

Summary

The Old Abbey of Drongen Eleven centuries of history

Johan Decavele
Jan De Maeyer
Patricia Quaghebeur
Paul Trio

Few religious sites in Flanders can look back on a history as long, unique and complex as that of the Old Abbey of Drongen. On the occasion of the abbey's designation as a protected monument in 1998 the idea was conceived of carrying out a study of its eleven-century history. This book is the first to give a complete picture of that history. That this was not done earlier may be attributed to the rather fragmentary and sparse nature of the source material on the abbey's Norbertine period. The abbey's archives were decimated during the religious wars of the second half of the sixteenth century; what could then be saved and built up again suffered severe blows once more during the revolutionary reign of terror at the end of the Ancien Régime. Fortunately the *Abdikroniek* (the abbey's chronicle), largely attributed to Prior Norbert Lammens († 1641), survived which, by using since lost documents, provides a wealth of data that cannot be found anywhere else. The fact that the Norbertine Abbey of Drongen had a rather limited regional importance in the Premonstratensian Order as a whole, and that the older and more powerful Benedictine abbeys of St. Bavo and St. Peter were situated nearby in Ghent also contributed to the neglect of its history. For the contemporary period, to the contrary, there is ample archival material available, but this requires a keen knowledge of the Jesuits and their specificity, something which seems to have frightened off historians in the past.

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach: it examines the history of the founding of the abbey, its management and institutional aspects, its socio-economic or material dimension, its religious and intellectual life, as well as the history of the site's architecture and art. The book develops new insights into the history of the abbey's founding and of its institutional development. It also includes for the first time in-depth contributions on the history of the building and on the abbey's books, as well as an examination of the abbey's territorial possessions and material support. The whole story of Drongen as a site for a factory, a Jesuit residence and a retreat centre is almost completely new. Because all the different parts of the story are put in context, the reader is given an insight into the social and cultural aspects of eleven centuries of the history of religion in Flanders. But this is certainly not the last word on the history of the Old Abbey of Drongen; it is rather the only book currently available on what is a rather singular history.

The religious community in the middle ages, ca. 915 - ca. 1580

The history of the site begins to emerge in the tenth century. Earlier traces, such as its foundation in 606 by a King Basinus or by the well-known missionary Amandus (ca. 594-684), seem to be just legends that grew up out of a desire to push back the date of the abbey's foundation. In this way the later Norbertine community of Drongen tried to position itself over against the already mentioned influential abbeys of St. Peter

(*Blandinium*) and St. Bavo in Ghent. The same is possibly true of a passage in the abbey's chronicle recounting the destruction of the chapter or abbey by the Vikings. That a community of secular canons was established there from 915 is all but certain; in that year Baudouin II of Flanders (863-918) translated the relics of St. Gerolf from Merendree to Drongen in order to give an extra boost to the ducal foundation. According to the *passio*, Gerolf, the son of a noble family from Merendree, was murdered at a young age, sometime about the middle of the eighth century. When his desire to donate his inheritance to the Abbey of Drongen and to be buried there was not granted, numerous miraculous cures followed.

The next phase began with the changeover from a chapter of secular canons, when the Norbertine canons, who had been established near Zalegem near Vrasene, moved to Drongen in 1136. The proximity of a big city like Ghent, which was easily accessible along the Leie River, undoubtedly motivated the move. The exact date is known thanks to a ducal and an episcopal charter, each dating from 1138. Papal ratification of the events followed in 1141. Iwein of Aalst (†1145) and his immediate family played a vital role both in the foundation at Zalegem as well as in the reorganisation of Drongen. The prayers, masses and other good works of the order of regular priests were to guarantee the salvation of Iwein's family, but the foundation was also intended to boost the family's social status. The choice of the Norbertines was fitting for the times, when religious who chose a disciplined and ascetic community life commanded more respect. One of the oldest Norbertine foundations, St. Martin of Laon, functioned as the mother-house and its custody would continue throughout the whole of the medieval period, even though Laon's control over Drongen was not always very strict. As was typical for the followers of St. Norbert, abbeys for women were established alongside the men's foundation. So, in the beginning Drongen had custody over a community of Norbertine sisters at Petegem-aan-de-Leie (near Deinze), which however disappears from the sources at the end of the twelfth century, and over a convent of Norbertine Sisters at Serskamp, which succeeded in becoming independent in the middle of the thirteenth century.

