

Autumn 2024

Salome Limberger

On my route of beguinages

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A journey to special historic sites with the OWHC Young Travelling Scholarship

On my journey to beguinages of Flemish Belgium and the Netherlands I wanted to discover the history, culture and socio-cultural significance of beguinages. My conversations with other persons in the beguinages – mostly with other visitors but also with inhabitants – I will present in form of little comics :)

There will be also some photos of the respective beguinage :)

But first, I'd like to talk a bit about myself, my topic and my experiences during the journey.

My name is Salome Limberger, I am studying Intercultural Management and I am a real travel lover. It is my passion to visit other countries and to explore and understand which different ways of thinking and acting people of other cultures have. Through this changes of perspective it is possible to see the world through another point of view – or to say it in other words: through other eyes!

As a person especially interested in human rights, liberal values, gender equality and intercultural exchange I wanted to discover World Heritage Sites that have to do with these fields. Moreover, I wanted to explore and get to know an underexposed aspect of the European history. That is why I chose the topic of beguinages – residential communities in which unmarried and widowed women lived in the Middle Ages! Thus, I visited the beguinages of Leuen, Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, Dendermonde, Mechelen and Amsterdam!

I am really impressed by how progressive the beguines were in their thinking and acting. They had the freedom to choose the lifestyle they wanted. Or more specifically, these women were free to choose an alternative lifestyle as independent, self-determined, unmarried and working person. Women in other parts of Europe hadn't this opportunity!

It is so interesting to see that already the beguines in the Middle Ages stood up for values like gender equality, (female) independence, (female) self-determination and liberty – and that the fight for these values is still a current issue nowadays.

Knowing the history, the culture, the self-conception and the progressiveness of the beguines helped me to understand even more that in the Middle Ages not everything was "backward". Thus, we shouldn't generalize: We should always try to draw a differentiated picture of the history – and not just of the history but of everything.

But, however, walking through the beguinages felt very ambivalent. On one site I could really feel the freedoms the beguines had when I was seeing all the little houses next to each other. Especially when I had the possibility to visit a little house from inside and when I saw for example the single bed there, I could see this single, self-determined lifestyle. On the other side, I also had an oppressive feeling when walking through the beguinages – because knowing that many beguinages had to demarcate themselves with a surrounding wall just to be safe didn't make me feel like they were *that* free. And to add something else: It was not just the surrounding wall around the beguinage but also the water moat in some cases and the extra wall in front of every house that contributed to this feeling.

Apart from that, beguinages as historical places can be adaptable models for future housing projects. As historical background it is important to know that the beguines were very religious women and that every beguinage had a church in the middle. But the beguines weren't in a holy order and they didn't take vows. So – in contrast to nuns – the beguines were more independent from the catholic church. The concept of the beguinages can be transferred to today because it is a current trend that more and more people want to live their belief without being in the church. Especially for women who not agree with the patriarchal structures in the church a religious life as a modern beguine can be an alternative.

For me as an intercultural scientist, there is one cultural feature of the beguinages that was very striking: It is the separate private area (of every inhabitant) – because every woman had her own little house and, additionally, a wall with an extra door in front of the house door. In most cases it was even not possible to see the front garden. This is very interesting in comparison: When I was walking through the modern cities of Belgium and the Netherlands it was very noticeable that many people have big windows without curtains. So I could often look into the living room very well. Therefore, there was no strictly separated private area. It was very exciting to experience this difference!

What I really loved was that many beguinages are a very silent, green oasis and “a city in the city”. In the middle of the courtyards there is normally a little park or a big meadow. To compare a bit, I’d like to mention that while in Antwerp and Leuven there was a park, the beguinages of Amsterdam, Brugges, Dendermonde and Ghent “just” had a meadow. Differences also exist in the respective structures: In some beguinages all houses are around the green space – and that’s it. You can see this for example in Dendermonde. In others the structure is like a real village – with alleys, hidden corners and tiny squares. This you can find for example in the big beguinage of Leuven.

