

Brussels – Spiritual History (1)

Place Saint-Géry

The earliest historical roots of Brussels

*This article aims at giving a short history of the Place St Géry. Its goal is to provide **background information as fuel for prayer** and prayer walks around this square.*

Brussels is the capital of Flanders, Belgium and the European Union. As a city it has a rich history, but great spiritual poverty. It is a very **strategic city much in need of prayer**.

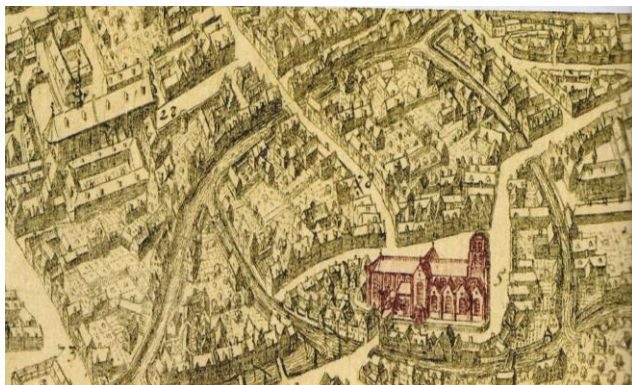
The **oldest centre of Brussels** is not the (famous) Grand Place, but the Place St Géry. According to some traditions, which are historically uncertain, Saint Géry (Saint Gaugericus, bishop of Cambrai, France) is supposed to have built a church on an island in the river Senne (now known as the Place St Géry) around 580 N.C. One legend relates how he is supposed to have killed a dragon here.



Saint Géry and the dragon

What is generally taken to be historical fact is that around the year 979, a fort (*castrum*) and a chapel for Saint Géry were built by Charles of France on the very same island; this date is regarded as the "official" historical beginning of Brussels. In 984 Saint Gudule's (652-712) relics were brought here (in 1047 they were taken to Saint Michael's Church, nowadays the Cathedral). Due to the regular flooding of the lower part of the city, the town centre

was removed to the current day Grand Place, while the



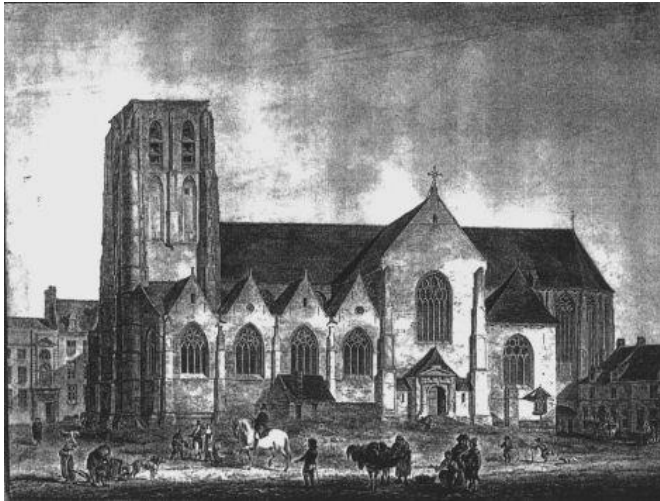
Island of St Géry (with church) 1640



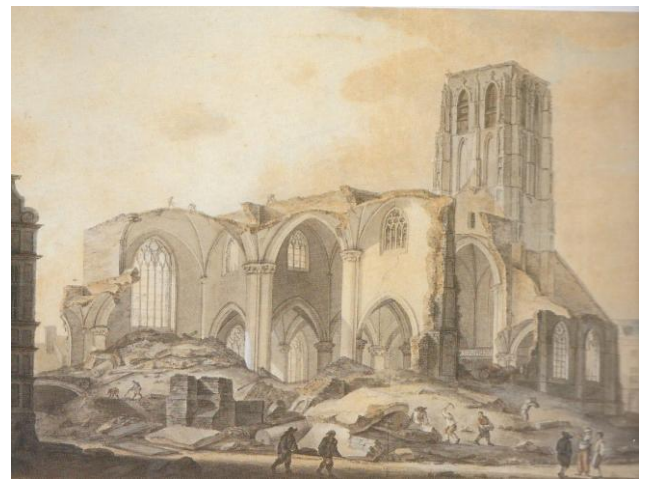
The island with first chapel 12th century

dukes built their stately homes and castles on the higher areas (Coudenberg, today's Place Royale).

From 1520-1564 a new church was built on this island which was destroyed in 1798-1801 (French revolution).



Church of Saint Géry before 1800



The church partly demolished in 1799



Place St Géry around 1820 after the church of St Géry was demolished



Flooding of Place St Géry in 1820

Then it became a square with an ancient fountain in the middle of it (the present day pyramid shaped fountain, dating from 1767, came from Grimbergen Abbey).