As in all Premonstratensian abbeys, the emphasis in Drongen was on the liturgy and on the sung Divine Office, reading and studying, caring for the poor and on parish ministry, even though the evidence for this is very meagre. Towards the end of the thirteenth century Drongen had in its keeping thirteen parish churches with the accompanying incomes, as well as the prerogative to appoint the parish priest. These churches included those of Zalegem (1136), Drongen (1136), Landegem (1136), Vosselare (1136), Petegem (1136), Nevele (1146), Hansbeke (1146), Serskamp (at the latest 1147), Astene (at the latest 1147), Verrebroek (ca. 1147), Hulsterloo (1156, but never a fully-fledged parish), Hengstdijk (1161), Pauluspolder (at the latest 1295) and Zonnegem (1173). In this the abbey was in line with its sister abbeys like Veurne and Ninove, but could not even come close to the order's big Brabant abbeys or the neighbouring Benedictine abbeys of St. Peter and St. Bavo in Ghent, which had about twice as many churches in their care. About half of the abbey's parishes were administered by extra-conventual canons, who actually lived outside the abbey in the parishes where they celebrated the sacraments.

As a way of increasing its income, the Abbey of Drongen encouraged devotion to the saints in the parish churches in its care. Although details about the abbey's specific activities in this regard in Hulsterloo cannot be ascertained any more, it is well

established that the chapel near Hulst in Zeeland grew to become a Marian pilgrimage site of regional importance. The abbey's attempts through hagiography and other means to encourage devotion to the saints in the church of Drongen itself seem to have been less successful. Popular devotion to Basinus and his daughter Aldegonde remained limited throughout the medieval period, while Gerolf's success extended only to the surrounding parishes.

What is certain is that until its dissolution in 1797 the Premonstratensian foundation at Drongen relied principally on the goods and tithes donated by the family of the founder, Iwein of Aalst. Consequently, the abbey's possessions were concentrated in regions governed by its greatest benefactor: the Land of Waas, the Land of Aalst and the region around Drongen. After Iwein's death hardly any land was donated to the abbey. The Canons of Drongen did make efforts in the thirteenth century to acquire additional property with their own means - for example, by selling and exchanging outlying lands that were difficult to manage - in order to consolidate and strengthen the dispersed holdings of the three existing centres. The property acquired consisted principally of large and small abbey farms or out-farms where waste ground, marshes and moors were reclaimed and lands were cultivated and managed. By the beginning of the fourteenth century the abbey's demesnes were fixed. Besides property, the returns from tithes, altars/parish churches and manorial privileges also provided important sources of income. Nevertheless, the few remaining accounts that have been preserved would indicate that there was rarely any surplus income.

The abbey's limited financial scope is most evident in its inability to maintain a large number of canons. With 21 canons in the sixteenth century - precise figures are known for this period - Drongen was a rather medium-sized abbey in the Flemish conventual landscape, at a time when large Norbertine abbeys like Tongerlo had twice as many canons. With the growth of the abbey, the abbots of Drongen acquired greater standing in Flanders and began to play a more important role in society. So they acted as intermediaries in conflicts such as, for example, those between the proud and indomitable city of Ghent and the Dukes of Burgundy. The increasing prestige enjoyed by the Abbot of Drongen was crowned in 1540 when the Pope bestowed on him the right to wear a mitre.

In the cultural sphere also, Drongen remained in the shadow of the Brabant Norbertine abbeys. The abbey never supplied any great writers or thinkers in the medieval period. Aside from a few rare indications of histories of the abbey, all that can be noted are accounts of the lives and miracles of the abbey's own saints, Gerolf and Basinus. The course of studies followed by most Drongen canons was indeed too narrow to foster high culture in the abbey. There is, however, ample evidence that ever since the medieval period the abbey and the parish church were well supplied with devotional objects, sculpted and painted altars, artistic reliquaries, precious liturgical vestments and magnificent memorial stones. The large-scale building activities of the first half of the sixteenth century also indicate that the abbey was doing well financially at that time.

