

# The flemish Chest of Courtrai – Anno 1302. A multidisciplinary Study concerning a unique Medieval diplomatic Coffin

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*Material culture; chest; diplomatic coffin*

The actual summary brings the essential of a larger edition in 2001 (Chest of Courtrai 2001) with all the concerning bibliography. Today we include here also some results of our last researches.

The former publications began with questions, which arised, and here are a few of them:

- What parts of the primary chest are original?
- How old is the wood?
- How old is the sculpture and made by whom?
- What was its intended use?
- Who ordered it?
- Who was the designer and who the maker?
- How and why did this furniture come to be in Stanton St. John, four miles of Oxford, and survived?

Section 1 comprises an analysis of the leading bibliography centred on the last 25 years from the point of view that by now at least the authenticity of the wood of the sculptured panel is scientifically proven. We also carried out our own research into the surface of this sculpture to determine that a normal ageing had occurred and thus that nothing artificial had been done to give the impression of a centuries old panel.

Even the detailed study made before by other specialists of the images, viz. the coats of arms, the distinguishing marks of the tradesmen, the suits, armour and weaponry, the clothes and the historical precision of the tableaux depicted... the evidence shows that only a contemporary Flemish artist who had lived the full facts from nearby, and was generally well informed, could have conceived and executed this work of art.

The conclusion of Section 2 archaeological analysis of the chest establishes that not only

the frontpanel with the sculptures but also the present back constitute two original parts of the primary chest. It is very important that on the inner side of both elements similar significant incisions exist. These indicate an original double bottom, cut into the front and the back at the inside of the chest in its primary stage. The upper floor was held by three isosceles trapezium-shaped wooden supports that divided the secret storage space into four compartments. On its own, the bottom of the secret space was originally supported by four horizontal laths of rectangular section. The front and the back of the chest are made of radially split wood, according to the technology of furniture making the 13th and 14th centuries.

In Section 3 concerning the reconstruction of the initial chest, use was made by us of the data derived from the archaeological analyses. From the general shape of other similar furniture of the same period we get also confirmation of the archaeological information on the Chest itself. These data taken together were useful in forming an image of the original chest. From these sources which bear each other out in broad terms, comes the reconstructed design of the general structure and appearance of the outside of the furniture as originally made. The four heavy corner posts and the filling material are in keeping with the general outer appearance, and the technical necessity. Two things give a clue to the width of the chest in the beginning. In the front, the missing parts of the composition of the sculpture let us estimate the primary measurements. The rediscovered inner structure of the secret compartments gives us an effective guide to the suggested all over design of the original furniture, for the outside and the inner

side as well, as conveyed in our reconstruction. The general measured, calculated now, can also be compared with those from the prescription of the handicrafts of the Scrinerwerckers or collermakers at Bruges about that time. And they are in that line.

In Section 4 the upper floor of the secret compartment as seen in section 3 must after all of necessity, have had a hidden lock. Signs of it are present in the transverse direction viz. notches for a wooden catch, a sort of long wooden bolt, are found in the front and the back of the chest in the axis of the inner space.

In Section 5, we considered the examination of the secret compartment itself in its initial function. This is a unique construction known for furniture of this period. In the whole of Europe, we found no other Gothic chest with multiple large secret compartments or safe deposits hidden in the bottom (see section 12 about the possible heavy load inside those spaces). The original secret storage space of the Chest of Courtrai raises questions about the function in this primary time of the Chest that we will broader consider in sections 10 and 12.

Section 6 is concerned with the consecutive phases of the creation and the execution of the sculpture on this Chest. The manufacture of chest was, in the Middle Ages in Flanders and the neighbouring regions, an artisanal ex-

port that could possibly have had a small serial production line. Some of these chests were decorated with architectural and figurative wood sculptures. For a structure with hundred figures (peoples and horses) divided into four register, stretching over a length of up to 4 meters, we could expect that at least a rough draft on paper or on wood had been sketches. During the execution of the draft some models or patterns by skilled hands would have been very beneficial. Their inspiration could also come from much earlier art. In the case of the Chest of Courtrai some of the figurines, and especially the horses, are put on the surface in mirror image. The execution of the sculpture in wood itself can not only change from the initial draft, but also be of other artistic quality than the finely drawn draft artwork they began with. A new opportunity for scientific study of the preparatory graphics for carved wooden panels from the Middle Ages is mentioned in this section. The involves the method formed up by us since 1958 using enlargements of details from X-Ray that make it possible to follow the evolution of the graphical design and even the three-dimensional configurations.

