

Introduction to historical graffiti on walls in Dutch and Belgian Limburg

(draft paper on the subject) by Jimmy Groen email: eljeegee@gmail.com © 2016

Introduction

Historical graffiti (also: *early graffiti*, *medieval graffiti*) is well- known from ancient locations in Italy like Pompeii (e.g. Keegan, 2006) and the nearby village of Stabiae (e.g. Varone, 2014), these places are in archaeological context.

In England the study and inventory of *historical graffiti* is ongoing in a wider survey by a section of the CAHG (The Community Archives and Heritage Group), carrying out surveys in England, e.g. by the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey. Recent publications (Pritchard, 1967; Champion, 2015) show much diversity and common shared graffiti with graffiti found in the region subject to this article.

In France similar developments take place by e.g. GRGA (Groupe de Recherche en Graffitologie Ancienne) leading to publications (e.g. Barbier, 2012) and information for a wider public.

This article is meant to be a first meeting with historical graffiti in the wider region of both provinces of Limburg in Belgium and The Netherlands. It is not intended to give any analysis about more profound interpretations about the subject, both because this requires much more intense study and the author is not a specialist in this case. So in a way, this article could be regarded as an enumeration of facts after inventory.

Historical graffiti on walls in both Dutch and Belgian Limburg has not been described yet; it is a bit of forgotten historical information. This underexposure of the subject is probably caused by the fact such historical graffiti is not present everywhere and is often difficult to interpret especially when the period of the graffiti is unknown or uncertain, which is very often the case.

This article is based upon a systematic inventory carried out in 2015 at 56 visited locations in Belgium and The Netherlands. All prospected walls belong to buildings or are freestanding walls, build of limestone brick from local or regional quarries (e.g. Zichen in Belgium, Maastricht and Valkenburg in The Netherlands). This limestone is easy to carve, so historical graffiti often occurs in this material. Other materials carrying graffiti have not been detected.

The presented graffiti in this article is one of the most eye-catching graffiti, found on the walls in the region.

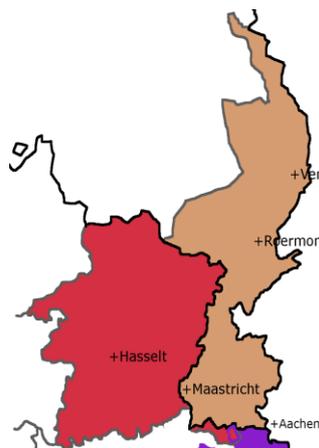


Figure 1 : location of the area where buildings were prospected for historical graffiti, Belgian Limburg in red and Dutch Limburg in brown color. Image from Wikipedia by cc-by-sa-3.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

Methods of inventory

In the systematic search for historical graffiti, a desk study has been made for suitable locations, where the use of limestone for construction was the determining factor. The chosen locations have been visited and walls have been examined for the presence of historical graffiti. The visited locations show a variety of constructions: walls of churches, castles, and historic farms, sheds and freestanding walls, see figure 2.

Figure 2: table with the division of examined constructions / buildings (N = 56)

Church/ chapel*	Castle	Tower (without church)	House	Shed	Wall	Other
42	4	4	1	1	1	1

- including the basilica of Tongeren and Meerssen

The constructions / buildings were located both in Belgium and The Netherlands, as presented in the table of figure 3.

Figure 3 : table with repartition of visited locations in Belgium and The Netherlands.

Belgium	The Netherlands
25	31

N= 56

During the examination of the walls of the buildings images were taken and posted at the web-log. The images were taken with a simple Canon IXUS 16.1 camera and selected images were post processed in a suitable photo editing program, like Picasa of Google.

The first aim was to make documentation of the present visible historical graffiti in the region.

This process did not include any real interpretation or analysis, as this was too far at the moment and would possibly be a next goal (after further studies).

In the selection of images presented at the web log – and thus accessible for a wider public, there was always the question what characterizes the choice of documentation: what is interesting and based on which parameter?

Two major principles in the selection of documentation were:

- a) the recording of possible information, which would be lost in the future by restoration, disintegration of the substrate or new contemporary carvings, made by tourists, etc. The dividing line for the period is set at approx 1950;
- b) the recording of contemporary (carved) graffiti from the period after 1950 as a part of contemporary (sub-)cultural expression (voice of the common people).

Results.

Some 1500 pictures were selected for publication, as a general overview of historical and contemporary graffiti at walls of buildings in the region. The earliest graffiti dates from the beginning of the 17th century while the latest documented contemporary graffiti is only one decade old or so.

