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WHEN THE SAINTS WENT MARCHING IN: REPRESENTATIONS OF SAINTS IN THE MUNICIPAL HERALDRY OF THE LOW COUNTRIES

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Before the French Revolution, very few local authorities in the Low Countries bore a coat of arms featuring a depiction of a saint. Saints appeared quite frequently in the arms of monasteries and of trade guilds, but not in civic arms. In what was one of the proverbial exceptions that prove the rule, the arms of the city of Brussels featured St Michael slaying a devil.¹ This relative absence came abruptly to an end in 1816, when the restoration regime of the newly created kingdom of the Netherlands started confirming old arms and granting new ones to municipalities.² Since then, more than 430 municipalities in the present-day Netherlands or Belgium have obtained a coat of arms in which an entire saint appears either on the shield or as a supporter (**Figure 1a**). That number excludes subsequent confirmations. Most present-day heraldists would agree with the late Archbishop Bruno Bernhard Heim that including a saint in a coat of arms rarely produces an aesthetically pleasing result.³ The traditional way of representing saints through their attributes is much to be preferred. Yet that consideration should not keep us from trying to understand the phenomenon.

This paper touches on two of the guiding topics of the congress. It describes how the restoration of local heraldry under King William I introduced a cohort of saints as charges or as supporters in municipal arms. After the secession of Belgium in 1830, the High Council of the Nobility in The Hague and the Council of the Nobility in Brussels developed different approaches to the treatment of saints in local heraldry. In the process municipal heraldry in the Low Countries came to reflect the religious divisions that were brought about by the Reformation, a second guiding topic of the conference. Protestants and Catholics held radically different beliefs about the veneration of saints. What was considered idolatry by one, was a practice for seeking heavenly patronage for the other. Having a closer look at which communities petitioned a coat of arms featuring a saint, and what determined the selection of the saintly patron, will help to clarify the process. It will also allow us to make a list of the most popular saints featuring in the local heraldry of the Low Countries. Finally, and by way of conclusion, this paper will contemplate the factors that are leading to the gradual decline of the presence of saints in local heraldry over the last half century.

This contribution is based on the official records of the heraldic authorities who deal, or have dealt in the past, with municipal heraldry in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Kingdom of Belgium. With the Decree of 24 December 1814 number 32, the Sovereign Prince William – the future King William I – empowered the recently formed *Hoge Raad van Adel* or High Council of the Nobility to re-establish the heraldic bearings of local authorities. This could be done through the recognition of an historic coat of arms or the granting of a new one. The Royal Decree of 24 August 1815 number 72 extended the procedure to the recently annexed Belgian provinces. As far as the Netherlands are concerned, the High Council has continued to exercise that power to this day.⁴ A few

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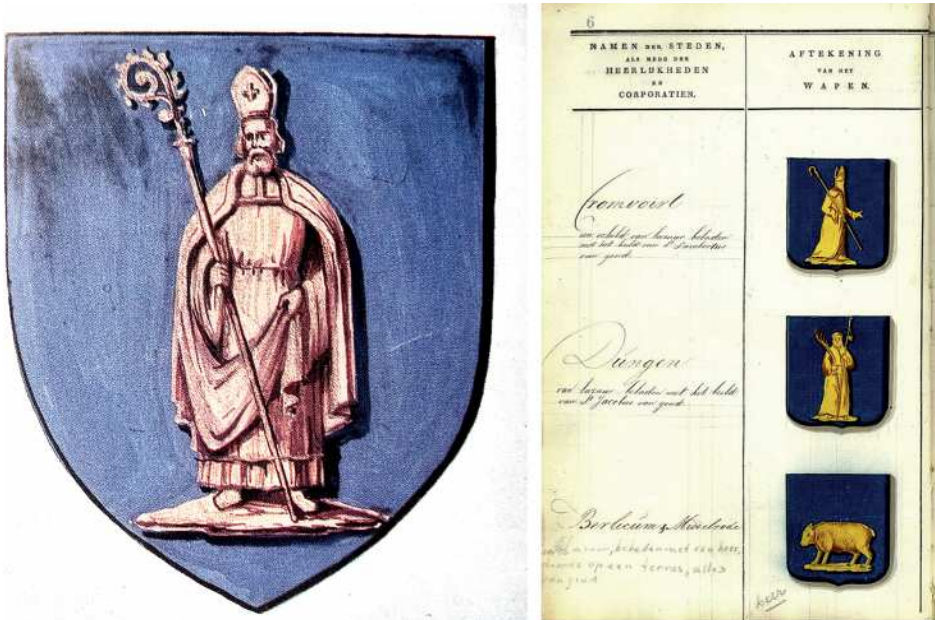