The troubles of the Reformation and the Catholic Revival 1566-1797

The events of the 'Year of Wonders' in 1566 brought an abrupt end to the life of the canons within the walls of Drongen Abbey. Not only was their status and spirituality

brought into question, but they also met with stubborn opposition from a powerful religious movement that put itself forward as the true heir of authentic early Christianity. Moreover, the abbey was an easy target for the Calvinists as the abbots behaved often more as large landowners than as pious shepherds of souls. The iconoclastic movement was unusually fierce here. A large part of the abbey's patrimony - the statues, stained-glass windows, reliquaries and devotional objects as well as the library and the archives with the precious illuminated manuscripts - fell prey to the destruction. The Ghent iconoclasts were readily supported by the local population, not so much for religious reasons but because people hoped for an end to what they saw as the unbearable rule and power of the abbey.

If, after the restoration, '1566' seemed in the eyes of many an *accident de parcours* caused by a number of breakaways, then the real moment of truth came twelve years later. The movement now emanated from official bodies. Following a revolt, the revolutionary town council of Ghent came to power at the end of 1577 with the silent approval of William of Orange (1533-1584). Initially a number of Norbertine abbots were somewhat inclined to join Orange's Dutch Revolt against the Spanish King Philip II (1527-1598), hoping thereby to be able to ward off the threat of their abbeys being swallowed up in the newly established bishoprics. However, the new rulers in Ghent very quickly revealed the radical political and religious direction in which they wished to take the town and general surroundings (ultimately the whole of Flanders): that of a Calvinistic republic in which there wouldn't be any place anymore for Catholicism, let alone for the continuation of monastic life in any shape or form. Drongen also was occupied by the Calvinists. The colourful and flamboyant Nicasius Van der Schuere moved into the abbot's quarters and a Protestant community was housed in the abbey's Gothic church.

With the dissolution of the abbey, the expulsion of the canons and the systematic destruction of the abbey's buildings in 1578-1579, it seemed that after five and a half centuries Drongen had definitely reached its end. That would indeed have been the case if the boundary that existed between the Republic of the United Provinces and the Spanish Netherlands at the end of the sixteenth century had been 50 km further to the south. In the end, things turned out otherwise. After Alexander Farnese, Duke of Parma (1545-1592), had once more brought Ghent under the rule of the King of Spain in 1584 (and Antwerp in 1585), the former Catholic structures were fully restored. However, the canons of Drongen were hardly in a position to take advantage of this, not only because their abbey was in ruins (Averbode had also been flattened but nevertheless arose very quickly from its ashes), but even more because dissension continued to smoulder in their stricken community, preventing it from finding a new lease of life. For more than a century the canons lived quietly in their refuge within the town walls of Ghent.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century it seemed as if the abbey's former splendour would be restored. On Sunday, 7 September 1698 the thirty-one canons marched in procession to their reconstructed abbey in Drongen, the last abbey in the Southern Netherlands to be restored after the Revolt. Just one month later the first new novices entered, confirming the trend towards rejuvenation that had already set in about 1650. In its new form Drongen could for a century profit undisturbed from the lustre of the Counter-Reformation and from the almost unquestioned position of the ecclesiastical institutions. Through their parish work, the extra-conventual canons

(who numbered 15 in 1735) contributed greatly to the promulgation of the decisions of the Council of Trent. The office of parish priest was highly regarded in a canon's career and was granted only at the average age of 37 years. An extra-conventual canon was promoted to abbot on many occasions. Their standard of living was usually higher than that of secular parish priests, even though the Norbertines also served in poorer rural parishes.

