

Winter School 2018 – State Archives Ghent – 29 January 2018

Word of welcome by Karel Velle (read by Karin Van Honacker)

Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants and professors of the fourth edition of the Winter School,

On behalf of national archivist Karel Velle, who unfortunately is taken ill, it is my great pleasure to welcome all of you – who work at archives and heritage libraries – to the State Archives in Ghent, a site that conserves about 35 kilometres of important heritage from a period ranging from the 9th century to today.

It is important for us to share this magnificent building with others. So we regularly put our rooms at the disposal of professors and students of Ghent University which is located nearby, in order to organise seminars that are focused on the practice of history. It was therefore obvious that the State Archives would accept to contribute to the Winter School project 2018.

In the very recent past, however, it would have been impossible for us to meet this kind of demand. The collections of the State Archives were moved to this new building only in 2015. Until 2014, the State Archives was located at the Geeraard de Duivelsteen, a 13th-century mansion of a knight whose nickname was ‘Geeraard the Devil’, mostly because of his dark skin and hair. Although his medieval mansion was not adapted to ‘today’s standards’ (and that’s an understatement), the Duivelsteen is a place of memory that speaks to the imagination of young and not so young – maybe you will pass by the mansion in the course of your stay in Ghent. And maybe some fans of comic books will then recognise the Duivelsteen from the well-known Belgian comic series ‘The Adventures of Nero’ by Marc Sleen, in which it plays a prominent role in three very popular albums. Others – fans of the awarded BBC series “the White Queen” based on Philippa Gregory’s historical novels about the War of the Roses in England in the 15th century – may also have a familiar feeling about the Duivelsteen. Indeed, a large number of shootings in the series were taken in Flemish cities, among others in Ghent. The medieval crypt of the Geeraard de Duivelsteen mansion was one of the favourite locations.

But our goal at the State Archives is not only to open up our infrastructure to the large public. We also, and chiefly, want to reach different target groups with our collections.

Not only do we describe archives and make them available to the public for historical research, we also provide tools for educational purposes, which has been one of our missions already since the 1970s. In fact, in the 1980s and 1990s, a small team of ‘teachers on secondment’ worked at the National Archives in Brussels and elaborated teaching dossiers about various historical subjects being part of the curriculum of secondary education – for example: the Belgian monarchy, ‘poverty in the Netherlands from the Middle Ages until now’, but also about witchcraft or leprosy. An exhibition, including a catalogue, was also set up about each of these themes.

The State Archives in the Provinces – that is to say the brothers and sisters of the State Archives in Ghent that exist all across Belgium – also regularly organise events specifically aimed at teenagers or even children; these events range from small exhibitions and guided tours to workshops and archival

quests. Recently (in 2017), the Cegesoma – that is to say the renowned ‘Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Society’ that became part of the State Archives in 2016 – organized an exhibition in cooperation with the Saint-Peter’s Abbey in Ghent (you will visit the Abbey tomorrow evening) entitled ‘War in short pants 14-18’. ‘War in short pants’ looked at the first world war through the eyes of seven children from seven countries. In their own language the children recount how a world war invaded their playground, living-room, classroom or village. With pen and pencil they described in diaries, letters and drawings how the great war affects their loved ones and their dreams, and touched their hearts. It is as if the young people we hear in the audio-guide were experiencing their impressions of the day for the first time.

Of course, in the 21st century, the State Archives also has made the step from analogue to digital tools, from teaching dossiers on paper to virtual exhibitions that can be accessed for free on our website. One of these exhibitions is ‘Archives & Democracy’ (for which project Geertje takes the credit). It is especially designed for educational purposes and contains a separate section for teachers, where they can find educational quizzes and teaching suggestions. Unfortunately, there was not as much interaction with the teachers as we had hoped for.

And yet, the State Archives has a vast and particularly good experience with crowdsourcing projects. In 2017, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the ‘Demogen’ project, a web application that allows volunteer workers to analyse from home various online archival documents, containing millions of datasets about our ancestors and feeding these information into the databases of the State Archives. All data introduced via the Demogen software are made available to the public for free via the search engine ‘Search persons’. In 2009, the State Archives was awarded the ‘e-Gov Award’ for ‘Most innovative project’ for this Demogen application.

However, since the creation of the Demogen project in 2007, ten years have passed already...

The Demogen project is still alive and kicking and enjoys the competent support of its hundreds of volunteer participants. Meanwhile, digitisation has progressively captured our daily lives and our professional activities at a fast pace.

Internet users today no longer simply want to use content made available by heritage organisations; they also want to make a contribution themselves, they want to participate. ‘User generated content’ and ‘user participation’ have therefore become key factors, also in archives and heritage libraries.

The desire for ‘social participation’ also increases: people no longer want to take part as individuals, but within a network. Knowledge scientists indeed point out that networks of Internet users want to play a role in content creation, by writing the stories of their own communities, by creating their own ‘memorial literacy’ (the French scientist Louise Merzeau calls it *‘littératie mémorielle’*). In this evolution, archives, libraries and museums certainly have a role to play. Prominent archivists have already pointed out that heritage organisations should get off their high horse and fully embrace their role as ‘societal intermediary’ and as facilitator in what is called the ‘participative archives’.

In addition to this, heritage organisations should also try to reach ‘new’ target groups, that is to say people who are barely or not at all in our ‘normal’ focus. Studies have shown that heritage can play an important and positive role in the lives of people who are difficult to reach, ranging from

homeless to refugees and from people with autism to people with dementia, etc. So in this regard, FARO, and especially Bart De Nil, whom I would like to particularly thank for his work, take a pioneering role in Flanders and, by extension, in Belgium. For example, in the course of this year, FARO will offer training sessions about:

- How to create an autism-friendly museum?
- 'Out on the Streets': Heritage for All, in Theory and Practice (about how heritage can be useful for homeless, poor people and refugees)
- Digital storytelling in the care sector (for example with regard to people with dementia, recovering people and care takers), and
- Cultural heritage & dementia. Creating an offer for people with dementia and their care takers

and more general

- How to develop a sustainable asset based offer?

In late 2018, FARO also organises an International conference on 'Participation in cultural heritage for mental health recovery' – to take place also in Ghent.

I would like to conclude with a quote by the freshly appointed Secretary-General of ICA (International Council on Archives), Ms. Anthea Seles, from the speech she pronounced at her inauguration on 17 November 2017 in Mexico:

"Finally, but definitely not least for me, is 'Innovate'. Digital brings with it many opportunities and challenges. I want to use the ICA as a hub to share international practice and innovative pieces of work happening in our field and others. There is much to learn and much to do. ... I want to organise hackathons, I want us to offer hands-on digital opportunities allowing people to experiment; whether highly technical or not, allowing them build their technical expertise by playing with tools. I think there are already interesting initiatives happening now that we can use as platforms to begin enabling this type of work."

So, in line with this prospect, I wish you all much inspiration, freshness and creativity in experimenting and working out your ideas. As was made clear in the quote from the speech by Anthea Seles: the archives and heritage libraries are awaiting eagerly new digital tools that can be used for all types of innovative projects, educational and other. Your efforts and achievements in the coming days will be greatly appreciated!

So, good luck to everyone!

And on behalf of Karel Velle, I have the pleasure to invite you to a welcome drink.