

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte, Bd. 50/1 (2019), 16-30

DOI: 10.60684/msg.v50i1.2019102

Karen Vannieuwenhuyze
University of Antwerp

**Using and Producing Urban Political Space. Nineteenth-Century Antwerp
Mayors and City Councils and their Claim to the Town Hall Square**

MSG Moderne Stadtgeschichte
ISSN: 2941-6159 online
<https://moderne-stadtgeschichte.de>

Dieses Werk steht unter der [Lizenz Creative Commons Namensnennung 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).
Bei den Abbildungen sind eingeschränkte Lizenzformen möglich, Weiternutzungsrechte
sind gesondert abzuklären.
© Karen Vannieuwenhuyze 2019



Using and Producing Urban Political Space: Nineteenth-Century Antwerp Mayors and City Councils and their Claim to the Town Hall Square

This paper focuses on the political appropriation of the Antwerp town hall square – better known as Great Market – between 1830 and 1914. In historiography town hall squares were usually perceived as symbols of united political communities. It was as if behind the facade of the main municipal building only single-minded urban governments and city administrations operated. However, with the culture wars-tradition within nineteenth century political history in mind, this research assumes that not only between subsequent urban governments, but also within one city council opinions were divided on how to use and transform material urban spaces. With the planting of the Tree of Liberty, the restoration of the sculpture of Virgin Mary in the town hall's facade and the inauguration of the monumental Brabofountain the different nineteenth-century Antwerp city councils attempted, each in their own way, to consolidate their control over the Great Market. The subsequent Catholic and liberal urban governments introduced similar and adapted each other's material symbols. The shifts between Catholic and liberal governing periods provide an excellent framework to investigate how differently and/or similarly the subsequent urban governments integrated this specific urban landscape in their governance activities and political campaigns.

1. Introduction

“And when, for example, Brabo personifies redemption or freedom [of the river Scheldt], it is obvious and suitable to place him on the *forum* where the monument of our municipal autonomy is constructed.”¹

In 1887, after some experimental set-ups to investigate the most appropriate location of the sculptural Brabofountain, the Antwerp liberal newspaper “Le Précurseur” announced its personal opinion on the case. As the extract of the newspaper article quoted above shows, the Antwerp *forum* or Great Market was, in the 1880s, seen as the physical symbol of city rights and urban freedoms. Municipal autonomy was an essential element of the urban identity

¹ Le Précurseur, 21 June 1887. Translation from the French. According to the legend, the Gallic hero Brabo liberated Antwerp and initiated free shipping on the river Scheldt by defeating the giant Antigoon who lived in the old Antwerp castle ‘t Steen and cut off sailor's hands when they refused to pay toll.

cultivated by the city councils of that period.² In this way, the construction of the Brabofountain on the Great Market, in front of the town hall, was a deliberate political strategy to emphasize the municipal autonomy of Antwerp.

In historiography town hall squares seemed to symbolize united political communities. These “epicentral political spaces”, as Pim Kooij labelled them, were the very centre of the urban political, economic and cultural power.³ They were the symbolic and ritual heart of the urban community, while the town halls themselves represented not only local or civic patriotism, but also the interrelationships between local, national as well as global political and cultural interests.⁴ It was as if behind the facade of the main municipal building only single-minded urban governments and city administrations operated. However, this does not mean that all the Antwerp city councils used the same rhetoric. Due to specific political, economic, social and cultural circumstances, the political elite of the first decades after the Belgian independence of 1830 probably had other objectives than the late nineteenth-century municipal governments to appropriate the built environment of the Great Market. This article is going to discuss in which way the subsequent nineteenth-century Antwerp municipalities politicized the urban space of the town hall square and to what extent their political claims differed from each other.

Over the course of the nineteenth century the city of Antwerp developed from a regional textile city to one of the biggest ports in the world. This economic expansion went hand in hand with a substantial urban growth. The population growth reached its peak between 1846 and 1860 and exerted great pressure on housing inside the sixteenth-century Spanish walls, which ob-

² Maarten Van Ginderachter, An urban civilization. The case of municipal autonomy in Belgian history 1830-1914, in: William Whyte/Oliver Zimmer (eds.), *Nationalism and the reshaping of urban communities in Europe 1848-1914*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 110-130, here pp. 110-111; Luc Duerloo [u.a.], *Bestuur en politiek op een Schoon Verdiep*, in: Marnix Beyen [u.a.] (eds.), *Het stadhuis van Antwerpen. 450 jaar geschiedenis*, Antwerpen 2015, pp. 171-215, here p. 198; Jan Dirk Baetens, *Voor vorst en vaderland: Een nieuwe lezing van de muurschilderingen van Henri Leys in het Antwerpse stadhuis*, in: *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis* 90:2, 2012, pp. 513-539, here p. 537.

³ Pim Kooij, Urban elites and political space in the nineteenth and twentieth century, in: Stefan Couperus/Christianne Smit/Dirk Jan Wolffram (eds.), *In control of the city. Local elites and the dynamics of urban politics 1800-1960*, Löwen 2007, pp. 1-13, here p. 6.

