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## THE HISTORY OF BRUSSELS



Officially, Brussels was **founded in the year 979**. But legends and non-confirmed stories let us suppose that the origin of the city has to be situated at the end of the 6th century. It was then that the Preacher Saint Gorik built a little chapel on a small island formed by two arms of the **Zenne**, the river that still is part of Brussels. First written confirmation of the existence of Brussels is given in the **year 977**, when the German emperor Otto 2nd gives Low-Lorraine to Carl of France. In those days the island was known as the Island of Saint-Gorik. **Carl of France decides to build a castrum** (= a sort of fortress) on the island: Brussels is born. At the

end of the 10th century, after the death of Carl, Low-Lorraine is taken over by Lambert of Leuven. In the middle of the 11th century Lambert 2nd Baldric decides to build a new castrum at Brussels. He also starts building the first city walls.

Above : View of the old harbor of Brussels (now the Fish Market) - By A. Martin (1699 -1763)  
 Reproduced by kind permission of Het museum van het Broodhuis - the city museum of Brussels

**During the ages, Brussels becomes more and more important.** In the 13th century a revolution takes place. The Guilds start fighting against the mighty and rich group of Citizens. They won't win. After that a restless period starts until the Duchess Joan comes into power. Brussels becomes a thriving city until the end of the 14th century. An economic recession takes place for a period of 50 years. But Brussels survives and starts producing luxury goods. In the same period Philip the Bold marries Margaret, an heiress of Joan. From that moment on the Bourgondians start ruling over Brussels. But not for a long time, because after the death of Carl the Bold in 1477, his daughter marries Maximilian of Austria, so the Habsburgians start ruling over Brussels.

In 1555 the emperor of that time, Charles V, resigns. His successor is **Philip II**. After a few years he starts quarrelling with William of Orange, supervisor over Holland, Zealand and Utrecht. William of Orange is a liberal thinking person. Brussels however suffers under the merciless **Duke of Alva**, official representative of Philip II. With the help of William of Orange Brussels starts a revolution and chases Alva away. But after 8 years Alva strikes back. For the economy of Brussels this period of encirclement was pernicious. Luckily a relative calm period comes ahead with the successor of Philip II, **Isabella and her husband archduke Albrecht of Austria**.



Above : Drawings of the destroyed city center and Grand'Place after the bombardment of 1695. The drawing on the right shows the destroyed Broodhuis (now city museum) and a part of the not too badly damaged town hall Drawings by A. Coppens (1668-1740) - reproduced by kind permission of Het museum van het Broodhuis - the city museum of Brussels

In **1695 Brussels is attacked by the French king Louis XIV**. The result is disastrous: more than 4000 houses and the Grand Place were completely destroyed. In the beginning of the 18th century the Austrian emperors take over Brussels. The citizens of Brussels revolt once more, but they have to surrender.

The last foreign emperor over Brussels and the present Belgian kingdom was the Dutch emperor William I. He has to leave the Belgian country in **1830, when the successful independence struggle bursts out in Brussels**.

At July 21st 1831 the first Belgian king, Leopold I, ascends the throne. Brussels becomes the capital of the new kingdom Belgium. A long period of rebuilding the city of Brussels starts. New and enormous buildings are build, the city walls are demolished, the city expands, not only with buildings. Lots of international congresses are organized, scientific organizations are founded; foreign artist, philosophers, scientists and other find their way to Brussels (e.g. Karl Marx, Victor Hugo, Proudhon, and so on).

WW I (1914-1918) and WW II (1940-1945) were not able to stop the further development of Brussels (only for a short while).

After WWII Belgium is divided in two semi-independent regions, Flanders and the Walloon Provinces. Brussels becomes a district with its own government (with restricted powers). Brussels becomes also the capital of the **European Union**. Moreover, **NATO** decides to plant his headquarters nearby Brussels (Evere). All this institutions and all kinds of industries, plants etc., give Brussels an enormous positive economic injection. The negative side of this is that Brussels had a very difficult time while trying to find a balance between keeping the historic spirit of the city and allow the modern times to enter Brussels.

Now Brussels has found that balance, and it has become worth the effort to visit Brussels. We hope you'll enjoy it.

