

## Flemish belfries (Belgium)

No 943

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	Flemish belfries
<i>Location</i>	Flanders
<i>State Party</i>	Belgium
<i>Date</i>	1 July 1998

### Justification by State Party

Belfries are - along with market halls - noteworthy and primordial representatives of civic and public architecture. At this level of meaning, the shift from the form of the "seigneurial keep" to that of the "communal keep" is highly significant. Church belfries, in regions such as historic Brabant, also bear witness to the relations between the civil and religious powers within the community. In the variety that exists with all its "functional" range of forms, and the relative changes that these have undergone, the belfries - and the complexes of which they usually form part - therefore represent a vital aspect of civil architecture from the 13th century onwards.

#### Criterion ii

The Flemish belfries are part of a group of unique constructions reflecting the origin and the development of civic independence which marked the history of Flanders from the Middle Ages onwards. These belfries are a unique incarnation of the desire for emancipation which led to a degree of local democracy of great significance in the history of humankind. The evolution of the belfries is revealing in itself in that it is intimately linked to the ebb and flow of the history of a region that lies at the heart of Europe.

#### Criterion iv

[**Note** This text is an abbreviated version of the text appearing in the nomination dossier.]

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

### History and Description

#### History

The definition of the term "belfry" was somewhat vague at the outset. Referring originally to the mobile wooden towers used in siege warfare, the term is later applied by Viollet-le-Duc in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française* to the wooden watchtowers mounted on the palisades surrounding the *portus* or pre-urban centres. It was to be applied occasionally to towers of all sorts, but particularly to those housing bells or standing next to the bell-tower.

Palisades, bells, and the right to possess bells are all closely associated with the development of urban life which took place in these regions following the Viking raids of the 9th century. A favourable geographic situation at the heart of Europe, the re-establishment of major trade routes such as Bruges/Brugge-Cologne, and the improvement of navigable waterways at regional and national level made this region the ideal site for contact, trade, and the meeting of cultures. Travelling merchants re-appeared and perhaps began to organize and establish permanent warehouses near the *castra* of the feudal lords. These pre-urban groupings, which often grew up along river valleys, are the origin of towns like Tournai and Gent, along the Escaut. Locations where roads met navigable waterways were particularly propitious for the organization of markets, first temporary but later becoming permanent fairs, encouraging merchants to settle in one spot. In addition, the cloth-weaving industry seems to have developed from the 11th century onwards, in small centres such as Lille, Ypres (leper), Bruges (Brugge), Ghent (Gent), etc. Trade and cloth-weaving became key factors for the development of the pre-urban centre, which began to make its presence felt as an organized body through the influence of the professional bodies (guilds, corporations) and to mark out its physical bounds by building ramparts or palisades with belfries to provide safety against marauders. From the 12th century onwards, such ramparts were often rebuilt in stone and subsequently extended.

Such centres expanded under the protection provided - for a fee - by the *castra*, whose importance and role gradually diminished to such an extent that in some cases, such as Ghent and Antwerp (Antwerpen), the abandoned castles were taken over by the local burghers. This development illustrates the insoluble conflicts between *châtelain* and burghers keen to organize as a "commune" with their own administration. Again from the 12th century onwards, successive Counts of Flanders favoured the burghers which led to the flowering, from Arras to Bruges, of thriving towns demanding written proof of their rights and privileges in the form of charters. These charters, issued from the 12th century onwards, are extremely diverse and fragmentary, and extremely practical in nature, often in the form of a step by step approach setting a legal seal on gradually acquired rights.

The commune was in fact made up of all the burghers living in the city who had given their oath of allegiance. At their head were the elected magistrates, the aldermen or *scabini* responsible for carrying out administrative functions, and the *mayer*, who had no specific powers. The chief alderman held an important position, since he

presided over the court and council meetings, kept the seals of the town and the keys to its gates, and commanded the town militia which owed the *ban* (feudal service) to the overlord. As feudal lord, the commune had other obligations to the *seigneur*, such as the payment of aid in the four following cases: departure on crusade; knighting of the eldest son; dowry of the eldest daughter; ransom of the overlord if taken prisoner. In return, the *seigneur* swore to protect the commune and respect its rights.

Many of the belfries now in existence are successors to wooden constructions, often destroyed by fire and known only through archives, which give no descriptions. The multi-purpose belfry soon came to be built of stone to prevent the risk of future fires. Its imposing volume formed either an isolated feature or a central or lateral element of the market halls, themselves often rebuilt in stone at an early date.

#### *Description*

The early belfries of the 13th and early 14th centuries are strongly reminiscent of the seigneurial keep, from which they take their massive square form, elevations showing sparing use of openings, and rising storeys built on or designed for vaulting. The main shaft is topped by a wall-walk and parapet running between bartizans: the central spire features a slate campanile roof and variations on a number of forms. The finials of the corner and central turrets are decorated with animals or symbolic characters protecting the commune.