⁴ Brecht Deseure [u.a.], *Brandpunt van de stedelijke gemeenschap. De Grote Markt en het stadhuis*, in: Beyen [u.a.], pp. 33-67, here p. 52; William Whyte, *Building the nation in the town. Architecture and identity in Britain*, in: Whyte/Zimmer, pp. 204-233, here pp. 207-208. See also Laura Kolbe, *Symbols of civic pride, national history or European tradition? City halls in Scandinavian capital cities*, in: *Urban history* 35:3, 2008, pp. 382-413 and several contributions in Swati Chattopadhyay/Jeremy White (Hrs.), *City halls and civic materialism. Towards a global history of urban public space*, London 2014.

structed any structural city extension. The situation became even worse when the Belgian government decided to ascribe a national military function to Antwerp. After long negotiations between Antwerp and the Belgian government, the decision was made in 1859 to replace the old walls by the polygonal fortification of Lieutenant General Henri Alexis Brialmont. Antwerp expanded from 242 hectares to 1650 hectares. From now on, the Antwerp port, industry and trade could fully develop. Between 1866 and 1900 the population doubled. At the turn of the century, Antwerp had around 300,000 citizens.⁵

The area of the Antwerp town hall square or Great Market – originally rural common land in the hands of the Margrave of Antwerp and later the Duke of Brabant – became part of the city in the thirteenth century.⁶ Probably in 1406 the city magistrate constructed the Aldermen's House, which already had become too small at the beginning of the sixteenth century.⁷ On 27 February 1561, the first foundation stone of a new freestanding town hall was laid.⁸ Throughout the centuries, the appearance, functions and symbolic meanings of the Great Market and town hall changed little. The town hall square was still the central place for political, economic, social and cultural activities in the nineteenth century.⁹

In the vicinity of the Great Market, two other important squares were situated: the Conscience Place, which was called the Jesuits Place before 1883, and

⁵ Catharina Lis, *De wederopbloei van Antwerpen als handelsmetropool*, in: Karel van Isacker / Raymond van Uytven (eds.), *Antwerpen. Twaalf eeuwen geschiedenis en cultuur*, Antwerpen 1986, pp. 234-249, here p. 234, 246-247; Hilde Greefs/Bruno Blondé/Peter Clark, *The growth of urban industrial regions. Belgian developments in comparative perspective*, in: Jon Stobart/Neil Raven, *Towns, regions and industries. Urban and industrial change in the Midlands, c. 1700-1840*, Manchester/New York 2005, pp. 210-227; Inge Bertels/Herman Van Goethem, *Vergankelijke stedelijke ruimte. De afbraak van de Spaanse omwalling in de negentiende eeuw*, in: Piet Lombaerde (ed.), *Antwerpen versterkt. De Spaanse omwalling vanaf haar bouw in 1542 tot haar afbraak in 1870*, Antwerpen 2009, pp. 118-142, here pp. 120-121; Inge Bertels/Tim Bisschops/Bruno Blondé, *Stadslandschap. Ontwikkelingen en verwikkelingen van een stedelijke ruimte*, in: Inge Bertels/Bert De Munck/Herman Van Goethem (eds.), *Antwerpen. Biografie van een stad*, Antwerpen 2010, pp. 11-66, here pp. 41-43.

⁶ Gustaaf Asaert, *Honderd huizen aan de Grote Markt van Antwerpen. Vijf eeuwen bewoningsgeschiedenis*, Zwolle 2005, p. 11.

⁷ Floris Prims, *Het stadhuis te Antwerpen. Geschiedenis en beschrijving*, Antwerpen 1930, p. 12; Jan Lampo, *Het stadhuis van Antwerpen*, Brussel 1993, pp. 11, 89.

⁸ For the building history of the sixteenth-century Antwerp town hall, see Petra Macloot/Ilse Van Ginneken, *De bouwbiografie van het Antwerpse stadhuis*, in: Beyen [u.a.], pp. 87-169.

⁹ Bart Tritsmans/Ilja Van Damme, *Agorafobie in een moderniserende metropool? Gebruik, betekenis en aanleg van stadspaleizen in negentiende-eeuws Antwerpen*, in: *De negentiende eeuw* 36:1, 2012, pp. 28-46.

the Green Place. The first was shaped in 1620 by the Saint Carolus Borromeus Church and the sodality of the Jesuit order and became a symbolic Catholic urban space. However, when the city bought the Jesuit buildings to house the city library and erected the statue of the Flemish nineteenth-century writer Hendrik Conscience, the square lost most of its religious significance.¹⁰ The second square was transformed under the French regime (1794-1815) and functioned as an example of how nineteenth-century Antwerp had to become a modern, monumental and cosmopolitical city. It was the meeting place for the local bourgeoisie to relax and to stroll between the many lime trees.¹¹

Nineteenth-century political history was strongly dominated by the culture wars- or *Kulturkampf*-tradition. According to Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, “the emergence of constitutional and democratic nation-states was accompanied by intense conflict between Catholics and anticlerical forces of the place of religion in a modern polity.”¹² Governments, either national or local, were regularly placed opposite each other, especially when it concerned liberal and Catholic ones. In Antwerp, the liberals dominated the city councils from 1848-1863 and 1872-1914. However, between 1831 and 1848 the Catholic mayor Gérard Le Grelle (1793-1871) governed the city of Antwerp. After 1863 the Catholics were in power again for almost ten years.