Figure 1: left, 1a: arms of Baarle-Hertog, originally granted in 1819, here shown as confirmed in 1910 (official register); right, 1b: page from the official registers of the High Council of the Nobility, province of North Brabant, 1818.

years ago, the registers that contain the official drawings and the blazon of the armorial bearings of local authorities situated in the present-day Netherlands were made available online (**Figure 1b**).⁵

After she had attained her independence, the Kingdom of Belgium annulled all Dutch grants of local arms with the Royal Decree of 6 February 1837. Municipalities wishing to continue using their arms now needed to have these confirmed. As of 1843, the *Conseil héraldique* or Council of the Nobility advised the competent minister on these matters. On 28 January 1977 the *Cultuurraad voor de Nederlandstalige Cultuurgemeenschap* or Cultural Assembly of the Dutch Speaking Community – a forerunner of the Flemish Parliament established in 1996 – approved a decree that brought municipal heraldry within the purview of the Flemish Community. It did so in the wake of a large-scale amalgamation of local councils, that reduced the total number of municipalities in Belgium from 2,359 to 596. Under the terms of the decree the 315 remaining Flemish municipalities were obliged to have an official coat of arms and flag. To ensure itself of expert advice, the Flemish administration soon created an advisory body, known since 1984 as the *Vlaamse Heraldische Raad* or Flemish Heraldic Council.⁶ The French Speaking Community approved a comparable decree on 5 July 1985. It provides a legal framework for the recognition or creation of municipal arms, flags and seals, without, however, making any of these obligatory. Established four years later, the *Conseil d'héraldique et de vexillologie de la Communauté française* or Heraldic and Vexillological Council of the French Community gives its expert opinion on the applications. The right to determine the arms of the nine municipalities in the German

Speaking Community has devolved on its government, while the heraldic status of the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region is currently in legal limbo.⁷ In 2002 all arms granted or confirmed to municipalities in Belgium or its predecessor states since Napoleon were gathered in dual publications of two volumes each. On the one hand, they deal with the municipal heraldry of Flanders and Brussels; on the other with Wallonia, Brussels and the German Speaking Community. Just as in the case of its Dutch online counterpart, here too the blazons and depictions are based on the official records.⁸

The kingdom of the Netherlands that emerged from the turmoil of the French Revolution combined the outward trappings of the Ancien Régime with many of the institutions created by the revolutionaries. Although ostensibly committed to the restoration of the old order, it did not revive the complex jurisdictions that had been swept aside. Instead, it left the highly centralized administrative structures created by the French largely intact. Only the names changed. The *départements* were henceforth called provinces. The *préfet* now became a governor. The names of provinces no longer referred to geographical features such as rivers but reverted to the names of the erstwhile duchies, counties and lordships that had constituted the former United Provinces, the Habsburg Netherlands and the Prince-Bishopric of Liège. The inhabitants of the *départements* *Bouches-de-l'Yssel*, *Escaut* and *Forêts*, now found themselves in the provinces of Overijssel, East-Flanders and Luxembourg respectively. On the local level the new kingdom maintained the municipalities that had in most cases been created along the boundaries of the parishes, albeit that the *maire* now became the burgomaster.

In an effort to endow these local governments with the trappings of days gone by, from 1814 onward the government encouraged them either to have their old arms confirmed, or to have new arms granted. The response to this appeal was mixed. By 1830, every municipality in Friesland had acquired its own coat of arms. North Brabant came second with 93%. In Zeeland, North Holland and South Holland the numbers ranged between 88% and 75%. Between half and a third of municipalities used their own arms in Utrecht, Gelderland, East Flanders and Antwerp. In the other parts of the kingdom the numbers were low to extremely low. Of more than 300 municipalities in Namur only three bothered to put their arms on record.