To conclude, I’d like to tell which of the visited beguinages are my favourite ones ;) First, I can really recommend the beguinage of Antwerp: I really loved the little green park in the middle with its old trees, its statues, the singing of the birds and the people relaxing in the grass and enjoying the sun. The beguinage of Antwerp was also the one that felt the most cosy; it had a really special atmosphere – I cannot describe it well with words but it has to do with the aspects just mentioned. Thus, just go there; then you know what I mean ;)

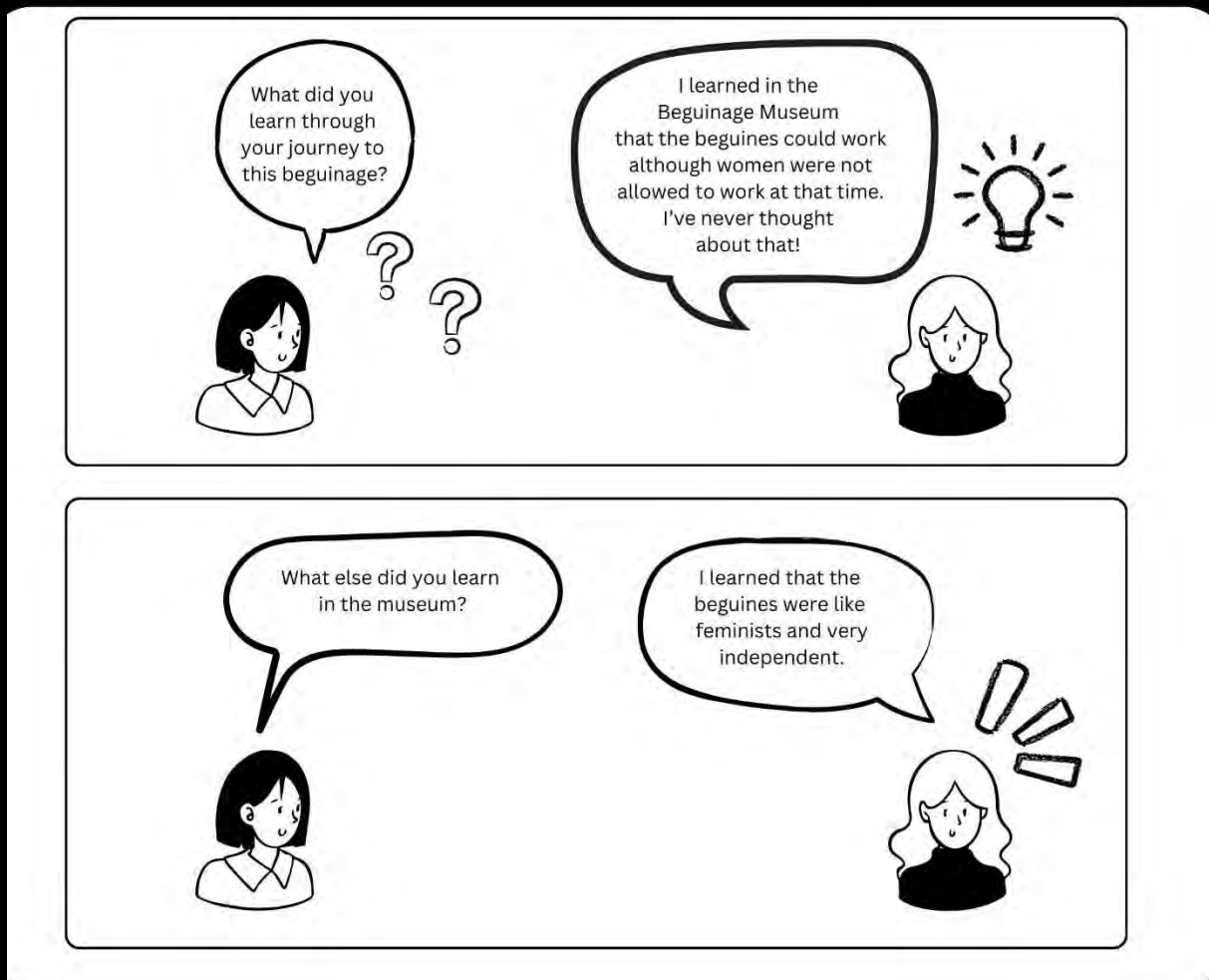
Second, I was in love with the big beguinage of Leuven. It has many small, twisty alleys, a very romantic garden and a little river. When I was standing at the river I felt like in a fairytale because there were beautiful, old gable houses with many green creepers and, moreover, I could hear the reassuring splatter of the water.