The shifts in Antwerp’s urban politics provide an excellent framework to examine how the town hall square transformed into a battleground and how differently and/or similarly city councils integrated this urban landscape in their governance activities and political campaigns. Besides, it is likely that not only between subsequent urban governments, but also within one city council opinions were divided on how to use and transform the material urban space of the town hall square – both when the city council was composed of members from different political orientations as when the members all belonged to the same political family. With the planting of the Tree of Liberty (1831), the replacement of the sculpture of Virgin Mary, patron saint of the city, in the town hall’s facade (1831) and the inauguration of the monumental Brabofountain (1887) the nineteenth-century city councils attempted, each in their own way, to consolidate their control over the Great Market.

¹⁰ Tritsmans/Van Damme, p. 39.

¹¹ Tritsmans/Van Damme, pp. 41-42; Piet Lombaerde, *De stedenbouwkundige werken van François Verly (1760-1822). Stadsarchitect van Antwerpen (1802-1814)*, in: Piet Lombaerde (ed.), *Antwerpen tijdens het Franse keizerrijk, 1804-1814. Marine-arsenaal, metropool en vestingstad*, Antwerpen 1989, pp. 101-127, here pp. 112-113.

¹² Christopher Clark/Wolfram Kaiser, Introduction. *The European culture wars*, in: Christopher Clark/Wolfram Kaiser (eds.), *Culture wars. Secular-catholic conflict in nineteenth-century Europe*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 1-10, here p. 1.

2. The Belgian Revolution, the Orangist Countermovement and the “Belgianisation” of the Town Hall Square in the 1830s

On 25 August 1830, the Belgian Revolution broke out in Brussels. After King William I had systematically ignored their increasing discontent with his economic, social and religious policy, the Southern provinces of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands rebelled in cause of secession. Two months later, at the beginning of October 1830, the Provisional Government declared the independence of Belgium.¹³ The revolutionary turmoil also reached other cities and regions of the Southern provinces. However, in some cities, like Ghent and Antwerp, the idea of an independent country was not widespread. The more affluent trading and commercial classes mainly supported the Orangist movement. Belgian Orangists pursued an economic and political union with the Northern Netherlands under the reign of King William I.¹⁴ Also in Antwerp, a city that had lost its important role as trading centre, Orangism was popular in commercial, shipping, insurance and transport sectors.¹⁵ Their representatives feared the end of the trade with the Netherlands and the Dutch colonies as well as the closure of the economically important river Scheldt.¹⁶ However, the Antwerp Orangists were not hoping for the reestablishment of the United Kingdom as such but supported an independent Belgium ruled by the House of Orange-Nassau and an economic cooperation between North and South.¹⁷

The Belgian patriots arrived in Antwerp on 24 October 1830. They entered the town hall and expelled all urban administrators who refused to declare themselves loyal to the Revolution.¹⁸ In December 1830, municipal elections took place in Antwerp. After the Orangist governor of Utrecht Florent van Ertborn refused his appointment as mayor, the Catholic and anti-Orangist Gérard Le Grelle became the first official Antwerp mayor of the independent Belgium. However, all elected aldermen were Orangists, while the city council was also

¹³ For a broader political context, see Els Witte [u.a.], *Nieuwe geschiedenis van België I, 1830-1905*, Tielt 2005, pp. 68-108.

¹⁴ Els Witte/Jan Craeybeckx/Alain Meynen, *Politieke geschiedenis van België. 1830 tot heden*, Antwerpen 2007, p. 33; Els Witte, *Politieke machtsstrijd in en om de voornaamste Belgische steden. 1830-1848*, Brüssel 1973, p. 74; Els Witte, *Het verloren koninkrijk. Het harde verzet van de Belgische orangisten tegen de revolutie 1828-1850*, Antwerpen 2014, p. 299.

¹⁵ Witte, *Het verloren koninkrijk*, p. 265.

¹⁶ Lampo, p. 25.

¹⁷ Lode Wils, *Het einde van het unionisme te Antwerpen*, in: *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis* 42:4, 1959, pp. 179-243, here pp. 180-181.