The successive abbots in the eighteenth century reorganised the abbey's finances and continued the reconstruction of the abbey. The abbey's church was continually embellished with priceless altars, statues and church silver, while the returned relics were reinstated. A non-stop stream of pilgrims came to the parish church to visit the miraculous statue of Our Lady of Hulsterloo. But as is evident from the abbey's remaining books, intellectual life in the abbey was at a low level, at least in comparison with the other large Norbertine abbeys of the Southern Netherlands. The devastating iconoclasm ("*Beeldenstorm*") of the sixteenth century and the huge efforts that had to be made in the seventeenth century to rebuild the abbey in Drongen may explain the shortage of resources necessary for a richer cultural and intellectual life. However, there must have been a more pronounced cultural and intellectual life at the time than we can ascertain today.

Secularised: from proud abbey to drab factory building 1796-1837

The last decades of the eighteenth century signalled a radical break with the Ancien Régime. The ideas of the Enlightenment--notably the belief in reason and in progress, and the civilising mission assigned to governments--encouraged enlightened monarchs like Joseph II (1741-1790) to curtail the privileges of the church and religious institutes. The primacy of the religious authority over the civil was questioned, and in future it was the state that would take the lead. In line with the belief in progress, the so-called 'useless' cloisters were abolished as early as 1783, although Drongen was spared for the time being.

The French revolutionaries got rid of religious institutes in the Southern Netherlands also, first in 1792 and again after 1794. Abbeys and convents were dissolved, their members expelled, their possessions inventoried, the buildings and lands confiscated and sold. Drongen met the same fate. In accordance with the law of 1 September 1796 (15 Fructidor, year IV) the thirty-six canons were simply driven out of their abbey on 1 January 1797. This brought a definite end to Norbertine monastic life at Drongen. But, as elsewhere, the Norbertines had been able to prepare for the arrival of the Republic's civil commissars. In 1792 they had been able to put some of their possessions (precious objects, liturgical silver plate and priceless liturgical vestments) into safe keeping, thanks to the network of parishes and tenant farms they controlled. Petrus de Hert (1771-1851), the later Dean of Aalst, and Adriaan de Coninck (1734-1810), the last abbot and from 1802 parish priest of Zomergem, along with various other people were able to save a number of objects from the abbey's patrimony. It should be noted that the Republic concentrated above all on taking over property titles to buildings and lands. The story of the visit of the civil commissars to Drongen gives a realistic view of how the confiscations and public sales were carried out. That history also illustrates how varied a revolutionary regime could be, depending on the character and/or attitude of the individual civil commissar or department prefect.

In any case the Abbey of Drongen was dissolved, its possessions confiscated and the demesnes sold off in lots. The abbey church was demolished. Between 1797 and 1822 the buildings and surrounding lands were in the hands of the ambitious Ghent businessman, Lieven Bauwens (1769-1822), who set up a cotton spinning mill in the abbey. Following an initially successful period, a long drawn-out struggle to keep the business financially afloat lasted from 1811 until 1822, and involved all sorts of machinations. This episode is painfully representative of the ups and downs of the successful but risk-taking businessman, his family and employees during the first period of industrialisation in Flanders. At that time, there was as yet no talk of social legislation and protection, and employees were the playthings and thus the dupes of new developments. After his death in 1822, the factory of the unfortunate Lieven Bauwens went to his brother-in-law, Frans De Vos (1767-1834). He in turn rented out the east wing of the old abbey to Jacob Verplancke who established a madder factory there (for the manufacture of red paint).

A Jesuit house from 1837

In 1837 the Old Abbey of Drongen entered a new phase of its history, this time as a Jesuit residence. The year before some members of the Society of Jesus had bought the wing of the former abbey along the Leie in order to house their expanding novitiate. Following the closure of the madder factory in 1850, they also acquired the remaining parts of the site. The revival of the Jesuit order in the nineteenth century was possible in the context of the freedoms of thought, association and religion guaranteed by the constitution of the new Belgian state of 1830-1831. However, the increase in the number of novices was also linked to the cultural climate of Romanticism and the dynamism of the religious revival. A characteristic of the revival was that ideally the faith was to be manifested both in private as well as in public life, marking the end of the catacomb mentality of the revolutionary period. Faith had to be also actually practised and to be made visible in action. The choice of a religious way of life was therefore prized by Catholic opinion, and the flourishing of an order oriented towards ministry, like that of the Jesuits, is therefore not surprising.