My third favourite beguinage is the small beguinage of Ghent: Of all beguinages I have seen it was the only one where the houses were painted in red – and that looked so beautiful. Furthermore, I was pleasantly surprised by the hidden meadows: There was a big meadow with a church in the middle; but when I was walking through the alleys to twisty corners I recognized that between some houses there are small, inconspicuous archways leading to hidden meadows. That was sooo amazing! :)

In the beguinage of Dendermonde

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A little conversation with Marie-Anne Carlier from Belgium





That's how beguines often looked like

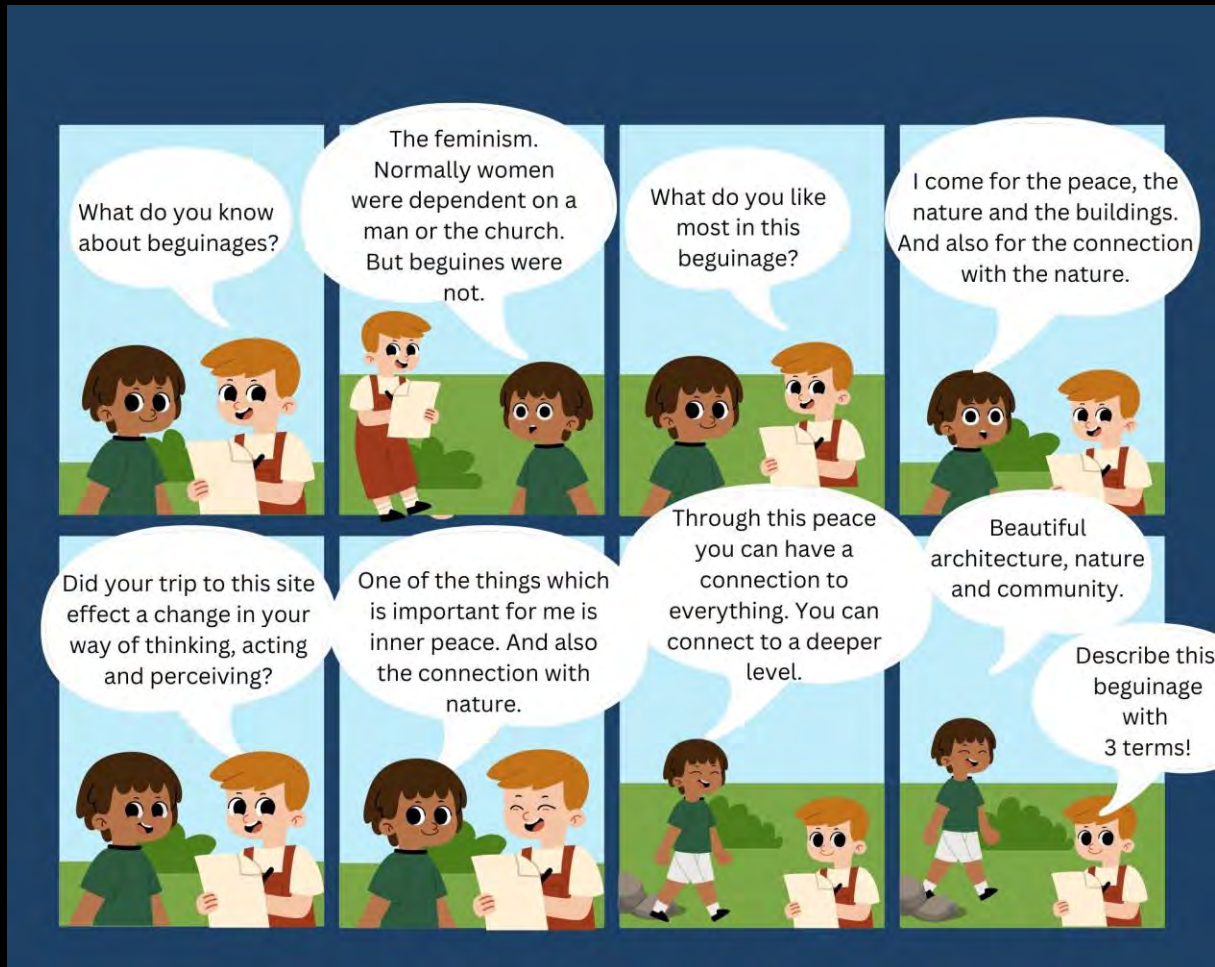






In the beguinage of Antwerp

A conversation with Johan from Belgium







The church is one of the characteristics of the beguinage













In the chapel



Dank aan God
voor eene verkregen
gunst.
I.F.

E. D. K.
DANK AAN GOD

DANK AAN GOD
I.V.

DANK AAN JESUS
MYNEN BRUIDEGOM

DANK
AAN GOD
I.S.

LIEFSTE JESUS
VERHOOR MY
I.S.T.

DANK AAN GOD
VOOR EENE BEKOMENE
GUNST
E.C.

DANK GOD
MYN ZEGEN
L.S.

DANK AAN GOD
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GUNST
J.L.

REMERCIEMENTS

DANK AAN GOD
VOOR EENE GENE...