¹⁸ Lode Hancké, *De Antwerpse burgemeesters van 1831 tot 2000. Van Le Grelle tot Detiège*, Antwerpen 2000, pp. 18-19.

composed of various counter-revolutionaries.¹⁹ Le Grelle, who was a professional banker, owed his popularity to his engagement for the urban commercial interests. Besides, he could agree with an independent Belgium administrated by the Royal House of Orange.²⁰

During his first months as mayor, Le Grelle needed to hold his ground in the difficult political, economic and social circumstances of Antwerp, where Orangists and revolutionaries both used the chaotic situation to promote their ideas. Le Grelle reinforced his own political beliefs not only by administrative measures, but also by introducing physical symbols in the urban landscape. In this context he immediately realised the importance and possibilities of the Great Market.

On 17 April 1831, the inauguration festivities of the Tree of Liberty took place on the Great Market. The planting of Liberty Trees – a tradition originated in the American Revolution – had become popular in Europe during the French Revolution. It was one of the most effective and best-known symbols to indicate newly annexed territories.²¹ In Antwerp, the French organised different planting ceremonies, four of which took place on the Great Market in front of the town hall.²² After the French period, the use of Liberty Trees was continued. In the Prussian Rhineland, for example, it became part of the popular political culture. Between 1830 and 1834 liberty trees were planted by ordinary citizens. As they were excluded from formal political life, the Rhinelanders looked for alternative ways to influence political and decision-making processes.²³ In the young country of Belgium, revolutionaries used Liberty Trees to bolster independence, liberty and national identity.²⁴ The Liberty Trees of 1830 and 1831 were supposed to symbolize the irreversibility of the revolution and ensure citizens that the time of trouble was over.²⁵

¹⁹ Hancké, p. 21; Lampo, p. 25; Witte, *Het verloren koninkrijk*, p. 266.

²⁰ Hancké, pp. 22-25.

²¹ Brecht Deseure, *Boom van Vrijheid / Boom van Slavernij. De Antwerpse vrijheidsbomen tussen oud en nieuw*, in: *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire / Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis* 88:2, 2010, pp. 221-254, here p. 223.

²² For more information on the French Liberty Trees in Antwerp, see Deseure, *Boom van Vrijheid*, p. 221-253; Brecht Deseure, *Onhoudbaar verleden. Geschiedenis als politiek instrument tijdens de Franse periode in België*, Löwen 2014, pp. 189-194.

²³ James Brophy, *Popular culture and the public sphere in the Rhineland 1800-1850*, Cambridge 2008, p. 108.

²⁴ Gita Deneckere, *Het revolutionaire alternatief. De symboliek van feesten en vrijheidsbomen*, in: Henk de Smaele/Jo Tollebeek (eds.), *Politieke representatie*, Löwen 2002, pp. 277-293, here p. 287; Anke Janssens, *Cultuur en politiek in een moeilijke tijd: Het republikeinse feest te Antwerpen*, unpublished Master Thesis KU Leuven 2002, p. 73.

²⁵ Deneckere, pp. 287-288.

Like in the Rhineland, ordinary Antwerp citizens would have taken the initiative to plant a Tree of Liberty.²⁶ However, in April 1831 mayor Le Grelle interfered by assuming the organisational responsibilities.²⁷ The correspondence between Le Grelle and the liberal Antwerp provincial governor Jean-François Tielemans shows that both feared commotion during the festivities.²⁸ The urban and provincial government probably wanted to avoid violent upheavals. Le Grelle reassured Tielemans that the initiators of the Liberty Tree were peaceful and were only motivated by their commendable sense of patriotism. He highlighted the good intentions of his Belgian-minded citizens, while on the other hand he certainly had doubts about the intentions of the Orangistic opponents.²⁹ For the sake of good order and discipline, Le Grelle and Tielemans called upon police and military assistance. The governor even suggested announcing the planting ceremony only a few days in advance and in such a way that the presence of the local and provincial government, a part of the Antwerp garrison and possibly also the militia would be obvious. He concluded that “it would be especially important for the police to have some leaders in the crowd, in order to lead the movement to enjoy true freedom, that is, order and law.”³⁰



Fig. 1: Drawing of J. Beunis. It illustrates the planting ceremony of the Tree of Liberty on the Antwerp Great Market on 17 April 1831.

²⁶ Floris Prims, *Antwerpen in 1830. Nota's*, part 2, Antwerpen 1931, p. 156.

²⁷ Deseure [u.a.], *Brandpunt*, p. 55.

²⁸ Letters from the Antwerp mayor Le Grelle and the Antwerp provincial governor Tielemans, 1 April 1831 and 16 April 1831, City Archives Antwerp, MA#1078/2.

²⁹ Letter from mayor Le Grelle to provincial governor Tielemans, 16 April 1831, City Archives Antwerp, MA#1078/2.

³⁰ Letter from provincial governor Tielemans to mayor Le Grelle, 1 April 1831, City Archives Antwerp, MA#1078/2. Translation from the French by the Author.