It was not a surprise that most buildings showing graffiti at the walls were churches, serving as public buildings for the community. In this case, unfortunately several churches have been restored in the recent past (twentieth century), where walls are smoothly sanded , so almost every graffiti was destroyed with it. Exceptions were noticed at walls of some chapels in Belgium like at Houthalen – Laar (B), or were still intact (Zonhoven - *Ten Eiken* (B), St- Gruitrode (B) and Noorbeek (NL)).

Description of a selection of historical graffiti from walls in Dutch and Belgian Limburg which must be regarded as *examples* of historical graffiti in the region.

Belgium:



Carvings of hand-forms of children, found at the southern wall of the church in St. Gruitrode (B)



Inscription of the year 1419 in the wall of the church of St. Gruitrode (B); this church has been build in 1417 on the remains of former church buildings.



Typical circles with daisy wheel motive at the wall of the church of St. Gruitrode (B)



*Inscription of a human skull shape
at the wall of the old church in As (B)*



Caricature on the wall of the church in Haren (B)



*Graffiti on the wall of the church of Houthalen (B)
representing two ladders and a circle/face*



Inscription of year 1618 at the wall of the church of Neerglabbeek (B)



Inscription at the chapel of Zonhoven- Ten Eikenen (B)



Dagger and carvings at the wall of the freestanding tower at Dilsen (B)

The Netherlands



*Roman galley at the walls of the church of Schin op Geul (NL)
18th century*



Many names and corresponding years from the early – late 19th century have been placed at the tower and walls of the castle Lichtenberg in Maastricht (NL), showing the rise of tourism in the region



Old sundial, still visible at the wall of the old church of Limbricht



Church and landscape, found at a wall in Sibbe



Text at wall of the church in Schin op Geul, :ANNO 1676 IOANNES HEUTS IOANNES



Bird figure found at the wall of the church of Scheulder



Mining pick at the wall of the church of Eckelrade



Two hardly visible former sundials at the wall of the church in Noorbeek,

Special features

In many buildings grooves and more shallow, bowl-shaped cavities were noticed, which origin is unclear.



*Arranged holes in the limestone, found at several blocks in the freestanding tower of Zonhoven (B)
It's meaning is unknown*

Discussion and further investigations

The number of walls with potential expected graffiti is limited by the use of limestone blocks as construction material in buildings; other rock types seem to be too hard to be (occasionally) carved. It has been noticed, that restoration of churches and chapels damage historical inscriptions, e.g. the church in Bree (B) which has been thoroughly sanded, which delivers a nice looking building – clean and devoutly, but stripped of all cultural history.

The chance to find historical graffiti at outer walls of buildings, dating back before 1600 is almost excluded, because of former restorations and weathering .

The greatest problem in identifying and analyzing historical graffiti found at the walls in the region is the lack of certain attribution to a period in case the year is absent; only in some cases, it is clear the graffiti is from one certain period, such as the historical graffiti at the church of Noorbeek (NL) where inscriptions of exact dates accompany symbols and texts on the wall.

Further study and analysis is necessary to determine the position of the historical graffiti in a more large historical context, both in the region and beyond.

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Appendix

List of visited locations

Belgium:

Churches and chapels

AS (B) BILZEN (B) BILZEN - ALDEN BIESEN (B) BREE (B) HAREN (B) HELCHTEREN -LAAK (B) HOUTHALLEN (B) JESSEREN (B) KESSENICH (B) ; MAL (B) MEMBRUGGEN (B) MILLEN (B)[FORT/CHURCH; NEERGLABBEEK (B) OPGLABBEEK (B) OPOETEREN (B) PEER (B) ; ROSMEER (B ;SINT GRUITRODE (B) ; VAL MEER (MEER) (B) VAL- MEER (VAL) (B) VLIJTINGEN (B); ZONHOVEN EIKENEN (B) ; ZUTENDAAL(B)

Freestanding tower

DILSEN (B) TONGEREN (B) TOWER [WALLS] ;ZONHOVEN (B)

Wall

HENIS (B)

The Netherlands

Churches/ chapels

ECKELRADE; GELEEN; GRATHEM; GRONSVELD;HOENSBROEK; LIMBRICHT ; MAASTRICHT SLAVANTE MARGRATEN; MECHELEN; MEERSSEN; NOORBEEK ; OIRSBEEK;OUD-VALKENBURG; SCHEULDER; SCHIN OP GEUL; SCHINNEN;SINT GEERTRUID; SITTARD; WIJLRE

Freestanding tower

GULPEN

House

BEMELEN [old community building]

Castle / Fort

MAASTRICHT FORT ST PIETER ; MAASTRICHT LICHTENBERG; MAASTRICHT NEERCANNE 1910-1950; OUD-VALKENBURG

Various (buildings, walls, station, etc.)

MAASTRICHT VARIOUS; MAASTRICHT NEERCANNE ROCK; VALKENBURG A/D GEUL

Freestanding walls

SIBBE

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