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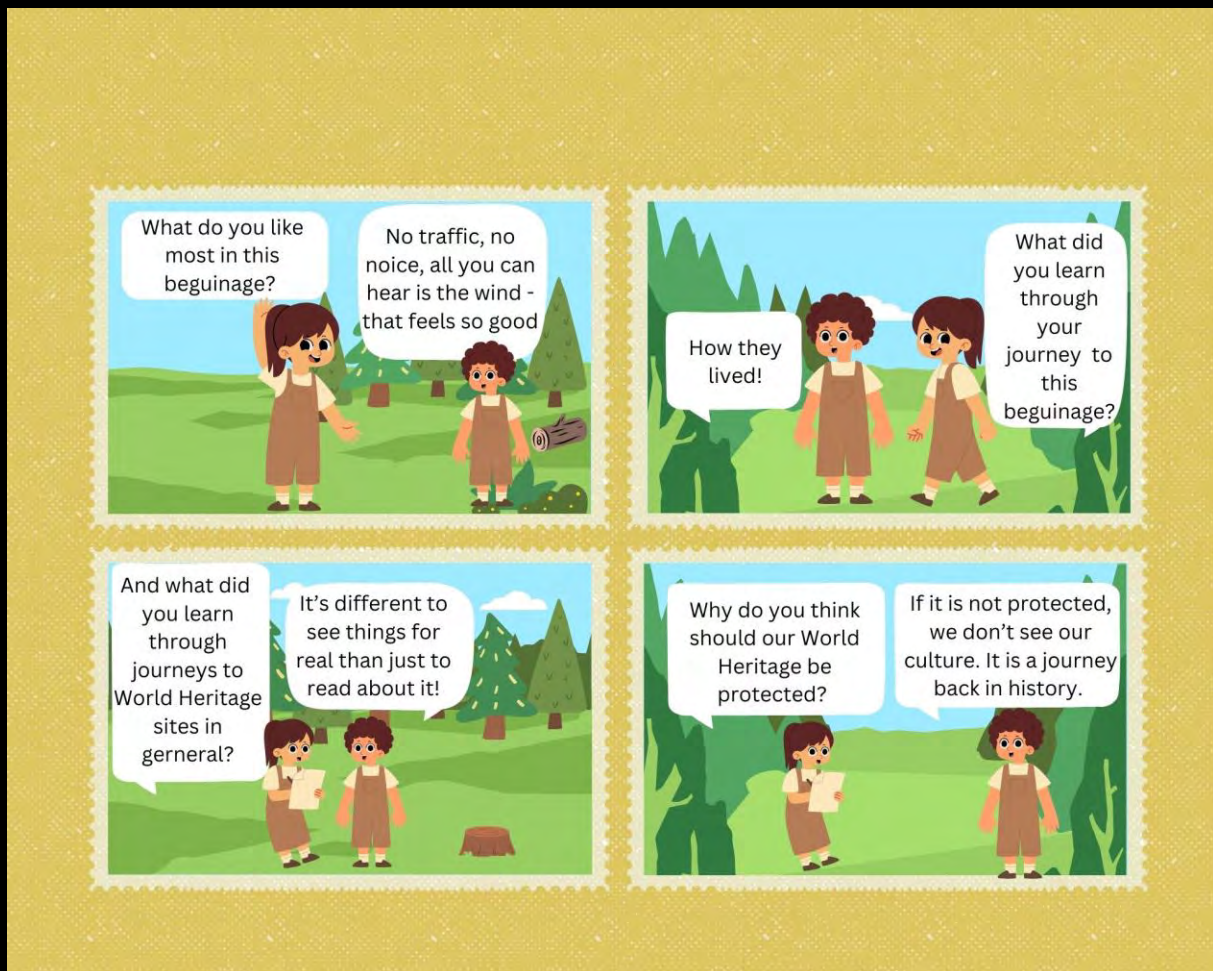
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In the beguinage of Bruges

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A conversation with Shailesh (originally from India, living in the UK)





It is really nice to see how the structures were and how the people lived.



In my home country, in India, there is much scribble on the walls. But here is so much cleanliness!

Did the journey to World Heritage Sites effect a change in your way of thinking and acting?



The scribbles don't look good - it is better to let it like it was.