In sharp contrast with the virtual absence of saints in local heraldry until then, by 1830 one in seven municipal coats of arms featured a saint. Normally this was the only, or the principal charge. In a tenth of the cases, the saint acted as the supporter of the shield. In a great many instances, the design was based on an old seal that did not have a heraldic character and merely displayed the patron saint of the local parish standing free in the centre. With the colours obviously unknown, the standard procedure was to use the tinctures of the royal arms, which resulted in a golden saint on a field of azure. In the case of Anderlecht it would seem that an altarpiece in the parish church determined the composition, but here too the *Or and azure* solution won the day. It wasn't always clear which saint was actually being depicted. The information provided by the municipalities could be quite vague. Very much pressed for time, the arms selected by High Council of the Nobility in The Hague had at times to be imprecise. Unaware that it was dealing with St Valentine, it blazoned the arms of Poppel (province of Antwerp) in 1819 as *Azure, the figure of a saint or*. In Teteringen (province of North Brabant, 1817) St Willibord became "a bishop" and for Mater (province of East Flanders, 1818) St Amelberga was styled "the image of a woman".

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A pronounced geographical distribution can be discerned: three quarters of the municipal arms bearing a saint were to be found in four of the twenty provinces of the kingdom. In all other provinces they were rare or simply non-existent. In the province of Antwerp, half of all arms that were confirmed or granted displayed a saint. In the contiguous North and South Brabant it was about a third. In East Flanders it was only a sixth, but since many municipalities had become armigerous there, that still represented twenty instances. In the course of the Eighty Years' War, the eastern parts of North Brabant, Antwerp and East Flanders became frontier regions bitterly fought over between the United Provinces and the Habsburg Netherlands. From the 1590s onward, on the southern side of the frontline church and state pursued a vigorous policy to restore the religious monopoly of Roman Catholicism there. Their efforts bore fruit. Even though the parts of North Brabant were lost to the Dutch Republic in 1629, its population remained steadfast in its faith.⁹ Two centuries later, local heraldry came to reflect to what degree the Counter-Reformation had succeeded in those parts.

The initial drive to endow municipalities with a coat of arms had largely passed by the Catholic province of Limburg, where only one in ten local authorities had heeded the call. In what became Dutch Limburg in 1839, this state of affairs changed rapidly from the 1880s onwards. By 1895 almost half of the municipalities were entitled to bear arms. In the process, depictions of saints proliferated, sometimes with two or three gathered together on a single shield. In the three years between 1888 and 1890 alone, more than twenty grants featured at least one saint. In most cases he or she was combined with the arms of an erstwhile local authority or of a noble family that had exercised power over the area. While the adoption of saints did not abate after the turn of the century, it now became more usual to employ them as supporters.

Across the border with Belgium, changes introduced in 1913 in the regulations regarding the creation of municipal arms produced a similar effect. Here too, the local patron saint once more became a regular feature. Most often he or she took on the role of supporter. Whether or not based historical precedents, this was particularly the case where several municipalities shared the same shield for historical reasons, and some form of differentiation was therefore desirable.¹⁰ In an echo of that practice, the most recent grant featuring full figure saints was that to Puurs-Sint Amands (province of Antwerp) in 2019. The two supporters are the patron saints of the two localities that gave their name to the new municipality (**Figure 2**).¹¹

So, who were these saints? In all, 84 different saints feature, or have at some stage featured, in the local heraldry of the Low Countries. The majority only appears once or twice. Regardless of the number of times that they feature, they cover a broad spectrum. Apart from archangels, they are mainly drawn from Christ's immediate family, his apostles, the martyrs of early Christianity, and early popes, bishops, abbots and abbesses. As such, most of them lived between the first and the eighth centuries. A smaller group consists of saints who are venerated in a specific region. Either way, the saints chosen almost always reflect the times that saw the formation of parishes in the Low Countries, and thus predate heraldry.