In section 7, concerning the polychromes connected with the Chest of Courtrai, we published in our larger report for the first time laboratory analysis of professors Drs J. Hoste and L. Moens, respectively former and current Di-

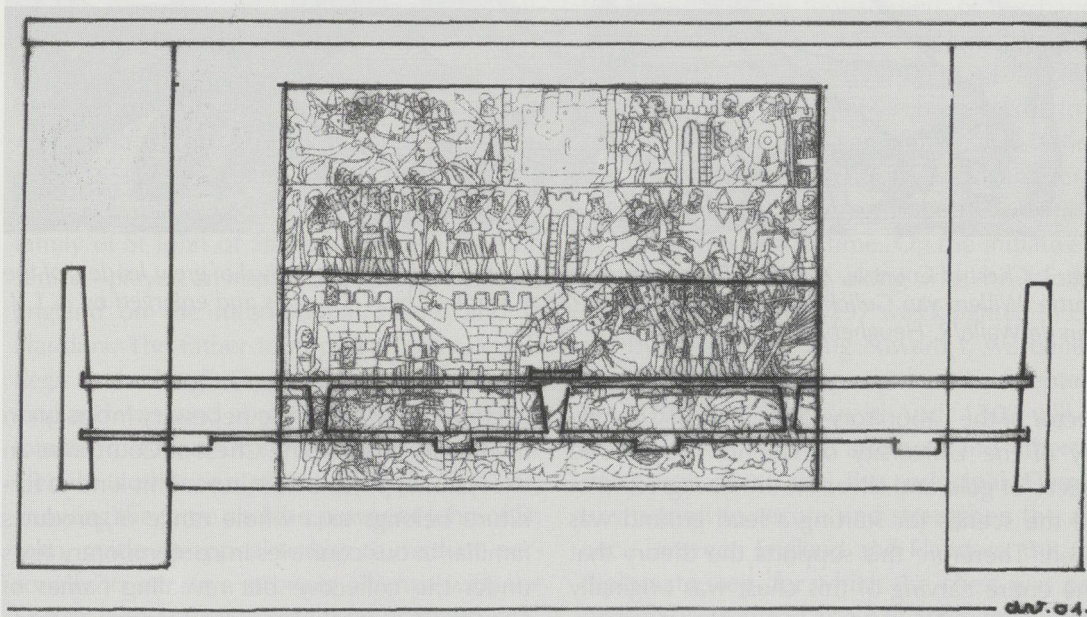


Fig. 1: Chest of Courtrai, A° 1302. Reconstruction of the front of the chest with indication of the preserved part of the historical sculpture and inside the furniture showing the construction of the important four secret safes (design: A. L. J. van de Walle/R. Heughebaert).



Fig. 2: Urban militia. Left: Chest of Courtrai, A° 1302; right: Milano, Porta romana 1162–1167.