In the end, in April 1831, the tree was planted and inaugurated at the same place where once the French Tree of Liberty had stood (Fig. 1). Remarkably, there were no negotiations and discussions about where to plant the Belgian specimen. The initiators and mayor Le Grelle probably did not blindly follow a tradition, but rather wanted to erase all traces of former foreign dominance. The myths of foreign oppression and continual struggle for freedom were central themes in the creation of a Belgian national identity.³¹ By officially supporting the patriotic initiative of local citizens, Le Grelle offered a clear political message to the Orangistic aldermen and councillors of his own city council. At the same time, he made a strong statement against the presence of the Dutch Lieutenant General David Chassé who occupied the Antwerp citadel to ensure the military presence of the Netherlands. Next to this, the festivities were an excellent opportunity to open the minds of all Antwerp citizens to the ideals of the Belgian independence. An initiative coming from ordinary citizens could only reinforce this message. The newspaper “Den Antwerpenaer” wrote, the Liberty Tree gave public evidence of the true spirit of freedom animating the city of Antwerp. It could convince the “small, even very small number” of Orangistic-minded citizens to reconsider their political beliefs.³² The Liberty Tree materially expressed the national sentiment and ideology in the Antwerp urban landscape. There could be no better place for it than the heart of the city centre. The Great Market and town hall were, after all, the first politically meaningful places conquered by Belgian revolutionaries.³³

3. The Catholicisation of the Town Hall Square

Mayor Le Grelle’s Belgian conviction was linked to his Catholic faith. He promoted the influence of religion and the Church on political and societal questions. This opinion was strongly opposed to the mainly Protestant Netherlands and the policy of King William I to, for example, organise education on national level.³⁴ Only a few months after the planting of the Liberty Tree, Le Grelle again claimed the Great Market to publicly express his Catholic political affiliation. On 13 August 1831, he replaced the statue of Saint Mary at the middle ressalt

³¹ Tom Verschaffel, *L’ennemi préféré. La France comme contre-image pour la Belgique à la recherche d’une identité nationale (1830-1914)*, in: Laura Fournier-Finocchiari/Tanja-Isabel Habicht (eds.), *Gallomanie et gallophobie. Le mythe français en Europe au XIX^e siècle*, Rennes 2012, pp. 73-82, here pp. 73-77.

³² *Den Antwerpenaer*, 19 April 1831.

³³ Hancké, pp. 18-19; Johan Op de Beeck, *Het verlies van België. De strijd tussen de Nederlandse koning en de Belgische revolutionairen in 1830*, Amsterdam 2015, p. 319.

³⁴ Hancké, pp. 25-26.

of the town hall's facade.³⁵ When Domien de Waghemakere finished the Renaissance building in 1565, he embellished the facade with a sculpture of Brabo. This legendary Gallic hero replaced the statue of Saint Mary, which had been guarding the former Aldermen's house. However, after the Catholic Spanish soldiers had conquered Antwerp in 1585, Brabo was removed and the Jesuits delivered a Virgin Mary to crown the town hall. Due to a new law prohibiting external signs of religion, the French Revolutionaries removed the religious sculpture again at the end of the eighteenth century.³⁶

Throughout the centuries, Antwerp had become known as the Catholic "city of Saint Mary" ("Mariastad").³⁷ Many private houses were decorated with little sculptures of Mother Mary and other saints that were mostly maintained by religious confraternities.³⁸ After a difficult period under the Austrian and French regimes, the tradition revived in the nineteenth century, especially after the fall of the French First Empire in 1814.³⁹ By placing the patron saint of Antwerp into the facade of the most central municipal building again, mayor Le Grelle not only visually and materially expressed the ideological foundations of the policy he would apply but also encouraged citizens to create a Catholic urban landscape. The placement of the new statue was in the first place based on the building history of the town hall. Otherwise, as the seat of the urban government, no other building was better suited to contain symbols of Le Grelle's political visions.

In August 1831, there was some controversy in the City Council on whether Le Grelle had acted legally, but in the end a motion to remove the statue again failed. The reason why there was hardly any protest against this political act of the mayor was probably the weak organisation of the Antwerp Orangists. Le Grelle did not have to continue very long with his well-considered and pronounced policy to transform Antwerp in a Belgian-minded and Catholic city. In

³⁵ Madonna- en heiligenbeelden in de Antwerpse binnenstad, Antwerpen 2010, p. 61.

³⁶ Floris Prims, *Het stadhuis te Antwerpen. Geschiedenis en beschrijving*, Antwerpen 1930, pp. 25-26, 32; Floris Prims, *De beelden en schilden van de stadhuisgevel te Antwerpen*, in: *Antwerpiensia* 19, 1949, pp. 29-32, here pp. 30-31.

³⁷ Ben Croon, *Toe-eigeningsstrategieën bij stedelijke en nationale identiteitsvorming in de kunst- en handelsmetropool Antwerpen. De negentiende-eeuwse Rubenscultus*, in: *Volkskunde* 104:1, 2003, pp. 19-83, here p. 68.

³⁸ Tom De Lepeleere, "In volle eendraechtighd der gebueren"? Een onderzoek naar de interactie tussen de broederschappen en het buurtleven in de Antwerpse Sint-Andriesparochie (1750-1820), in: *Trajecta* 22:2, 2013, pp. 285-318, here p. 285.

