

Chapter 3 - FLANDERS

Over the course of history, the borders of the geographical territory that was called Flanders have varied greatly. From around 1000 AD, Flanders historically meant the north-western part of what is now Belgium (approximately the modern Belgian provinces of East and West Flanders) plus Netherlands Flanders and parts of northern France but the southern borders were fairly flexible.

The map on page 10 shows the core territories but often the southern borders stretched down as far as the north of Normandy.

Flanders has figured prominently in European history. During the late Middle Ages, Flanders' trading towns made it one of the richest and most urbanized parts of Europe, weaving the wool of neighbouring lands into cloth for both domestic use and export. As a consequence, a very sophisticated culture developed, with impressive achievements in the arts and architecture.

This story covers only the first period of the House of Flanders up until 1127.

Baudouin I 'Bras de Fer' (830-879)

The story of the Counts of Flanders begins with a love story. Imagine the life of Judith of West Francia (844-870), daughter of Charles the Bald (823-877); at the age of 12 in 856 she became the wife of the 61 year old King Æthelwulf of Wessex (795-858).

It appears that she was treated well and was, in fact, the first consort of a Wessex King to be called 'Queen'. But, her then elderly husband died less than two years later.

On the death of his father in January 858, Æthelbald (834-860) the eldest son took the throne and, before she could leave for home, married Judith who was barely 14. Their marriage was annulled as 'incestuous' by Pope Nicholas I in 860 and, in any case, Æthelbald died on 20 December in the same year.

This time Judith packed up and departed England for home, a twice widowed 16 year old girl. One has to guess that she made her way back to her father's court by the then shortest route via the port of Bruges in Flanders.

Perhaps there, she met the young Baudouin, already a member of the local nobility and, with the nickname 'Iron Arm', obviously an acknowledged warrior; it would seem that she was impressed by him and fell in love.

When she arrived home, her father sent her to a convent in Senlis about 50 kilometers north of Paris presumably whilst he found another suitable husband for her. But, around Christmas 861, with the connivance of her brother Louis the Stammerer (846-879), she escaped, married Baudouin locally and then travelling north with him.

Charles had not given permission for the marriage and tried to capture Baudouin. He sent letters to local nobles forbidding them to shelter the fugitives. After Baudouin and Judith had evaded his attempts to capture them, Charles had his bishops excommunicate them.

Judith and Baudouin responded by travelling to see Pope Nicholas in Rome. Their plea to be allowed to marry was successful and Charles was forced to accept this. The official marriage took place on 13 December 862 in Auxerre.

Charles the Bald made Baudouin Count of Flanders. By 870, Baudouin had acquired the lay-abbacy of St Pieter in Ghent with substantial holdings of land and he controlled the counties of Flanders and Waasland

Baudouin became a very faithful supporter of Charles and played an important role in the wars against the Viking raiders. And, he was named in 877 as one of those willing to support the cause of the emperor's son, Judith's brother, Louis the Stammerer.

Before his death in 879, he expanded his territory well down into the Kingdom of West Francia. He was buried in the Abbey of Saint-Bertin in Saint Omer.

Baudouin and Judith had four children. Charles, the eldest, (born 864) was named after his grandfather but he died at a very early age. The second son, Baudouin, succeeded his father. The third son, Raoul (869-896) became Count of Cambrai. They also had a daughter Guinidilda who married Wilfred 'The Hairy', who eventually became Count of Barcelona.