

## Tapestries and Racing Cyclists

### Oudenaarde – a Small Town with a Big History

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[ DIRK VAN ASSCHE ]

No matter which direction you approach the town from, the massive tower of the main church always soars up like a raised forefinger from the folds of the landscape. The town centre of Oudenaarde is so small that it needs the tower to attract attention in the rolling countryside of the Flemish Ardennes. The Scheldt is a second way of finding the town. Today, the river mostly resembles a canal, but until well into the 20th century it used to twist its way through the landscape. At one of its many bends a town came into being around the year 1000.

The town can be explored in different ways. Most visitors to Oudenaarde come by bicycle, for recently it has become the cycling capital of Flanders. However, I choose to arrive in the slowest but also the most reliable way – on foot. First through the railway tunnel and then another couple of hundred metres and I'm standing in the town centre. Until the 19th century, I would have lived outside the town walls. When the railway was established, a section of the fortified wall was demolished. This means that from my kitchen window I now see the platforms of the new station and to the right of them the small tower of the former one. This imposing structure replaced the first building as early as the end of the 19th century. It now stands empty, but it looks just like a station ought to look, with a ticket-office hall where the employees, seated behind large walls of glass, used to push a ticket through under a small hatch. It also has various waiting rooms with gleaming wooden benches and a buffet where one drank coffee out of heavy china cups. As a child I was afraid of taking the train there, because you had to cross the railway lines to get to the far platform. To help relieve me of my fear, a new station was built in 1996, with a tunnel under the tracks. But my fear has now been replaced by revulsion. Revulsion at the banality of this concrete container and, in particular, the station square in front of it. A train traveller whose first meeting with Oudenaarde takes place there will leave again by the next available train.

Standing with one's back to the old station, one looks straight at the tower of the Sint-Walburgakerk, the main church, which is visible like a beacon through the entire region. In between stands a white statue of a woman reclining on a globe and laying a crown on a grave. On this very square, in 1864, a handful of volunteers gathered who were prepared to defend the Belgian Princess Charlotte in Mexico. Her husband, Maximilian of Austria, Emperor of Mexico, was



Town hall. Photo by Eugène Desplanques (ca. 1854)

being threatened by rebels. The result of this expedition was disastrous for the Belgian mercenaries. The Princess had to leave her husband and Mexico, and the Emperor was put to death. The name of the square, Tacambaro, commemorates this sad story.

Today, ten or so pupils are sitting on the base of the statue waiting for the bus to take them home. Close by lies the Sint-Bernardus College, the largest school in the town. In the turbulent year of 1968, a young man studied here who was having difficulty in finding his niche in life and sought consolation in poetry and drugs. After his suicide, Jotie 't Hooft became a cult figure, the first drugs suicide in Dutch-language literature, an icon of neo-Romantic poetry. He set himself up against the narrow-mindedness of Oudenaarde, but his town still reverberates with the name Jotie, a dialect form of his own name, Johan. The town's youth centre now bears the name of the youth who was expelled from school for drug abuse and who complained in a poem that in the town he is 'tolerated/as formerly the village idiot'.

The college, with its beautiful Renaissance facade, lies hardly a hundred metres from the market. This large square, at the foot of the Gothic town hall, is surrounded by scores of cafés and terraces. Here there is a suitable place for everyone to take a drink: those of maturer years drink their coffee on the terrace of the Pomme d'Or, the bikers congregate each weekend at the Carillon beneath the church tower and the younger people sit on the terrace of the Adriaan Brouwer. This 16th century painter, much admired by P.P. Rubens, is more closely associated in his native town with beer than with art. A typical Oudenaarde brown beer has been named after him – as are the annual beer festivals.

On the corner of the Grote Markt square stands a somewhat elderly man, deep in conversation. It is Freddy Maertens, one of the most controversial

figures of Belgian cycle racing, who was twice world champion. Maertens is now the figurehead of the Tour of Flanders Centre that has been located in Oudenaarde since 2003. The town has invested heavily in getting the arrival of one of the most important classic cycle races on its territory, and in 2011 this also took place here for the first time. This has meant an added attraction for the town. A media magnate and avid cycle-lover purchased the race, made a TV series out of it and then shifted the arrival to his native town. Since then, Oudenaarde has become a new mecca for cycle enthusiasts from the whole world.