The 13th century belfry of Ieper is a fine example of this type, although it forms part of the market hall complex later to include the town hall, construction of which continued down to the 17th century. Most of the examples concerned cover the periods of the 14th-15th centuries and the 16th-17th centuries, thereby offering an illustration of the transition in style from Norman Gothic to later Gothic, which then mingles with Renaissance and Baroque forms.

The 14th century belfry in Gent represents a transitional style on a rectangular plan, already taller and slimmer in outline.

In the 14th-15th centuries, the belfries abandoned the model of the keep in favour of finer, taller towers such as those of Dendermonde, Lier, and Aalst. The subsequent addition to the top of the shaft of a narrower, different shape to serve as the base for the campanile would give the desired monumental effect, and the roof itself would take on more bulbous, sometimes extended lines, as in the case of Veurne (17th century). As already mentioned, these crowning features underwent repairs and even frequent transformation, the chronology of which differs markedly from that of the shaft itself, which remained a constant feature.

When the market halls and belfries grew too small to function as a meeting-place for the aldermen, a new type of building was required, the *Hôtel de Ville* or town hall, clearly designed in accordance with the administrative organization and, from the 15th and 16th centuries onwards, assuming an obvious representative role achieved by incorporating the symbolic belfry, as in the examples of Brussels and Oudenaarde.

The *Hôtel de Ville* in Antwerpen (1564) is an excellent example of the transposition of Renaissance principles in the central risalith with superposed diminishing registers flanked by obelisks and scrollwork and finished with a pediment, reiterating the theme of the central belfry.

The 20th century was faced with the problem of reconstruction after two World Wars. The rebuilding of the belfry and market hall of Ieper after the First World War provoked international controversy, finally resolved by an identical reconstruction based on the surveys which had preceded the restoration under way when war broke out. The same type of "archaeological" reconstruction was applied in Nieuwpoort. The period between the wars also saw the construction of new town halls featuring belfries, demonstrating variations on the theme of regionalism at Dijksmuide and Eeklo, or blended with modernist tendencies at Roeselare. All three possess an obvious symbolic value, with a slightly different emphasis according to location: the belfry at Roeselare was destined to celebrate the town's rebirth after the destruction of 1914-18, and a return to the tradition of the belfry abandoned in the 18th century. In Eeklo, which had hitherto possessed only a church belfry, the much-needed expansion of the *Hôtel de Ville* served as the starting point for the construction of a belfry destined also as a monument to the fallen. Post- World War II reconstruction led in Oostende to the re-siting of the badly damaged *Hôtel de Ville*, complete with belfry, in the outskirts of the town. On the former town-centre site was built a *Palais des Fêtes*, reiterating on one corner the theme of the belfry in a sober and highly stylized profile strongly reminiscent of the traditional image.

Existing belfries are very varied in type, but fall into one of two basic categories:

1. civic (market hall) belfries;
2. church belfries.

The belfries in the following twenty-four towns are proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List :

Aalst (Alost)  
Antwerpen (Anvers)  
Brugge (Bruges)  
Dendermonde (Termonde)  
Dijksmuide (Dixmude)  
Eeklo  
Gent (Gand)  
Herentals  
Ieper (Ypres)  
Kortrijk (Courtrai)  
Lier (Lierre)  
Leuven (Louvain)  
Lo-Reninge  
Mechelen (Malines)  
Menen (Menin)  
Nieuwpoort (Nieuport)  
Oudenaarde (Audenaarde)  
Roeselare (Rosiers)  
Sint-Truiden (Saint-Trond)  
Tielt  
Tienen (Tirlemont)  
Tongeren (Tongres)  
Veurne (Furnes)  
Zoutleeuw (Léau)

## Management and Protection

### *Legal status*

Market hall and church belfries form part of a complex or edifice which is listed as a historic monument in its entirety and, indeed, often forms part of a listed urban site, thereby reinforcing the role of the protection agency, the Monuments and Sites Division (*Division des Monuments et Sites*).

The legal protection orders all date from the initial period of application of the first preservation act (*Conservation des Monuments et Sites*) of 1931, which proves that the belfries met the required criteria in terms of their artistic, historic, and architectural value.

The protection orders apply to the entire edifices and complexes, except in the case of Menen where an additional order was made approximately a year later, covering the *Hôtel de Ville* adjoining the belfry. The protection orders apply equally to damaged market halls and belfries, some barely reconstructed as in Nieuwpoort or in the course of reconstruction as in Ieper, confirming the value placed on such operations.

Protection orders for the surrounding urban site, made possible by the decree of 3 March 1976, are still the exception and cover variable areas ranging from the market-square, as in the case of Mechelen (1985) or Dendermonde (1996), to the historic centre of Lo or to Veurne (1995). The site surrounding the belfry complex in Gent contains a concentration of monuments, each individually protected by successive orders.