³⁹ For the historical development of the statues of Saint Mary, see August Thyssen, *Antwerpen vermaard door den eeredienst van Maria. Geschiedkundige aanmerkingen over de 500 Mariabeelden in de straten der stad*, Antwerpen 1922; Wim Strecker, *Antwerpen, een Mariaburg? Versteende mariale geschiedenis tot leven gewekt*, in: Eric Antonis [u.a.], *Madonna: Beelden van Maria in de Antwerpse binnenstad*, Antwerpen 2002, pp. 47-65.

contrast to Ghent, the Antwerp Orangists did not manage to expand their political power.⁴⁰ In February 1832 the Orangist aldermen and nine other Orangist councillors resigned. A month later, new municipal elections were held. Ten of the thirteen elected members were convinced Catholic patriots.⁴¹ When King William I in 1839 finally recognized Belgium as an independent state, the Orangist movement quickly fell apart. As their political ideals closely followed the programme of the liberals, the remaining Orangists joined them.⁴²

4. Mayor Léopold de Wael: A Homogeneous Liberal Town Hall Square?

In 1872 the Antwerp liberals recaptured the town hall after about ten years of Catholic rule. Under the reign of the new doctrinal liberal mayor Léopold de Wael (1823-1892), statues became truly popular in Antwerp. During his twenty years as political head of the city, no less than ten public sculptures were constructed. The opening speech of De Wael at his first city council meeting of 2 September 1872 clearly illustrated the political connotations and functions he assigned to them: “The first administrative act of the elected representatives of July 1st, the act that must inaugurate their presence at the Antwerp City Hall, is to decree that Antwerp receive, on a municipal site, the statue of Leopold I”.⁴³

Although Liberty Trees had lost their relevance since the 1840s, the Antwerp one adorned the Great Market until May 1882.⁴⁴ A month earlier, the city council had ordered the by now dead tree to be cut down.⁴⁵ A little part of the trunk was transferred to the Antwerp archaeological museum, while another part was used to design a commemorative piece of furniture for the town hall.⁴⁶ Even though the Antwerp citizens did no longer pay much attention to their Liberty Tree, its broader meaning was still a sensitive matter. In the period just after the independence of Belgium, the Catholics managed to expand their political power, which resulted in an absolute majority position at national

⁴⁰ Witte, *Politieke machtsstrijd*, pp. 117-120; Witte, *Het verloren koninkrijk*, p. 266.

⁴¹ J. B. van Mol, *Les élus d'Anvers depuis mil huit cent trente. Résumé des annales communales parlementaires et législatives*, Antwerpen 1889, pp. 36-37; Witte, *Politieke machtsstrijd*, pp. 148-149.

⁴² Witte/Craeybeckx/Meynen, *Politieke geschiedenis van België*, p. 24.

⁴³ *Stad Antwerpen*, *Gemeentebblad*, 1872, 2, p. 184. Translation from the French.

⁴⁴ Deneckere, p. 290.

⁴⁵ Letter from the city council to De Bosschere, 19 April 1882, City Archives Antwerp, MA #1362/1; André Meulemans, *Vrijheidsbomen in Antwerpen*, in: *Antwerpsche tydinghen* 15:4, 1994, p. 125.

⁴⁶ Letters between the College, the secretary of the archaeological museum Génard and the city architect Dens, 23 May 1882, City Archives Antwerp, MA #1362/1.

level as well as in some cities.⁴⁷ However, in the current situation, the tree had lost its symbolic meaning, and the Antwerp Catholic newspaper “Het Handelsblad van Antwerpen” lamented its disappearance: “In recent years, he [Tree of Liberty] seemed to want to live, but when the freedom of 1830 is itself dead, killed by the *geuzerij*⁴⁸, why then its symbol would still have to live!”⁴⁹ The liberal municipality, on the other hand, showed some respect, as it did not mercilessly did away with the tree but preserved some parts. Indeed, the symbolism of freedom played an important role in the doctrinal liberal programme of De Wael’s urban government.

The removal of the Antwerp Liberty Tree created a large open space in front of the town hall, which enabled the current city council to re-appropriate the urban space of the Great Market. Nevertheless, it was not until 1887 that a new material symbol adorned the square. Around May 1883, the Antwerp sculptor Jef Lambeaux finished a first version of a fountain representing the aforementioned Brabo. The theme of economic freedom in the legend of the Gallic hero was closely connected to the former Liberty Tree.⁵⁰

The municipal commission of Fine Arts was put in charge of identifying the most appropriate location. In March 1884, the Commission warmly recommended a place on the Great Market, in front of the town hall and near the river Scheldt and the old castle ‘t *Steen*. Although the city council approved the recommendation, the debate on the appropriate location of the Brabofountain was soon reopened.⁵¹ Subsequently, some other places were considered but in the end rejected. The Great Market was, next to his historic reminiscence, chosen for its vastness and the supposed symbiosis between the fountain, the town hall and the many guild houses surrounding the square. The refined modern but Flemish design of Brabo would not undermine the facade of the town hall; it rather would “from an aesthetic point of view [...], as it were, complete

⁴⁷ Witte, *Politieke machtsstrijd*, pp. 139-187, 255-289.