It is worthwhile to have a closer look at the top ten. The tenth place is shared by St Nicholas of Myra, who is traditionally depicted as a bishop resurrecting three children who were being pickled by an evil butcher; and by St Gertrude of Nivelles – on whose abbess' staff three mice crawl up. St George occupies the ninth spot, prudently wearing

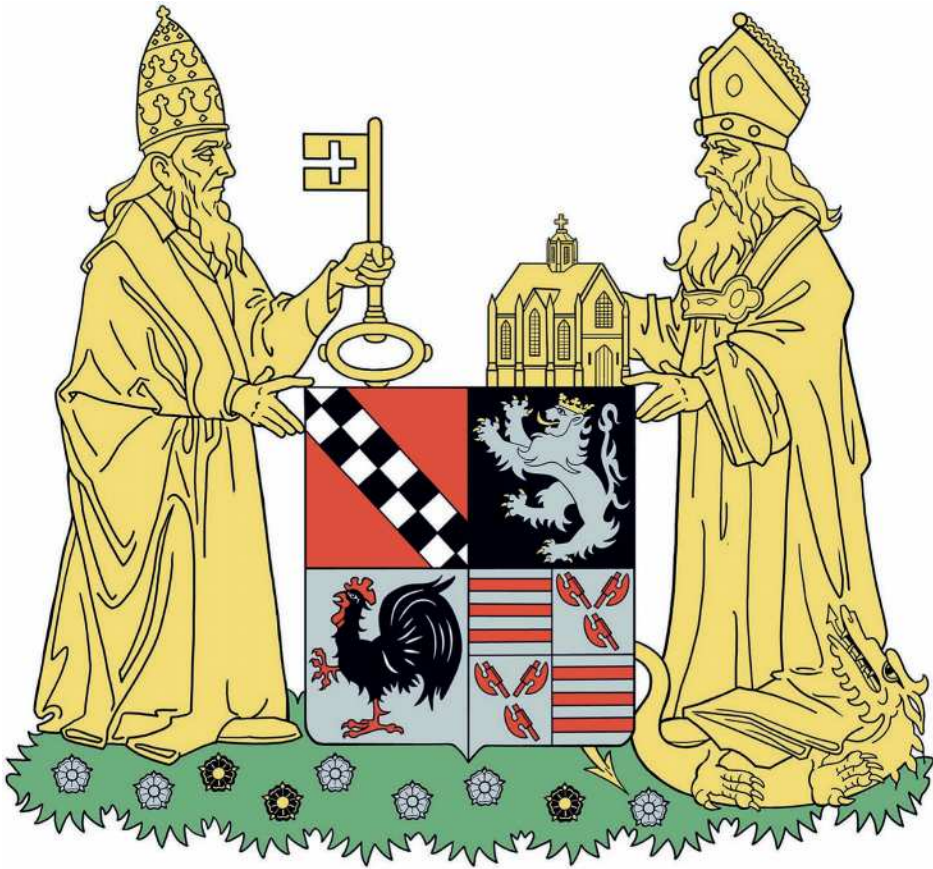


Figure 2: arms of Puurs-Sint Amands, granted in 2019 (official register).

full armour while valiantly fighting a dragon. Then comes St Willibrord, a Northumbrian missionary who preached to the Frisians and founded the see of Utrecht. Seventh and sixth place are for St Lawrence, holding the grill on which he was martyred, and St Michael, the winged archangel fighting the devil. Fifth is St John the Baptist, clad in a camel hair cloak, holding a cross and usually accompanied by a lamb. Depicted as a balding man holding a set of keys, St Peter is narrowly beaten for third place by St Lambert, whose murder in Liège resulted in the see of Maastricht being moved there. St Lambert together with his predecessor St Servatius and his successor St Hubert, appear in 46 municipal arms, a clear reminder of the importance of the medieval see of Liège. As the runner up, St Martin of Tours, generously shares part of his mantle with a beggar in 41 local coats of arms. The first place goes to the Virgin Mary, who, contrary to almost all others, appears in a variety of ways, depending on her invocation.