Between 1867 and 1871 the Senne was completely overarched, on account of the regular flooding and pollution (which led to a cholera-epidemic in 1865 with resulting 3500 deaths). This urban renewal by mayor Jules Anspach demolished whole neighbourhoods to make

way for wide boulevards and mansions for the better-off bourgeoisie (along the lines of the Parisian model) and destroyed a great part of the historic city's soul. The river too is no more to be seen.

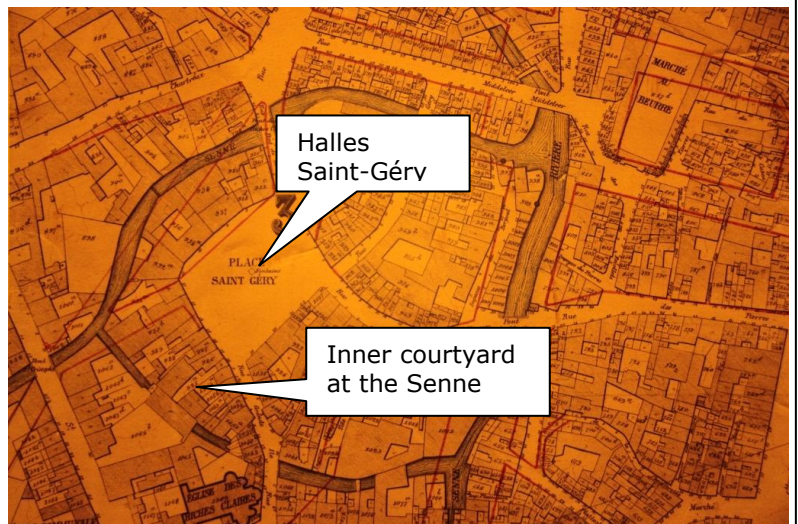
The present-day building (1881) served as a market hall; today it is a cafeteria, exhibition area and information point of the Brussels Region.



Old photo of the Halles St Géry



The Halles St Géry today



Old map of the city, ± 1870, where you can still see the Senne and the old streets + the new street map (red lines)

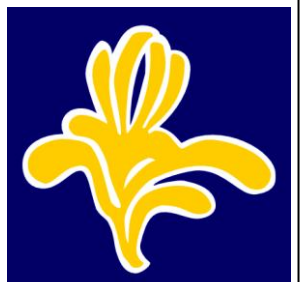


Inside: present day cafeteria, exhibition area, Brussels Region information centre



The cellars, now an exhibition area

P.S. The name "**Brussels**" originally comes from "Broekzele" (*Latin "Bruocsella"*) meaning a hamlet or township ("zele") in wetlands or marshy ground ("broek": **marsh**, swampy area). The precise historical beginning of the city is shrouded in mist: people lived there already in the Neolithic age, and remains of Roman villas have been found in Uccle and Anderlecht. Probably a hamlet grew up later around a bridge over the Senne, at the part where it was navigable, at a crossroads on the merchant route from Bruges to Cologne. The symbol for Brussels is **the iris**. These flowers grew in abundance on the islands in the Senne in earlier times.



Spiritual observations:

On this spot lies the oldest historical heart of the city of Brussels, **its roots, foundations**.

A **river** usually lies at the origin of a city: it brings life (water and fish), fruitfulness, welfare (textile industry, mills ...)

Psalm 46: 5: **A river – whose streams make glad the city of our God...**

PRAY FOR:

Further and ongoing cleansing and sanctification of these spiritual **roots**: that these roots might be planted beside the living water (Psalm 1). Continue to bless these roots with pure water and good food, so that they flow through the whole tree, the whole city. Let us bless this source and purify it (as in the bitter waters of Mara, in Exodus 15:23-25) and connect it to the true Source.

Proverbs 8:22-9:4 - God's Wisdom was there already before the foundation of the earth, "when there were no fountains laden with water" (AMP), also in this place, at the origin of Brussels. Let us pray **God's destiny** for Brussels into reality, His plan and goal for this city, the image and **identity** that He has deposited in this people, and ask Him what life-giving words He wants to speak through us into the roots of Brussels.

Saint Géry (555-625) was an apostolic figure, a man who radiated joy, performed signs and wonders, fought against heathendom and destroyed statues of idols, and set slaves and prisoners free. The positive spiritual heritage that he laid down here is one of the old spiritual wells that we can dig up again (just as Isaac dug open the wells of Abraham again, in Genesis 26:15-22).

This ground was marshy and unstable. Spiritually speaking this could mean that God's Word has sunk away in this region down through the ages (a **spiritual marshland?**). Let us pray for the river bed to be purified, for spiritual drainage, so that the marshland dries up and becomes fruitful soil. There is **only one Rock** that is not swept away through the storms and that can be the spiritual foundation able to carry the weight of a world city (Matt. 7:24-27)!

Right beside the Place St Géry is an inner courtyard (go in under the gateway called "Le Lion St-Géry"), where the only part of the original waterway of **the Senne** can still be seen.