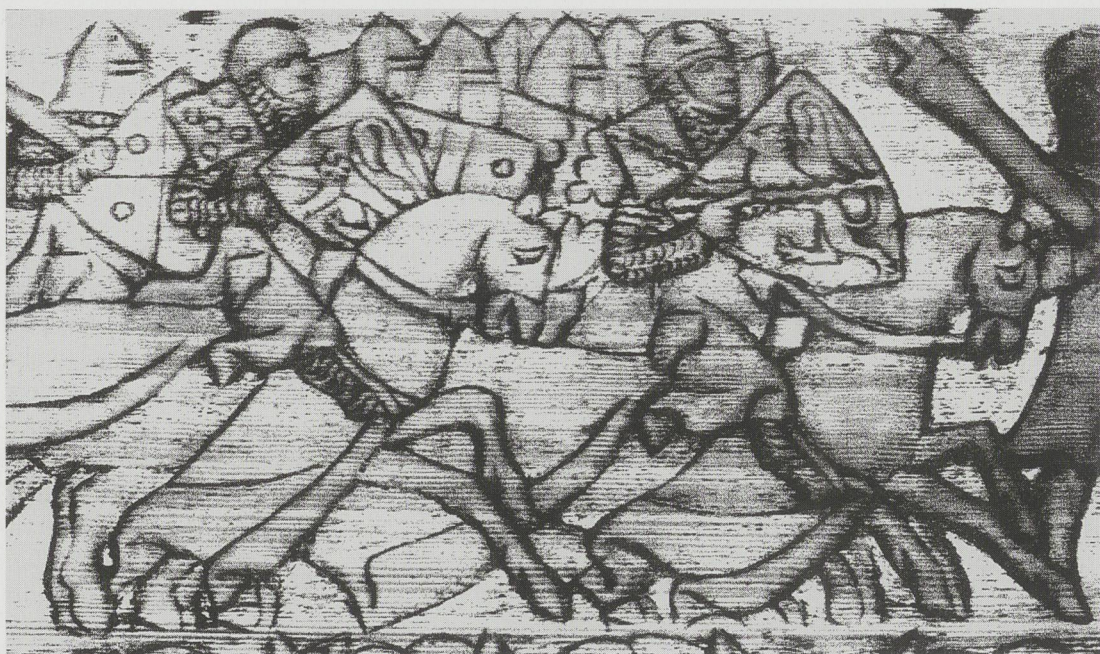


Fig. 3: Chest of Courtrai, A° 1302. Detail representing in the sculpture the arrival of great leaders of the battle: Willem van Gulick and Gwij van Namen (X-ray scanned by A. Pauwels and enlarged by A. L. J. van de Walle/R. Heughebaert).

rector of the Laboratory for Analytical Chemistry of the University of Ghent. They found traces of gold and silver on the background of all the scenes for starting a lead ground was used. Therefore this supports the theory that the entire carving of this chest was originally polychrome. This corresponds with data of historical texts and what we find on quite a few items of furniture of the Middle Ages in the Southern Netherlands and Western Europe.

Section 8 starts with the necessary inclusion in the history of art of the Chest of Courtrai as an exceptional piece of furniture. This kind of furniture belongs to a whole range of products familiar in our countries in contemporary texts under the collective but revealing names of Flemish Chest, coffre de Flandre, Opera Flaundrensi.

Some of those chests were luxuriously finished and filled with precious objects.

The status questionis of the dating of the original pieces of the Chest of Courtrai is covered in section 9. The dendrochronological and C14 and the back panels, of shortly before 1302. The historical facts pictured on the Chest give us the ultimo *post quem* date of the 12th July 1302 when the plundering on the battlefield in Courtrai took place. A precise date *ante quem* can be deduced from the following section 11.

With regard to the original destination of the Chest, section 10 gives us a clue to the possible intended function in general of such kind of chests. Moreover, we can call on a general comparative examination on the realia as well as references in texts of the period. At first sight, the most probable purpose of such chest was to stock coins, jewellery, silver tableware or paper documents. Most of all, chests of that period always showed some images of either illustrations on the outer wooden carvings or paintings indicating the intended use. According to the authors of our report that was almost certainly the case with the Chest of Courtrai.

Section 11, about the address of the chest, is divided into three distinct parts. Firstly, the relationship between the Chest and the locality where it was found, Stanton St. John north of Oxford, is examined. In this little feudal community normal pastoral life evolved slowly and conserved the old customs and culture, using and sharing the same implements for so long. This can explain the protection and the salvage and the reusing a time after of the mutilated chest. In the second part of this section we examine the chest relative to the local familial data. Thanks go to B. Gilmour and I. Teyers who suggested this link for the very first time. We also delved further into it. The noble family of St John of Stanton – especially John senior – played an important role to the king of England on the international scene, and in Flanders. The father took part in the *Consilia Regis* or the King's Council, accompanying the king and was send abroad on military and diplomatic missions. One must point out that the Flemish authorities after the battle of 1302, knowing the fame and the power of John of St. John, made an appeal to him to mediate personally to secure a stronger alliance with the English king against France their common enemy. According to written sources of the time such diplomatic missions and gifts went together. This would explain how the chest of

Courtrai came to be in Stanton St. John. We refer here for example to the gifts sent by the Swiss Confederates or Eidgenossen to their not allied in Tirol. However they became a part of the booty taken on the duke of Burgundy.

In the third and last part of section 11, titled 'Alliances, prison and diplomacy Flanders-England 1224–1303' the changeable and volatile political affairs between both countries are scrutinised along with their possible impact on the creation of this unique piece of furniture and its journey to the north of Oxford. Although the warlike spirit of the Flemish was dominant on the battlefield of 1303, they were not at all successful in diplomacy. Apparently the Chest was finished too late, or did not arrive in time in Stanton St. John. In any case, the Chest did not have the intended diplomatic impact. Probably John of St. John after certain document was dying when the hurried but impressive mission, the chest and contents arrived in Stanton.

