, besides einkorn, also emmer wheat, lentils, peas and linseed.

3.2
A stone adze, a kind of axe, found in the LBK settlement of Rosmeer.

3.5

House-Building

FOCUS

Around 5,300 BC, for the first time in West-European history, immigrant farmers built houses for permanent occupation. The hunter-gatherers who had inhabited the region for centuries, had always made do with temporary shelter made of vegetable material or tents made of animal skins.

Those houses consisted of a living space and a store room to keep the harvest in. In the middle was a hearth. The oblong dwellings were built of poles placed close together. They supported a roof of reed or bark. The walls were made of woven branches filled with loam. The farmers gathered the loam close to their houses. This created long pits, into which rubbish was later dumped.

The farming settlements consisted of various houses. This points to the fact that various families lived together. Their houses always had the same structure, but their size could vary. On the Staberg traces of no fewer than sixteen houses were found. The largest dwelling measured 6 by 25 metres.

Migration

FOCUS

The LBK-farmers from Eastern Europe were looking for locations with fertile soil. They found them in the loamy soils in the valleys of the Meuse, Jeker, Heeswaterbeek and the upper reaches of the Demer. Their migration was gradual and took many generations. They brought their knowledge of growing plants (grain, lentils, peas...) and rearing animals (sheep, goats, cattle...) with them.
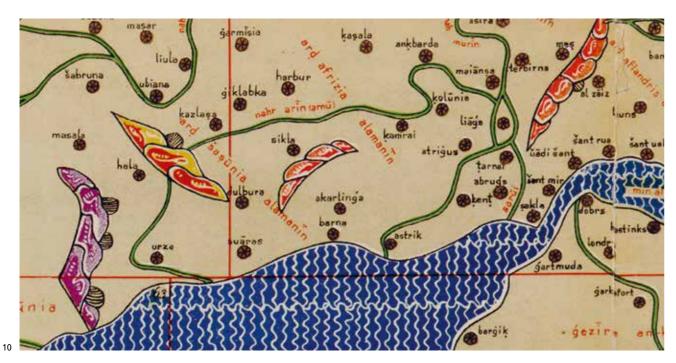
Probably the local hunter-gatherers and the first farmers did not encounter each other very often during those first few centuries. The fertile loamy soils on which the first farmers grew crops were largely ignored by the hunters. They preferred the sandy plains with rivers, where there was a greater variety of fish, game and edible plants. Those areas in turn were generally unsuitable for farming.

The local population adopted the lifestyle of the farmers only very slowly. The Linear Pottery Culture itself remained unchanged for a long time. The first farming settlements were very similar, wherever they appeared: everywhere the same oblong houses were built, the same crops and animals were grown and reared and the same kinds of utensils were used.

As the farming communities grew, contacts increased. The hunter-gatherers gradually adopted objects, customs and technological knowledge from the farmers, such as (the production of) pottery and certain stone implements. Eventually they would give up their nomadic existence entirely and also opt for a life as farmers.

3.3
LBK house under construction (reconstruction), actual scale.

3.4
Archaeological research on the LBK site of Riemst. The houses themselves were not preserved, but their structure is clearly visible in the form of soil discolouration where the wooden posts were placed in the ground.
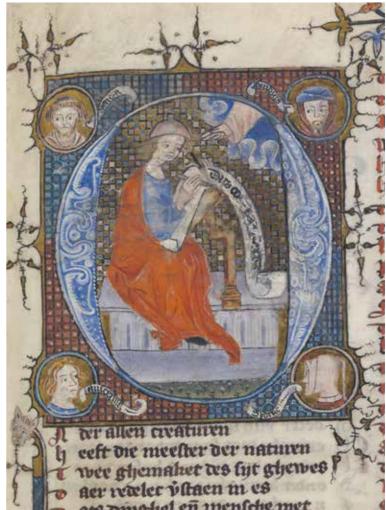
3.4

3.5
3D reconstruction of a LBK settlement on the Cannerberg near Maastricht.

'Kent' (Ghent), 'Abrugs' (Bruges), 'Sant Mir' (Saint-Omer)... Under those corrupt names various Flemish towns appeared on a map of the 12th century. Muhammad Al-Idrisi achieved a considerable feat. In an age of limited information he managed to map the world he knew.

Al-Idrisi was a scholar from a distinguished Maghreb family. In around 1154, having been commissioned by the (Christian) king of Sicily Roger II, he completed the *Kitāb Roedjar* or 'Book of Roger', a description of the world as he knew it. For Al-Idrisi Sicily was the ideal spot to learn more about regions where he had never been. Much knowledge was gathered on that island, which was a crucible of Christians, Muslims and Jews and where numerous traders and travellers visited in passing. Probably Al-Idrisi sought information from them about towns in the Low Countries that he thought important enough to mention on his map. His description was not always accurate, because he was basing himself on incorrect statements. That was not exceptional: Western scholars also used dubious sources when they wrote about distant lands.