An unusual case concerns the arms of Tremelo. In 1970 that municipality was granted Father Damien as a supporter. On 1 October 1991 these arms were confirmed for the recently enlarged municipality of Tremelo. Father Damien –whose full name was– Jozef Damien De Veuster (1840–1889) – is by far Tremelo’s most famous son, and

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enjoys an international reputation as the missionary who went to live and die with the lepers of Molokai in Hawaii. In 2005 he was voted the Greatest Belgian, on the Flemish side of the competition at any rate. Strictly speaking, Father Damien was not a saint when these grants were made. He was only beatified in 1995 and canonized in 2009. Yet ever since the canonization process was opened in 1968, he was generally expected to be declared a saint sooner or later.

This paper took a cumulative approach to the way saints feature in the local heraldry of the Netherlands and Belgium. In that sense the number 430 is deceiving. Not all municipal coats of arms that have been granted or confirmed since 1816 have survived to this day. In fact, there are clear signs that the marked presence of saints has decreased over the last fifty years. The gradual decline of faith in western societies might be a factor, but it would seem that two other factors carry more weight. Today's local authorities are expected to perform a series of tasks and deliver a whole range of services that would have been unheard of two centuries ago. They can only do so by increasing in size, either through voluntary or forced amalgamation. As a result, the close link between the parish and the municipality has been broken. When designing arms for the new administrative unit, very few have chosen to retain one or more of the parishes' patron saints. The arms of Ravels, that bring together St Michael, St Servaas and St Valentine are exceptional in this regard. Lievegem's decision to evoke the common landscape is more representative of current trends. The other important factor is the heraldist: we prefer to replace saints with their attributes. When Simpelveld and Bocholtz were joined together in 1982, St Remy of Simpelveld and St James of Bocholtz were thanked for their services. Their place was taken by their attributes of a dove bearing a vessel with sacred oil, and an escallop. With this evolution in mind, it would seem that the saints are now marching out.

¹ Lieve Viaene-Awouters and Ernest Warlop, *Gemeentewapens in België: Vlaanderen en Brussel*, 2 vols (Brussels, 2002), vol. 2, pp. 454–457.

² Luc Duerloo, 'Belgian Local Heraldry under Dutch Rule', in: Jean-Claude Muller (ed.), *Actes du XXI^e Congrès International des Sciences Généalogique et Héraldique*, vol. I: *La ville et ses habitants: Aspects généalogiques, héraldiques & emblématiques* (Luxembourg, 1999), pp. 117–128.

³ Bruno Bernhard Heim, *Heraldry in the Catholic Church: It's Origins, Customs and Laws* (Gerrards Cross, 1978), p. 147.

⁴ *Gemeentewapens in Nederland* (The Hague, 1989), pp/ 11–20. See also: Willem Jan d'Ablaing van Giessenburg, *Nederlandsche gemeentewapens of wapenboek der gemeenten, heerlijkheden, waterschappen en corporation, welke sedert 1815 deel hebben uitgemaakt van, of behoord hebben tot het koninkrijk der Nederlanden, zoowel noordelijk als zuidelijk gedeelte* (The Hague, 1862), pp. 1–16.

⁵ <https://www.hogeraadvanadel.nl/heraldiek/databank-overheidsheraldiek>.

⁶ Viaene-Awouters and Warlop, *Gemeentewapens in België*, vol. I, pp. 23–48.

⁷ *Armoiries communales en Belgique: Communes wallonnes, bruxelloises et germanophones*, 2 vols (Brussels, 2002), pp. 11–53.

⁸ See notes 1 and 7. The arms of the current Flemish municipalities can be found on <https://www.sarovaanderen.be/wapenregister>.

⁹ Christine Kooi, *Reformation in the Low Countries, 1500–1620* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 143–161.

¹⁰ Andrée Scufflaire, 'Armoiries familiales et emblèmes locaux: La Maison de Ligne et Beloeil', in Jean-Claude Muller (ed.), *Actes du XXI^e Congrès International des Sciences Généalogique et Héraldique*, vol. I: *La ville et ses habitants: Aspects généalogiques, héraldiques & emblématiques* (Luxembourg, 1999), pp. 100–116.

¹¹ <https://www.sarovaanderen.be/puurs-sint-amands-0>.