The Tour fits this town perfectly. The connection with the surrounding countryside is being re-established. The cyclists ride continuously through the hills of the Flemish Ardennes and almost everywhere can glimpse the top of the main church tower. While for centuries this tower was a landmark for believers in the whole surrounding area, it now serves a similar purpose for toiling cyclists.

I continue my walk past the meat market, which is now the public library, and a small beguinage until I come to the banks of the Scheldt. This is one of the most beautiful spots in the town. In front of me, on the far bank, stands the small Gothic church of Pamele. Once, this village was a proper town, like Oudenaarde. In the first half of the 13th century, the gentlemen of Pamele had a church built in the Scheldt Gothic style. It was more beautiful than the main church of neighbouring Oudenaarde and even today it still dominates the right-hand bank of the Scheldt. To the right of it stand the remains of Maagdendale Abbey, once one of the largest nunneries in Flanders and an important religious and intellectual centre. During the French era, the abbey was used as a barracks and it now houses a shooting range, the town archives and the art academy of the town. On my left, behind the lift bridge that immobilises the traffic scores of times every day, stands the Lalaing House, where an important bastard was probably born, and the courthouse, behind which lies the former gaol.



Railway station  
© Dirk Van Assche.

## The royal chambermaid

During an art event in 2001, the artist Johan Van Geluwe placed a sign on the right bank of the Scheldt with the text 'Achtung! Sie verlassen das Heilige Römische Reich Deutscher Nation' and on the left bank one with 'Attention. Vous quittez le Royaume de France'. He was referring to the period around the year 1000 when the Scheldt formed the border between two power blocs. On the right bank, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire had a fortress built in the village of Ename. Boudewijn IV, the ambitious Count of Flanders and vassal of the French King, not to be outdone by his opponent, built a tower on the opposite bank. In 1033, Boudewijn crossed the Scheldt and destroyed the fortress of Ename. To deprive the village of any future military role, an abbey was founded there. Oudenaarde, on the left bank, then became the most important settlement. Right up until the French period, the abbey at Ename, was an important intellectual and religious centre – but today it is where archaeologists conduct their investigations.

Oudenaarde rapidly developed into an important trading centre and a base for the Counts of Flanders. Jan the Fearless had a fortification built and for a while had his Council of Flanders there. Only for a short while, for neighbouring Ghent, also on the Scheldt, viewed the development of Oudenaarde with con-



siderable envy. Ghent was a self-willed town that regularly rebelled against the monarch. Oudenaarde was much more subservient and law-abiding. In the 14th century, the two towns regularly came into conflict with each other, with Ghent – the larger of the two – normally gaining the upper hand. The sympathies of the Burgundian Dukes, however, were with the smaller Oudenaarde, and they even built a residence there.

In 1521, the as yet unmarried Charles V stayed in it. His soldiers were besieging the nearby Tournai, and the governor of the town organised a feast for the young monarch. His attention was caught by the chambermaid Johanna van der Gheynst. The records state that she was extremely beautiful and was the one true love of Charles' life. Nine months later, at any rate, a daughter was born – Margaret of Parma. Charles came to acknowledge her as his lawful daughter and gave her an education suitable for a noblewoman. She thus came to play a role in the marriage politics of her father. Already at the age of fourteen she married for the first time, with a scion of the de Medici family. When he was murdered a year later, she married shortly afterwards for a second time with the fourteen-year-old Ottavio Farnese, Count of Parma, grandson of Pope Paul III. From 1559 to 1567, Margaret was the Governess of Flanders. Her son, Alexander Farnese, was later to reimpose with an iron hand the dominion of the monarch in rebellious Flanders.