Without mentioning each specifically, "movable" fittings which are in fact immovable are also included in the protection orders: in the case of the belfries, this means key distinguishing features such as the clock, bells and carillons, etc.

Protection orders are under consideration for Dijksmuide and Roeselare, part of the "modern heritage." These orders have been deferred until now because the overall inventory of architectural heritage, which forms the basis for all comparison and appraisal, had not yet begun in the region.

It is to be noted that the two public buildings, neither of which is under threat, lie within the perimeter of the area of habitat designated as of cultural, historic, and/aesthetic value (CHE zone), which already ensures them a measure of protection. They also stand in close proximity to one or more listed monuments.

For Roeselare, the inventory begun in November 1997 has already identified the importance and the impact of the "new *Hôtel de Ville* and belfry" on its immediate environment, the Grand'Place. The protection order is now based on reports and research by the team which intends to recommend protection of the urban site and of the town hall as a specific monument forming part of the Grand'Place ensemble.

In the case of Dijksmuide, a request for listing made by the town council has not been followed up, in part because the problem did not appear to be urgent since neither the belfry nor the town hall is under any threat. In the context of its nomination as part of the "Flemish

belfries phenomenon," this matter is clearly being given priority.

### *Management*

At the level of the Flemish community, the Monuments and Sites Division and *ad hoc* units are involved in the overall management of the sites, since the belfries and the complexes of which they form part are listed monuments. They are involved in matters of maintenance, in the drawing up of conservation/restoration plans, in the execution of work, and in examining the required annual reports.

The Monuments and Sites Division handles financing for maintenance and restoration work and is responsible for timely proposal of the sums which must be included in the annual budget of the ministry responsible.

At the local level, the town council, represented by its college of burgomaster and aldermen, is responsible for the management of the belfries. The town council then allocates responsibility for day-to-day management of the belfry to the appropriate department(s), depending on the use currently made of the belfry.

The departments most often concerned are the Culture Departments for the "functional" oversight and Technical Departments for the "physical" oversight of the building and its "day-to-day" maintenance. Naturally, in those towns which have their own monuments department, such as Antwerpen, Gent, and Mechelen, these departments are involved in management and work closely with *ad hoc* units of the Monuments and Sites Division on the preparation and follow-up of the various dossiers.

## Conservation and Authenticity

### *Conservation history*

The Flemish belfries are both civic buildings and symbols. As such, they have been the object of constant maintenance. Their construction often took place in several stages, but they have always been maintained in good overall order. Some, damaged by war, have been rebuilt, generally in identical form. All are listed as historic monuments, either in isolation or as part of an edifice, a square, or an urban site.

### *Authenticity*

In view of the number of buildings under consideration (24), it is not proposed to analyse the degree of material authenticity of each in this document. It might be argued that the authenticity of these monuments is not to be measured in these material terms, but rather by considering their symbolic value and the permanence of their existence. The oldest have been in existence since the 13th century, and construction has continued right down to modern times.

Most of these belfries were built in several stages which, in certain cases, reflect the economic fortunes of the town throughout its history. War, and World War I in particular, destroyed many which have since been rebuilt, generally in identical form, demonstrating their importance as a symbol of the permanence of the commune. The authenticity of the market hall and belfry

of Ieper can no more be contested than the authenticity of the city centre of Warsaw, entirely rebuilt after the last war.

### **Evaluation**

#### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Flanders in March 1999.

#### *Qualities*

There is no doubt of the distinctive nature of the Flemish belfries. Their location in the ancient County of Flanders is unique to this region. The borders of the ancient county spill over into parts of what are now the Netherlands, France, and the Walloon Province of Belgium. Belfries are to be found in each of these different regions, testifying that these are indeed a tradition specific to Flanders.

#### *Comparative analysis*

The belfries constitute an ensemble which has no equivalent. The most that can be done is to mention some of the elements they have inspired. In the past, contacts with the Hanseatic League were not merely commercial: the towns of Flanders inspired the building of belfries in Poland. The construction of the Tour Perret in Amiens just after World War II, or the tower of the *Hôtel de Ville* in Le Havre designed by the same architect, are directly inspired by the Flemish belfries, even though their role is not that of a bell-tower.

#### *Comments by ICOMOS*

Whilst ICOMOS has no reservations about the value of the Flemish belfries, it is conscious that they represent a phenomenon that was characteristic of the ancient County of Flanders and not merely the modern Belgian Provinces of Oost- and West-Vlaanderen. As pointed out above, fine examples are to be found in the Walloon Province of Belgium.

### **Brief description**

This nomination consists of a series of twenty-four belfries of medieval origin, generally attached to the town hall and occasionally to a church. They are invariably found in urban settings.

### **Recommendation**

This nomination was *referred back* to the State Party, which was requested to extend it to include important examples of belfries in the Walloon region of Belgium. At the time this evaluation was prepared for printing, no additional information had been received from the State Party.