⁴⁸ The word “*Geuzenrij*” was derived from “*Geuzen*”. The Antwerp *Geuzen* governance, composed of Calvinist rebels, ruled the city between 1578 and 1585 and opposed the Catholic Spanish rule of King Filips II. In the nineteenth century, the term was used to refer to liberal politicians or to the liberal party as a whole.

⁴⁹ Het Handelsblad van Antwerpen, 5 May 1882. Translation from the Dutch.

⁵⁰ Hugo Lettens, *Over de ontstaansgeschiedenis van de Brabofontein te Antwerpen*, in: *Cahier van de Koninklijke Gidsenbond van Antwerpen* 1, 1994, p. 4; Tritsmans/Van Damme, p. 35; Deseure [u.a.], *Brandpunt*, pp. 56-57. For more information on the legend of Brabo, see Inge Schoups, *Brabo en de reus. Het ware verhaal in woord en beeld*, Zwolle 2002.

⁵¹ Stad Antwerpen, *Gemeentebled*, 1884, 1, p. 155; letter from city council to Commission of Fine Arts, 6 May 1884, City Archives Antwerp, MA #1301.

the Great Market.”⁵² The city council immediately voted in favour of the Commission’s proposal.⁵³



Fig. 2: The Brabofountain on the Antwerp Great Market, ca. 1890-1910.

More than a year later, mayor De Wael renounced the Great Market and launched the idea for the Ernest Van Dijck Quay alongside the Scheldt and next to ‘t Steen (Fig. 2).⁵⁴ The official reason behind his choice was the direct link that existed between the legend of Brabo and Antigoon, the river Scheldt and the castle. Besides, the Great Market was less spacious than the wide plain of the quays.⁵⁵ Perhaps, De Wael also wanted to justify, reward and embellish the economically important new quays with an impressive monument. The controversial straightening of the Scheldt was executed between 1877 and 1884. In order to ameliorate the port infrastructure, the oldest part of the city around the *Werf* and the *Burchtplein* had to be demolished and many citizens were expropriated of their houses.⁵⁶ The question of the best location for the fountain of Brabo caused a discord in the exclusively liberal College of Mayor and Aldermen.⁵⁷ In the end it was again forwarded to the municipal Commission of Fine

⁵² Stad Antwerpen, Gemeenteblad, 1884, 2, p. 32. Translation from the Dutch.

⁵³ Stad Antwerpen, Gemeenteblad, 1884, 2, pp. 31-33.

⁵⁴ Extract College, 7 September 1885, City Archives Antwerp, MA#1301.

⁵⁵ Letter from the College to the Commission of Fine Arts, 31 October 1885, City Archives Antwerp, MA#1301.

⁵⁶ Inge Bertels, Building the city 1819-1880, unpublished doctoral thesis KU Leuven 2008, p. 266; Lombaerde, Antwerpen als 19de-eeuwse metropool, p. 241.

⁵⁷ Extract College, 26 October 1885, City Archives Antwerp, MA #1301.

Arts and, after a temporary experiment with two facsimiles at both places, almost all members of the Commission still supported the original proposal.⁵⁸ On 21 June 1887, a narrow majority of the city council finally opted for the Great Market.⁵⁹ Although the fountain of Brabo was generally interpreted as an icon of the Antwerp liberal city council, the councillors did not show unanimous support for its construction at the political heart of the city.⁶⁰

The fountain not only divided the liberal political actors, it also reinforced the political struggle between liberals and Catholics. Lambeaux's representation of Brabo exhaled a liberal interpretation of the legend: Antwerp owed its origin and expansion to the enterprising merchants, while the triumph of Brabo referred to the recent "Freedom of the Scheldt" treaty of 1863, which ended the collection of duties on the river by the Dutch.⁶¹ The fountain also contained a reference to the sculpture of Brabo that decorated the facade of the town hall in the sixteenth century. The liberal administration of De Wael reintroduced this local symbol of free trade. After centuries of decay, the municipality restored and even transcended the prosperity of Antwerp's Golden Age.⁶² The Brabo-fountain thus symbolized and glorified its liberal ideologies while at the same time supported and reinforced its political power. Lastly, the design of the fountain – with a naked Brabo and sensual sea nymphs – offended the conservative and Catholic politicians.⁶³ The naked figure, though, also created resentment among the liberals themselves. Some of them therefore suggested alternative locations on the Great Market itself.⁶⁴ Eventually, the sculptural fountain arose in the middle of the Great Market with Brabo's naked back oriented towards the town hall.

Remarkably, the Antwerp citizens – more precisely local historians and novelists – kept silent about the sculptural Brabofountain. When the writer Guillaume Beetemé mentioned the installation of the statue, he was very sceptical:

⁵⁸ Report Commission of Fine Arts, 3 June 1887, City Archives Antwerp, MA #1301.