However, this historical story ended with an alliance, not between the English king Edward I with Flanders, but between him and the French king. Edward I was definitely the winner of the battle of Courtrai.

Our second last section 12 concentrates on the problem of the patron who ordered this rich present, the Chest of Courtrai and its possible content. Here is a distinct visual sculptured homage to the noble Flemish leaders, the members and foot-soldiers of the handicraft associations or militia and their role in the revolt and in the armed battle of 1302. Notable among the important represented triumphal leaders are Gwij van Namen and Willem van Gulik, family of Gwijde van Dampierre. They represent with some others the real power in Flanders at that time. On the initiative of Jan van Namen who along with his brother Gwij van Namen in 1297 was knighted in Ghent by the English king Edward I, we believe two diplomatic missions on the 3th of September 1302, and later on in April 1303 will be tried. From these two attempts and others, a delegation from the five principal Flemish towns tried to secure and strengthen the alliance between England and Flanders. But this diplomate step, for which the chest was presumably sent ahead as a palliative, finally totally failed in 1303.

The very last section 13 deals in our primer report with the makers of the chest in its whole

and its carving and completion. To start and achieve such a work, certain consecutive phases must be gone through. First of all there is the concept whereby the furniture and its hidden spaces are to be calculated and determined, together with the dimensions and exact appearance of the sculpture.

Afterwards all the details must be checked and executed. For this period of the Middle Ages we know from historical documents that an artist could have a number of skills such as cabinetmaker, a sculptor, painter, ... all in one. We have no written sources about a maker of chest with secret compartments.

There is also a remarkable connection between the images of the horses and cavaliers on the chest and the work of the sealmakers of Flanders in this period. The originator(s) of the carvings on the Chest of Courtrai was (or were) certainly not only constrained by other artwork of the period of the battle of Courtrai or Groeninghe, but was also by the ingenious techniques concerning wooden constructions namely for the integration of secret safes.

## Conclusion

We want to show that the Flemish leaders, among whom were Gwij and Jan van Namen, had reasons enough to Edward I, king of England, known as one of the most successful monarchs of this time, with the intervention of John of St. John.

The following points bear this out:

– Gwij and Jan van Namen, knighted in Ghent in 1297 by Edward I, for that reason had specific ties with this king. In feudal terms this meant a bond between the mighty suzerain and the vassal. The latter performed for his master some duty such as military service in exchange for protection.

– Edward I is effectively at war with Philip IV, King of France. The latter is also their common foe and was defeated by the Flemish in Courtrai in 1302.

– Philip IV had taken Gascony from Edward I.

– John of St. John senior was a member of the *Consiglio Regis*, the most dynamic sector of the

whole of Edward I's administration. In this royal council sat his head councillors, his most dedicated judges and clerks, a selected group of worthies who accompanied him everywhere. This council was preoccupied with matters of major importance in the kingdom and also functioned as a court for business of national importance.

– The personality of Edward I was interesting to the Flemish for he was willing to listen to the opinions of others, in contrast to Philip IV, effectively King of Flanders. Edward I reigned in the main with cooperation between town and community.

– Edward I granted the Parliament and the cities a kind of democratic participation in the power, with citizens as representatives.

– Possibly John of St. John, when on an official visit to Flanders in 1297 met Gwij and Jan of Namen in person in Ghent. Or they at least had some notion of his close and good relations with Edward I. We also must notice that John of St. John has been taken prisoner on 30 January 1297 by the Count Richard of Artois at Bastide Bellegarde (Aquitain). John of St. John had given "all the stores he had collected" for his release of the count of Artois. The killed count is represented on the battlefield at Courtrai as a horrible focus in the ultimate scene VII of the Chest of Courtrai.

– The financial position of St. John senior and junior seems, according to the King's Exchequer, to have been anything but rosy. We cannot ignore the fact that a valuable 'sweetener' would have been welcome in the family of St. John of Stanton. And this intervention could well have come from Flanders in the safe-deposits of the Chest. An other generally important matter – in fine – is raising up. In fact the Chest of Courtrai is a material testimony of the urban social, political, diplomatic and military evolution not only in the history of Flanders but concerns West Europe during that period of the Middle Ages. Our last researches convict us that this is valuable as well for regions north as south of the Alps and Pyrenees. We hope next time to realise an extended publication on this matter.

## Bibliography

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A lecture was given by A. L. J. van de Walle on 26 june 2002: "Researching the model for the sculpture of the Chest of Courtrai", organised by Kon Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring Kortrijk.

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