THEME **CONTACTS WITH THE MUSLIM WORLD**

At the beginning of the Middle Ages Western Europe was not a very fruitful area for science and culture. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire (in 476) the region found itself in crisis. Much of the knowledge that had been built up in antiquity was forgotten. Only the great abbeys kept a number of Greek and Latin works in their libraries. Under Charlemagne (about 800) intellectual life again flourished. But Western Europe lagged behind the Muslim world, which extended from Southern Europe deep into Central Asia. Certainly, in the Al-Andalus region, the south of present-day Spain, scientists and philosophers went to work with knowledge from antiquity. Islamic and Jewish scholars initiated new developments in medicine and philosophy.

From the 12th century on, partly thanks to the Islamic world, culture and science gained a second wind in Western Europe. Christian scholars were influenced by writings from Al-Andalus. Mathematical terms such as 'algebra' and 'algorithm' come from Arabic. In addition, the Europeans rediscovered part of the legacy of Classical antiquity via scholars from the Islamic world. In this way knowledge was passed from one civilisation to another, each time with additions and new insights.

10.1
The *Dietsche doctrinael* is a work on ethics written in Antwerp in 1345. It is based on a Latin book by the Italian jurist Albertanus of Brescia (1195–1251). The opening miniature shows four scholars who inspired Albertanus: at the bottom left Avicenna is depicted.

10.2
In the 11th century the Persian scientist Ibn Sina, known in Europe as Avicenna, wrote a canon or encyclopaedia of medicine, which had a great influence in the West. The doctor Andreas Vesalius studied the work of Avicenna critically in the 16th century.

10.2

10.3

10.3
A complete, modern
version of Al-Idrisi's
world map. He positioned
the south at the top and
saw the Middle East as
the centre of the world.
The Low Countries are at
bottom right.

18 Erasmus

Erasmus was one of the most influential European thinkers of the 16th century. He wrote on the upbringing of children and education and sharply criticised the church and those in power. His writings helped to shape the philosophical and religious thinking of his time.

Erasmus was born in Rotterdam – that Holland town belonged at the time to the Burgundian Netherlands – but travelled through Europe all his life. Thanks to his exceptional knowledge of Greek and Latin literature he was able to bring antiquity back to life. His most ambitious achievement was the edition of the New Testament published in 1516. That section of the Bible had originally been written in Greek, but for a thousand years the church had used a not always reliable Latin translation. Erasmus published the Greek source text and produced a new Latin translation with a commentary. That translation undermined traditional interpretations of the Bible. In Leuven Erasmus was the driving force behind the Collegium Trilingue or Three-Language College. There students could study the three Biblical languages – Hebrew, Greek and Latin – together.

18
Hans Holbein the Younger, *Erasmus*, 1523.

18

18.1

18.2

THEME **HUMANISM**

Erasmus was a figurehead of humanism. That is an intellectual movement which in the 15th and 16th century spread across Europe from Italy. The humanists encouraged critical thinking. They argued for a philosophy and ethics that put man at the centre of things (hence: humanism). That opened the door for innovation in many subject areas, such as language study, mathematics, anatomy, cartography, botany, medicine...

The humanists found their inspiration in the Classical Latin and Greek texts, which they studied, admired and imitated. They purged the ancient texts of mistakes and deliberate changes that had gradually crept in. In this way they laid the foundations of philology, the scholarly study of language and literature.

The humanists also studied the history and philosophy of antiquity. They felt that people from the upper classes needed that knowledge to play their leading role in society. Reform of education was therefore important. For example, at school one should master Latin by using the language actively and not learn grammatical rules off by heart without understanding them.

North of the Alps humanists like Erasmus also studied the Bible and the church fathers. It was intended to lead to a purer Christianity, closer to the Gospel, stripped of abuse, hollow rituals and contrived theological arguments.

18.1
Reconstruction of the Three-Language College in Leuven. The institution was a breeding ground for humanists like Gemma Frisius, Andreas Vesalius, Gerard Mercator and Rembert Dodoens.

18.2
In *Laus Stultitiae* (In Praise of Folly) Erasmus dissected the society of his time. Neither worldly nor ecclesiastical dignitaries escaped his sharp pen. The book appeared in Paris in 1511 and was dedicated to the English humanist Thomas More (1478–1535). The first Dutch translation appeared in 1560.

30

1835
Modern Period

On 5 May 1835 three steam trains left Groendreef station in Brussels. On board were nine hundred guests, spread over thirty carriages. When they arrived in Mechelen just over an hour later, a huge popular celebration erupted. The first train journey on the European mainland had gone off successfully.