⁵⁹ Extract City Council, 21 June 1887, City Archives Antwerp, MA #1301; Stad Antwerpen, Gemeentebblad, 1887, 1, p. 531.

⁶⁰ Deseure [u.a.], Brandpunt, p. 57.

⁶¹ Lettens, p. 4; Deseure [u.a.], Brandpunt, p. 56.

⁶² On the importance of the river Scheldt for the nineteenth-century trading city Antwerp, see, for example, Brecht Deseure/Guido Marnef/Gerrit Verhoeven, Inleiding. Een pot vol mosselen. De Schelde en de stedelijke identiteit van Antwerpen (zestiende-twintigste eeuw), in: Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 123:4, 2010, pp. 480-485; Ilja Van Damme, Scaldis getekend. Percepties van het economisch welvaren van de stad Antwerpen of de genese van een handelsideologie (zestiende-negentiende eeuw), in: Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 123:4, 2010, pp. 486-503.

⁶³ Het Handelsblad van Antwerpen, 17 June 1887; Het Handelsblad van Antwerpen, 19 August 1887; De Koophandel, 23 August 1887.

⁶⁴ Report Commission of Fine Arts, (3 June 1887), in: City Archives Antwerp, (MA #1301).

“Whatever, it is a public monument, intended to address the crowd, the people of Antwerp. However, I very much doubt whether the people understand much of such monuments and whether they see more than naked women and men. We must always use language that is easily understood by the people!”⁶⁵

The indifference towards this prominent municipal symbol reflected the shifting perception of the Great Market. At the end of the nineteenth century this square had lost its function as popular gathering place for the ordinary citizens. Whereas a few decades ago the Great Market housed markets, processions, official receptions and the like, it now achieved a rigid, neat and cosmopolitan status.⁶⁶ The political claim of De Wael’s municipality thus had little impact on the Antwerp electorate or the Antwerp citizens in general.

5. Conclusion

The town hall square or Great Market was a century-old fixed value in the urban fabric of the city of Antwerp. Between the Middle Ages and today, the appearance and political function of this traditional place remained quite the same. However, the subsequent city councils of the nineteenth century each made a claim on the Great Market by using, reusing and producing urban and architectural structures, such as buildings, statues, sculptural fountains and trees. Sometimes these realisations were subtle, while at other times, they were more remarkable. When the liberal city council of De Wael, for example, inaugurated the monumental Brabofountain in 1887, it took over symbolically the most important political place of Antwerp. The construction of the fountain was a clear statement against its Catholic counterparts. Nevertheless, contemporary controversial discussions reveal that on the one hand almost half of the liberal councillors were not convinced of the Great Market as a suitable location for the liberal fountain, and on the other hand, some members of the Catholic side did recognise the artistic values of Lambeaux’s sculpture.

After 1830, both political parties introduced similar and adapted each other’s material symbols. They did present, however, their own interpretations that fitted their beliefs, interests and policies. The Catholics as well as the liberal Antwerp politicians identified with the Tree of Liberty. Mayor Le Grelle involved himself in the organisation of the planting ceremony and invested the Tree with a Catholic Belgian meaning. The Liberty Tree, together with the sta-

⁶⁵ Guillaume Beetemé, *Antwerpen. Moederstad van handel en kunst*, part III, Antwerp 1892-1893, p. 82. Translation from the Dutch by the author.

⁶⁶ Karen Vannieuwenhuyze/Gerrit Verhoeven/Marnix Beyen, *In de schaduw van de stad. Het stadhuis in romans, kronieken en reisverhalen*, in: Beyen [u.a.], pp. 249-273, here pp. 264-265.

tue of Mother Mary in the town hall's facade, created an urban landscape that expressed Le Grelle's opposition to his colleagues – the predominantly Orangist-minded College of Aldermen – and earned him a firm foundation for realising his Catholic political goals. In the 1880s, mayor De Wael and his city council recovered the symbolism of liberty, although no longer in the form of a tree but in the form of the Brabofountain. The Brabofountain thus was not an exclusively liberal symbol, as is repeatedly suggested in the literature.

The nineteenth-century material history of the town hall square of Antwerp demonstrates that, in contrast to the political history of Europe and Belgium, the political history of Antwerp was not purely determined by the liberal-Catholic antagonism. Also within the political parties and municipalities dominated by one party there was disagreement. In addition, both political groups built upon each other's urban and architectural realisations and thus sometimes recognised themselves in the symbols of their adversaries. At other times, they took advantage of internal conflicts between their opponents to put forward arguments that substantiated their views. The town hall square – in the case of Antwerp the Great Market and its sixteenth-century town hall – thus did not necessarily symbolise a common civic pride or unified political governance but could just as well conceal internal political division.

Abbildungsnachweis

Abb. 1: Het oude Antwerpen. Stadsbeeld en stadsleven, Antwerpen 1923, pl. 21.

Abb. 2: City Archives Antwerp (GP#6775).