

THE CASTLE OF THE COUNTS

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A Fortress for the Ages:
a Thousand Years of History

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**A WALK AROUND THE CASTLE
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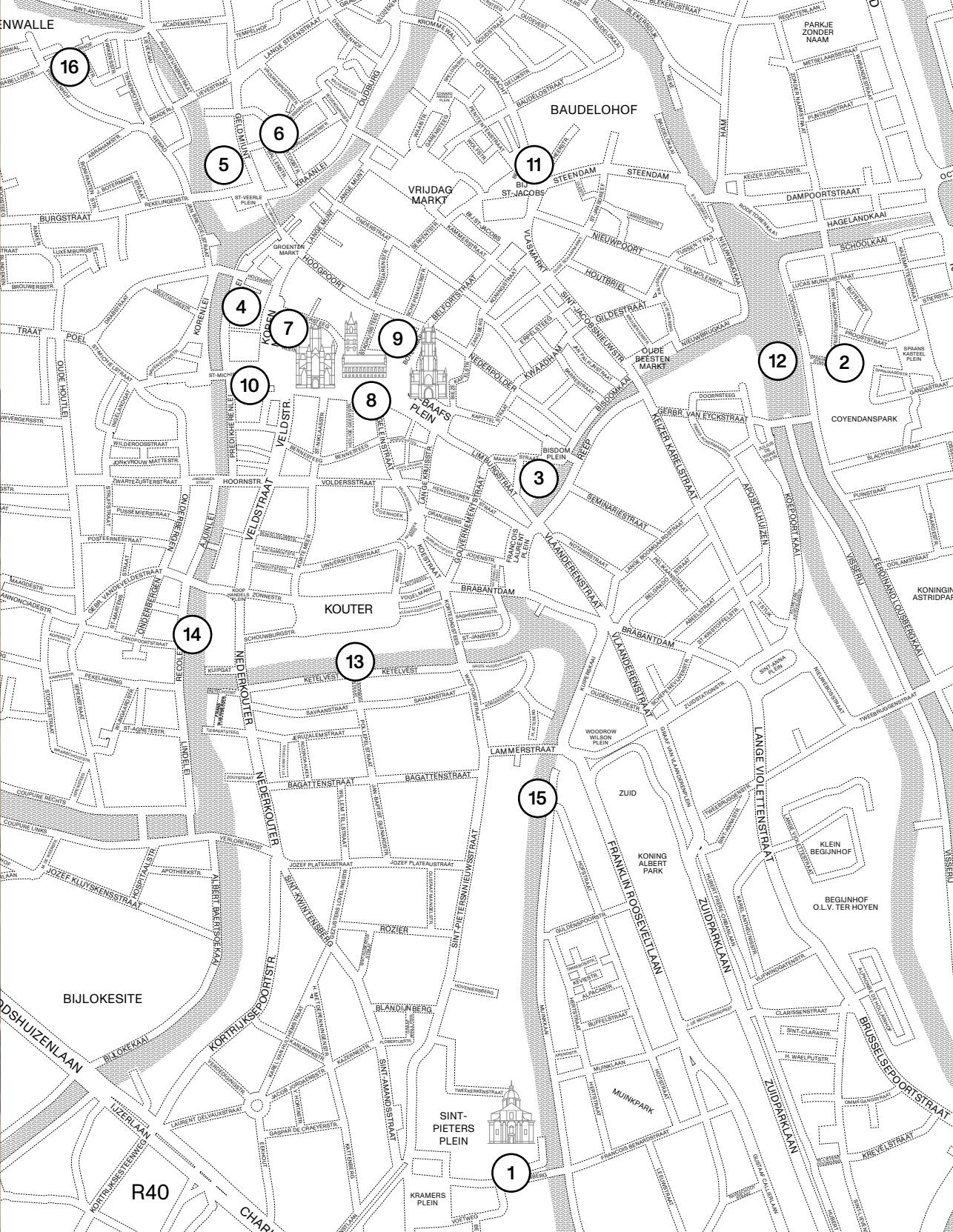
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**A WALK THROUGH THE CASTLE
OF THE COUNTS**

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GENERAL MAP OF GHENT

- 1 St Peter's Abbey
- 2 St Bavo's Abbey
- 3 First Scheldt portus and the Castle of Gerald the Devil
- 4 Leie harbour (Graslei and Koornlei)
- 5 Castle of the Counts and Sint-Veerleplein square
- 6 Patershol neighbourhood
- 7 St Nicholas' Church
- 8 Belfry
- 9 St Bavo's Cathedral (St John's Church)
- 10 St Michael's Church
- 11 St James' Church
- 12 Confluence of the Leie and Scheldt rivers (Ganda)
- 13 Ketelvest
- 14 Leie arm
- 15 Scheldt arm
- 16 Prinsenhof (Princes' Court)





This map by Matthias Quad (from the *Fasciculus Geographicus*, 1608) shows the county of Flanders, which mainly comprised present-day West and East Flanders, as well as parts of present-day French Flanders and Zeeland.

THE PRECURSORS

(10TH CENTURY - 1180)

Today, Ghent – including its thirteen boroughs – is a city with 272,000 inhabitants, a major seaport, the largest university in the country, an impressive heritage, one of the largest annual street festivals in Europe, a busy cultural and sporting calendar, and more than a million tourists and visitors every year.