The inauguration of the first rail connection had been meticulously prepared for. Leopold I had come personally to inspect the engines. However, the king did not himself travel on the 22 kilometre-long route. Who was on board one of the carriages was George Stephenson, the British engineer who had invented the steam locomotive.

The train journey from Brussels to Mechelen was not a world first. In Great Britain trains had been travelling around for several years. But on the European mainland Belgium played a pioneering role. For the young country the building of a railway network was a way of projecting itself as a modern state and emphasising its industrial ambitions.

THEME

THE RAILWAY OPENS UP THE COUNTRY

Belgium had been independent for scarcely four years when the government decided to build a national railway network. Mechelen was to be the hub. Soon Belgium had a widely branching train network. After the building of stone-surfaced roads and canals in the previous decades, this was a new important step in the opening up of the country.

The train was a boon for industry. Raw materials could henceforth be transported fast and in large quantities overland. Through the expansion of the rail network the demand for coal, iron, wood and other building materials rose. Partly because of the rail network little Belgium was able to develop into a major industrial country.

Other European countries also invested in trains. Towns, villages and regions were connected with each other via railways and their inhabitants profited from the increased mobility. Thus the railways played a part in the formation of modern nation-states, while also promoting international contacts.

Through their knowledge and experience, Belgian companies had ample opportunity to collaborate in the expansion of railway networks. They exported locomotives and other railway material to all corners of the world. In the Congo Free State too they laid rails to be able to exploit the riches of the Congo. Forced labour and the appalling working conditions caused many victims among the Congolese workforce.

30
The former station of Mechelen, the arrival point of the first train journey on the European mainland.

30.1
The first train journey won a place in popular visual culture. The strip album *De fluitende olifant* (The Whistling Elephant) in the Suske and Wiske series (2021) refers to L'éléphant, one of the three steam locomotives from 1835.
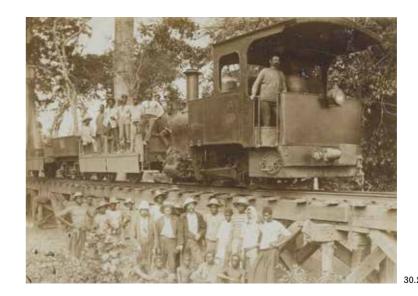

30.1

30.2

30.2
At the end of the 19th century the Belgians built a first railway line in Congo. Indigenous labourers carried out the work under particularly harsh conditions.

1853—1948
Modern Period

Marie Belpaire at her desk, about 1910.

In the 19th century educational opportunities for women from all levels of society were extremely restricted. The Catholic writer Marie Belpaire made it her life's work to remedy the situation. She organised education for girls and lobbied strongly for the admission of women to colleges and universities.

From 1874 Belpaire, with private capital, organised primary and vocational education for working-class girls in Antwerp. Her involvement shifted in the 1890s from working-class education to secondary and higher education for middle-class women. Initially instruction was in French but from 1911 also in Dutch in the Sint-Ludgardisschool. That was new. Belpaire was one of those involved in the launch of the Catholic Flemish College Extension for Women, where women could study science and philosophy. Her crowning achievement was the foundation in 1919 of the Catholic Flemish College for Women in Antwerp. But Belpaire did more: for decades she played a key role in pro-Flemish intellectual and literary life.

THEME   **GIRLS GO TO SCHOOL**

The 19th-century feminists realised that emancipation for the women would not come without proper education. Advanced studies for girls from the bourgeoisie, however, clashed with the ideal image of the woman as wife and mother. Because of poverty and child labour children from the lower classes had no chance at all of good schooling.

For boys the government had organised secondary education since 1850. After primary school girls' choice was limited to the schools of certain religious congregations. They offered only a limited range of subjects, such as domestic economy and primary school teaching. Isabelle Gatti de Gamond founded the first municipal secondary girls' school in Brussels in 1864. Other cities followed suit.

From the 1880s on the government also set up girls' secondary schools, but they did not offer syllabuses that were required for one to go to university, with Latin and sufficient maths. Private initiatives, like that of Belpaire, did and in so doing ensured a flow of women into higher education. In the 1880s the universities of Brussels and Ghent opened their doors to female students, Leuven did not do so until after the First World War. From 1925 onwards the government secondary girls' schools also offered all options. However, the measure that made the greatest impact on girls of all social classes, was the introduction of compulsory education up to the age of 14 in 1914.

37.1

37.2

37.1
In the second half of the 19th century girls from poor families in East- and West-Flanders learned a minimum of reading and arithmetic in so-called lace schools. Mostly those girls were a source of cheap labour. Here they are at work in the lace school of the Apostolines in Bruges.

37.2
Group photo of students and teachers of the Catholic Flemish College for Women in Antwerp, around 1920.