During that period, Oudenaarde was a prosperous city, and this prosperity also had to be displayed to the outside world. In 1526, the first stone of a new town hall was laid. This new edifice was to reflect the wealth of the town, which is why the commission was also given to a top builder, Hendrik van Pede, who had

Alexander and the high priest  
(end 16<sup>th</sup> - early 17<sup>th</sup> century);  
370 x 435 cm.  
MOU Museum Oudenaarde  
©Technifoto Van Wambeke,  
Oudenaarde



The Scheldt in Oudenaarde. On the left the church of Pamele, on the right a town gate. Royal Library, mss. 1175 © Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Brussels

earned his spurs by, among other things, building the King's House (Broodhuis/ Maison du Roi) on the Grand Place in Brussels. Right up to the present day, the town hall is one of the loveliest examples of late Brabantine Gothic architecture.

The tower of the belfry bears the imperial crown, and above it stands the statue of Hanske de Krijger (Hans the Warrior). The story is that Hanske was a watchman who was to announce the arrival of Charles V, but that he had drunk too much Oudenaarde beer and fallen asleep, which meant he did not see the monarch arrive. Charles is then said to have ordered the town to include a pair of spectacles in its coat of arms. In actual fact, it is not a pair of spectacles but the Gothic letter A of Audenaerde. According to the writer Charles de Coster, Hanske de Krijger was none other than Till Eulenspiegel himself, who lived in the town for a while and who sneaked off with the provisions of the commander of the local militia.

### Purveyors to nobility

That the town could permit itself such a special town hall was due to its production of tapestries. Along with such cities as Brussels, Arras (F), Tournai, Ghent and Bruges, Oudenaarde developed into an international centre and one of the most important purveyors to the European courts. Like most Flemish towns, Oudenaarde had mainly been a producer of linen. A crisis occurred, however, and just as now innovation and specialisation were the remedy. The Oudenaarde textile sector came to specialise in the weaving of tapestries –



a luxury product. The first traces of this industry go back as far as the latter half of the 14th century. The link with the surrounding countryside was very strong. That was where most of the weavers worked. The merchants, along with the craftsmen, the tradesmen and the guilds, lived inside the town walls. In the 16th century – the golden age – more than half the population worked in the tapestry weaving industry. They mainly produced verdure tapestries (with formal designs derived from foliage), although it was in fact possible to order any genre or narrative, whether it came from Antiquity, the Bible or mythology.

Important for the tapestry industry was the relationship with Antwerp, which was then the centre of international trade. Both for the supply of basic materials and for the exporting of the finished products this seaport played a crucial role. Quite a few Oudenaarde producers sent members of their families to Antwerp, where they functioned as contacts. In 1544, Charles V regulated tapestry weaving in order to safeguard a high quality. From that time onwards, it was also compulsory to weave a town mark into the edge of the tapestry, as conclusive proof of its place of origin. In many Oudenaarde tapestries from that period we find the spectacles from the town coat of arms.

In the museum situated in the town hall some magnificent examples are on display. One of the finest is a series depicting Alexander the Great, comprising three tapestries, manufactured at the end of the 16th century. It is assumed that this series once belonged to Alexander Farnese, Count of Parma. It is thought that he received the tapestries in 1582 in connection with his ceremonial inauguration in Oudenaarde.

## In the eye of many European storms

Economic success often goes hand in hand with social and political stability. From the beginning of the 16th century this was hard to guarantee. Reforms to religious services, grafted onto social unrest, obscured matters. Reformists were quickly rounded up, and the first merchants started to emigrate. Despite the harsh inquisition, the reformist movement grew increasingly stronger, and in 1572 Oudenaarde was conquered for a short period by the Wild Beggars. In 1582, Alexander Farnese put an end to this Calvinist republic, which lasted only a few years.

For the tapestry industry these times were severe. Thousands of weavers and merchants left the area and left in large numbers for the Northern Netherlands. They were to settle in Amsterdam and Delft, but Gouda in particular proved to be their preferred final destination. By around 1582-83, about 80 Oudenaarde families had moved to the city and tapestry weaving was flourishing there. But the industry back in Oudenaarde never fully recovered from this exodus. The last workshop closed its doors in 1772. Oudenaarde weavers did help lay the basis for the production of French tapestries. Today, in the Lalaing House, there is still a workshop where tapestries are restored.