This book offers a detailed view of life as it was lived in a Jesuit house. It was a life spent working in the Lord's vineyard, in tune partly with the rhythm of the seasons, partly with the rhythms of the liturgical year. The book describes the life of both the priests and the lay brothers who were responsible for the material and logistical organisation of what was indeed a large house. The content (spirituality, theology) and formation (lifestyle) of the novitiate training of the Jesuits is here comprehensively examined for the first time. The Jesuit novitiate was strict, demanding, strongly oriented to the formation of character and training in Ignatian spirituality, and preferably to the formation of future priest-teachers. Until the closure of the novitiate in 1967 no fewer than 3,510 candidate Jesuits had entered the Old Abbey. In addition, there were at least several hundred more scholastics and foreign Jesuits who stayed in Drongen for a number of years for their juniorate and tertianship. Renowned figures from the Society, such as Constant Lievens (1856-1893) and Alberto Hurtado (1901-1952) followed part of their Jesuit formation here, highlighting the historical importance of the Old Abbey as a formation house for the Flemish Jesuit province.

Drongen also enjoyed a good reputation as a retreat centre (from ca. 1840 until ca. 1965) for secular priests, regulars and (male) laity. Under the charismatic leadership of Fr. Adophe Petit (1822-1914) in particular, Drongen developed into a retreat centre for the Catholic elite in the nineteenth century. The retreat phenomenon is best understood in the context of the clerical-liberal struggle in the nineteenth century and the mobilisation of the people by the elites. Elite groups convincingly took the lead, but they also looked for guidance and positioning in the face of ever-advancing modernity, understood here as the separation of the various spheres of life. Later, during the interwar period, with the advance of democracy and modernity, the retreats were differentiated according to the various social strata, individual capacities and themes (youths and adults, men and women, manual and white-collar workers, the various professions).

Those two activities in Drongen were also reflected in the architecture and design of the abbey's interior. The complex included both the cloister section for the Jesuits and their novices, as well as the ever-expanding residential section for retreatants. The site's architecture was dominated by the newly built neoclassical parish church (1858-1859) and by the cloister chapel. The latter was designed at the request of the Society of Jesus by the great advocate of St. Luke Neo-Gothicism in Belgium, Jean-Baptiste Bethune (1821-1894). With its decorations crafted in artistic workshops linked to Bethune, the chapel offers a rare sampling of Jesuit iconography, and is a wonderful example of the link between architecture, figurative wall paintings, stained-glass windows, statues and altars. The cloister chapel can be cited as an example of Neo-Gothic *gesamtkunstwerk*, a unique blend of Marian and Ignatian elements, the iconography and symbolism of which is shown in detail to the careful viewer.

In the 1960s the thriving Jesuit life in Drongen flagged. The rigid formation no longer suited the declining number of novices, resulting finally in the closing down of the juniorate (1958), the novitiate (1967) and the tertiate (1968). The retreat centre also had to be rethought. Behind these changes was the final breakthrough of modernity, with its increasingly radical secularising effects on people and society. The Jesuit house evolved from being a centre of formation for the Society of Jesus into a community for aging Jesuits known for silent prayer and an ascetic lifestyle. The retreat house became a centre for reflection, which thrived in the 1970s and made its name as a spiritual centre for young people, offering a many-sided spiritual formation of the kind demanded in post-Vatican II Flanders. However, a malaise set in when the retreat house became involved in an experiment with the De Sirkel (1972-1978), a multi-denominational *Volkshogeschool* (adult education centre). The stagnation ended only in the 1990s when the centre was completely reoriented and was turned into a multipurpose centre for Christian and Ignatian spirituality, a house of formation and a place offering a wide range of activities relating to the interaction between religion and art. These developments occurred in a somewhat spontaneous fashion, although not without the deliberate intervention of the Jesuit Province which appointed a lay director and a supporting advisory group.

The Old Abbey of Drongen attempted in every way to answer to the needs of religion and spirituality in post-modern times. One thing remains clear however: throughout the centuries the Old Abbey of Drongen has been like a tough old lady, yet has always remained in touch with new developments.