More than a thousand years ago, though – in the early days of Ghent – none of this existed.

People had settled in this area centuries and even thousands of years earlier. Pottery shards dating back to the Neolithic period (11,000–3,000 BC) have been found here. Other archaeological excavations revealed Roman and Gallo-Roman traces of habitation.

From the ninth century, Ghent belonged to the county of Flanders, the *pagus Flandrensis*, a ‘fief’ or ‘gau’ within the territory of West Francia, which in turn was part of the great Kingdom of the Franks. In 1384 count Louis of Male died without a male heir. His daughter Margaret of Male married Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, and Flanders became part of the Kingdom of Burgundy.

The county of Flanders mentioned here is not to be confused with modern-day Flanders. The former county comprised the western part of present-day Flanders and parts of the Netherlands (Zeelandic Flanders) and northern France (French Flanders).

What did Ghent look like in the tenth century?

Two rivers converging, the Leie and the Scheldt, each with their own arms.

A few hills rising above the marshland. Today, they are still called 'mountains', even though they are nothing more than molehills in the flat Flemish countryside.

There were also two important abbeys, both founded in the early seventh century by Amandus for the Frankish king Dagobert. One abbey was nestled where the two rivers meet, which is why it was initially called Ganda Abbey – after the Celtic word *ganda*, meaning confluence. Later, it became St Bavo's Abbey, named after St Bavo, who had stayed there for a while as a follower of Amandus.

The other abbey (later called St Peter's Abbey) was built on the Blandijnberg hill, 29 metres high and along the old course of the Scheldt.

Around these two abbeys arose two 'villages', settlements linked to monastic life. The villagers (the Peterlings and the Bavelings) were enterprising: they acquired estates, engaged in agriculture and trade, founded churches, made wine, produced manuscripts and collected relics – genuine or otherwise – to attract pilgrims.

In the ninth century, both abbeys were ravaged by the Vikings, mainly from Denmark, who invaded Flanders by sea and river in their *drakkars* and *sneks*. The Carolingian kings tried to protect their cities, churches, abbeys and palaces from the Normans. Charlemagne even assembled a war fleet, which he came to inspect in Ghent in 811. Ramparts were built here and there, and fortifications were erected at river mouths, along the coast and at ports. But none of this stopped the Vikings. Their raids became increasingly fearless, with St Bavo's Abbey bearing the brunt of their attacks. By the early eleventh century, however, their aggressive streak had come to an end.

Aside from the two abbeys, Ghent's first *portus* (a trading settlement) had been established on a high sandy ridge between the Scheldt, where



The vast estate of St Bavo's Abbey (in the foreground) before it was largely demolished by Emperor Charles V in 1540. The panoramic painting is by Lucas d'Heere and dates from 1564, but depicts the situation before 1540.



Illustration of the vast estates around St Peter's Abbey – sketch taken from the *Flandria Illustrata*, a cartographic work by Antonius Sanderus from the first half of the seventeenth century.



Various images from the second half of the nineteenth century, but before 1889 when the demolition of the houses around the Castle of the Counts began. In one of them, you can clearly see two factory chimneys protruding. (Ghent City Archives)



Various images from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the removal of the factories, the workers' cottages and the machine rooms, etc., not much remained but a dilapidated shack. Architect Dewaele set to work on the restoration. (Ghent City Archives / Edmond Sacré)



← The inner gate

As a building, the entrance gate actually had two gates, but only the outer gate remains. You can still see the hinges and holes for the crossbar that closed and reinforced the second inner **gate (2)**. Just before the second gate, look up to see the machicolations through which invading enemies could be bombarded with boiling water, boiling oil or all kinds of projectiles.

In the passage between the two gates, there are supporting stones in the wall. It is not clear what they were used for, but perhaps there was once a mezzanine floor here.

The rectangular rear of the entrance gate is older than the rest of the structure, which was built in the twelfth century under Philip of Alsace. The first rampart, which was shorter than Philip's rampart that still stands today, once started here at the back of the gate.

When you walk through the entrance gate, you will see the entrance to **the stables (3)** on your right. Just beyond that, you can buy an entrance ticket in **the ticket office (4)**. This brings you to the upper courtyard, the open space in front of the castle.

The **donjon (5)** is the large tower on the right, in the centre of the complex. At the bottom of the tower (north side of the donjon), you will find an open door where stairs lead you down into what is now the basement of the donjon.



Continue straight ahead and you will first enter the small **countess's chamber**, the purpose of which is unknown (despite its imaginative name), and then the large **count's chamber**, where the Council of Flanders convened until 1442. After that, the room was used for legal administration, among other things. This room contains a replica of a **chain mail**. Here, too, you can see traces of renovations, mainly to accommodate a cotton mill in this building.

Retrace your steps to the passageway between the donjon and the Count's Residence and take the stairs down in the corner. This will bring you to a small room (on the ground floor of the Count's Residence) where you can still 'admire' a **prison pit**. This was not an *oubliette*; it was not the intention for people to be locked up here forever and die of hunger and thirst.



Prison pit