From the second half of the 17th century, Flanders was at the centre of the European battlefield for many decades. Numerous conflicts were contested here and Oudenaarde, strategically situated on the Scheldt, seldom escaped acts of war. The expansionist policy of the French King Louis XIV played an important role here. In 1688, Oudenaarde came under French rule, which ushered in a brief



Church of Pamele and  
St. Walburga Church  
© Dirk Van Assche



Maagdendale Abbey  
© Dirk Van Assche

golden age. But acts of war soon put an end to this. On several occasions the town suffered heavy bombardment. On 11 July 1708, the major European powers stood facing each other in Oudenaarde with enormous armies – a total of 180,000 troops. At stake in the battle was the crown of Spain. The Great Alliance, with British, Prussian and Dutch troops, was up against a mighty French army. The hilly landscape played an important role in this battle, with the French King suffering a bitter defeat. More than 6000 soldiers fell in the battle. Three hundred years later, several hundred actors from all of Europe re-enacted the battle. Once more the canons roared, but this time the battle ended with loud applause.

In the 19th century as well, the town fell on very hard times. Until 1859, people lived there under the Ancien Régime. In that year, the town authorities decided to demolish the fortresses and restrict the numbers of the permanently stationed garrisons. From that moment on, Oudenaarde cautiously sought to join the modern world.

At the end of the First World War the town was once more in the line of fire. From 31 October to 10 November 1918, one day before the Armistice, the Battle of the Scheldt was fought. French and American troops stood facing the Germans. The town was heavily bombarded and a large part of the patrimony was damaged. In addition there were many victims of German poison gas attacks. Shortly before the Battle of the Scheldt, Adolf Hitler was taken care of at a German hospital located in the local college before being repatriated to Germany.

To commemorate this battle, the Ohio Bridge was built over the Scheldt. Before the war an iron bridge stood here – it was blown up and subsequently, with the aid of the American state of Ohio, it was rebuilt. The new bridge was embellished with four American bison. They are there to this day, although now, after restoration, they mistakenly look in the opposite direction to the original one. In the town centre, the American monument in General Pershing Street reminds people of the role played by the American troops in the liberation of Oudenaarde.



## The hole in the market

The Second World War also resulted in serious war damage, which was only completely repaired many years later. After this, the town wished to adapt swiftly to the new age. Everything was set in motion to bring about economic prosperity. This led to comprehensive changes to the external appearance of the town. Via various small canals, the Scheldt had had a strong presence in the townscape until well into the 20th century. For that reason, the town was also referred to as the Little Bruges. But the canals were filled in, and the twists and turns of the river Scheldt straightened out. The fact that this, among other things, meant doing away with the remains of the Burgundian citadel and a modernist artists' centre could not deter the town authorities from implementing their plans. Oudenaarde was to adapt to the modern world and to do so people were prepared to go far. So far that a large number of old houses close to the church were demolished in order to lay down a four-lane road to the Grote Markt square. This was scornfully referred to as 'the hole in the market' by the local population. At the beginning of this century, the new town authorities realised their mistake and filled in the hole once more with new blocks of flats and a cycling museum featuring the Tour of Flanders. Let us hope that the lesson has thereby been learnt that the only way of preparing a town for the future is to pay due respect to the past.

I'm still standing daydreaming a bit on the bank of the Scheldt when three men on racing bikes pull up beside me. They are apparently from Australia and have come specially to Oudenaarde from 'down under' in order to explore the area of the Tour of Flanders. They soon set off again to do some climbing in the area of Patersberg, Koppenberg and especially Oude Kwaremont, and even though they have sophisticated GPS devices with them, the tower of the church of Oudenaarde will remain their point of reference wherever they ride. ■

The Scheldt and the church of Pamele. On the left the Palace of Justice. © Dirk Van Assche

*Translated by John Irons*