In India we have a lot of historical sites but many of them are not maintained. I like the way how it is maintained here. It is maintained so well here



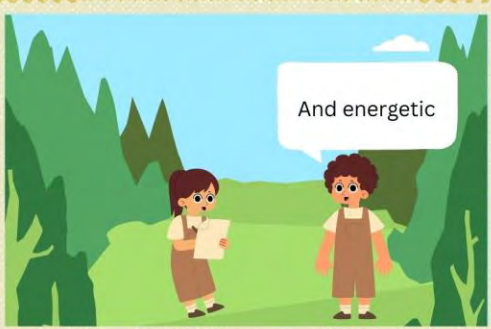
So please describe this beguinage with some words now!



Peaceful Relaxed Quiet



Fresh air No traffic Close to the nature



And energetic

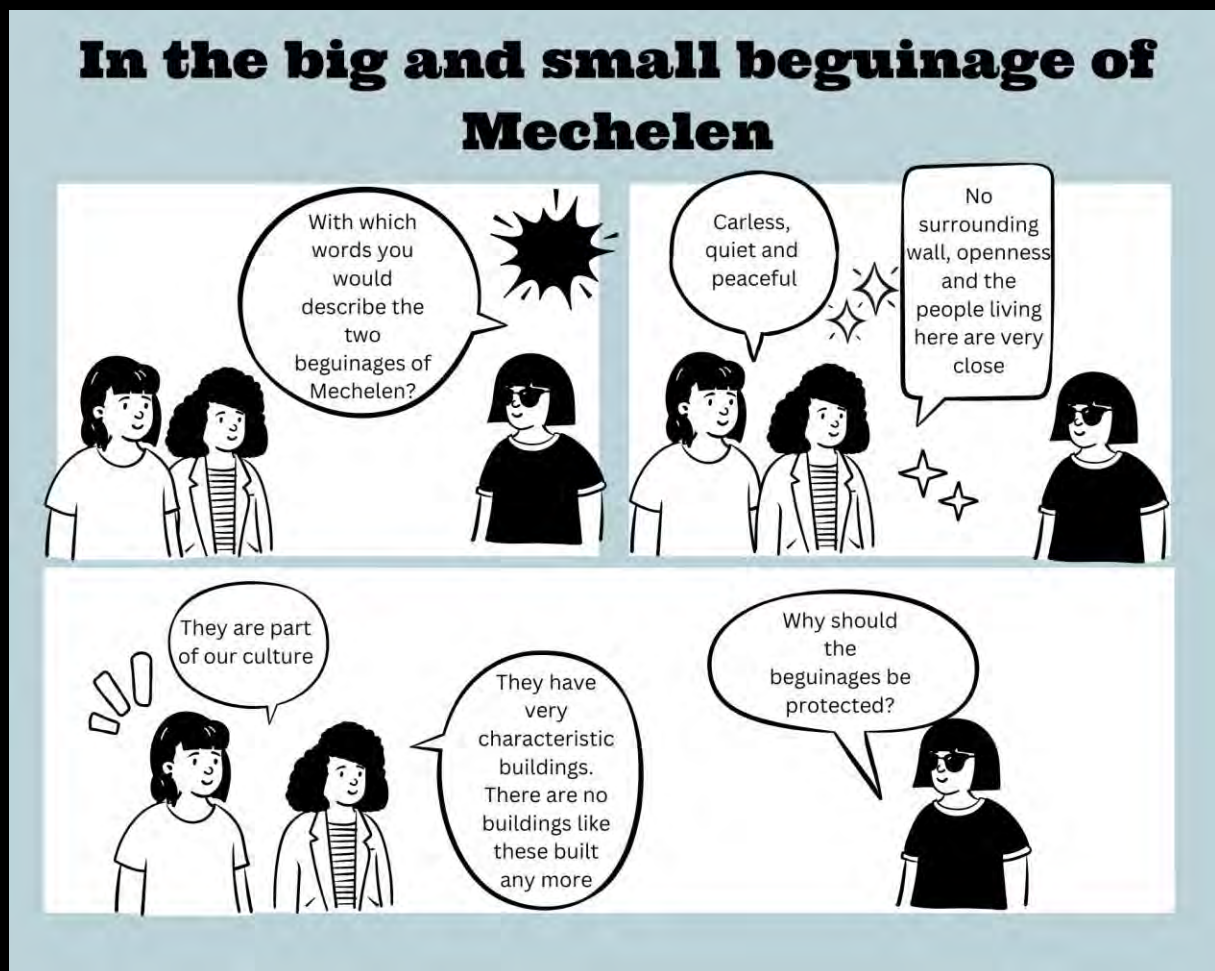




In the two beguinages of Mechelen

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A conversation with Sarah and Elina (both living in the big beguinage)





In the big beguinage





The old brewery of the big beguinage



In the small beguinage – here I'm standing at the entrance







