

‘From Georgian Spa Boxes to Asian Porcelain: what recent excavations at our last house in Liège tell us about convent and school life in the eighteenth century’

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In 2022 the Agence Wallonne du Patrimoine began excavations of the site of the community’s former home in Liège. The community moved to this site in 1656, the prince-bishop having granted them the lands of a then recently disbanded male order, the Freres Coquins in the Faubourg d’Avroy district of the city, on the rue Saint Gilles. **[SHOW SLIDE 2]** The community remained there until 1794, when they were forced to flee the city and return to England in the wake of the spread of the French Revolution. After the community’s departure, the site passed into the hands of the new regime, and the site was broken up thereafter. Throughout the nineteenth century the vast majority of the community’s buildings were demolished and replaced. Tragically, the current site bears little resemblance to the way the community left in 1794. The site today is dominated by a series of late nineteenth-century buildings, constructed to form the Montefiore Institute, an engineering school within the University of Liège, named after Georges Montefiore-Levi, a Jewish industrialist, who had been born in Streatham, south London.

Here are a number of images showing the present setting. **[SHOW SLIDE 3]** The first is the main building of the Montefiore Institute. A grand institutional building, typical of the period in which it was built, this is set well back from the rue Saint Gilles, entrance is/was through beautiful set of wrought iron gates that we can see in the next slide **[SHOW SLIDE 4]**, which as the following slide shows, have recently been removed. **[SHOW SLIDE 5]** The following image shows the rue Saint Gilles as it currently looks. **[SHOW SLIDE 6]. [SHOW SLIDE 7]** The area highlighted that we see mark the convent’s boundaries, with the chapel bordering the street, and standing roughly where these nineteenth and twentieth century buildings now stand.

[SHOW SLIDES 8-9] These images are from a nineteenth-century report, which gives us an idea to site as the community left it, and what subsequently became. The site had consisted of a church, a cloister, areas for the religious and pensioners, (three houses becoming one), another house with a small garden... **[SHOW SLIDE 10]** The next image is a satellite image; the large Montefiore Institute can be seen to the south, farthest from the Rue Saint Gilles, with the nineteenth-century auditorium closer to the road. In between the two is the only surviving building from the community's time, a school building, containing living quarters for the girls and instruction rooms. **[SHOW SLIDE 11]** The next slide shows the building in question, which has just very recently been demolished, and will be subject to some minor excavations before building commences on the site for the Belgian Electricity Board, offices and an underground carpark. The building that we see here was built in the 1770s, and subsequently transformed in the nineteenth century. A nineteenth-century lecture hall stands adjacent to the building **[SHOW SLIDES 12-13]** Directly to the site's rear, and bordering the community stood the Abbaye de la Paix Notre-Dame de Liège **[SHOW SLIDE 14]**, a community of Benedictine nuns dating from the 1680s. The grand baroque abbey church can be seen in the next slide.

As you can see from these images, the site is much changed from the community's time. However, the excavations carried out over the last few months have recovered some of the community and school's lost heritage. **[SHOW SLIDE 15]** These images give you some sense of the scale of the trench and what position on the site that it was situated. What you can see here is what is believed to have been the school's waste pit. The trench was just under 2ms deep, and it is from this trench that we got a new snapshot into the community's life in Liège in the decades leading up to their departure in 1794. **[SHOW SLIDE 16].**

Now before going on to talk about the items found, just a little bit of context. In previous talks I spoke about the importance of the community's school in Liège, which is very much central

to the excavation. Like all the English convents on the Continent, the community had from the 1640s schooled girls, albeit in modest numbers. In the late 1760s though a new venture was undertaken, with the construction of a new purpose-built, stand-alone school. The school was distinctive in a number of ways: its size (a much larger number of girls); its location (a new building away from the convent); its curriculum (more secular and less religious/devotional). The community's account and benefactors books contain a number of references to the building process. **[SHOW SLIDE 17]** This extract from the Benefactors' Book for 1772 shows Lord Stourton contributing over 2,000 Liège florins 'towards the building of the new school'. I found a sad mention of the school's construction in the Mass Disbursements' Book for 1776: 'Mass for the boy died of the hurt he received when the school was built'. **[SHOW SLIDE 18]**

The reason for mentioning the school, as I say, is that most of the items discovered in the dig relate to the school, and its waste pit. So now to the great reveal: what was found when the archaeological team undertook their excavations? Well, they found a surprising mix of items, ranging from the everyday to the extraordinary. Yet whether mundane or exceptional, all of the items can tell us something about the world the religious community and the wider monastic *familia* inhabited.

[SHOW SLIDE 19] One of the most and poignant items that was found during the excavations was this gold ring, bearing the double-barrelled Patriarchal cross, as used by the community since the foundation. This is perhaps the oldest of all the items found, estimates suggesting that it is late seventeenth-century. **[SHOW SLIDE 20]** This was a wonderful example of serendipity; when Guillaume showed us this ring, Moira and Diane duly showed theirs. I think the surprise on Guillaume's part was that as an archaeologist he spends his time discovering historic items, yet what we had here was an example of the community's own historical, living continuity. A seventeenth-century ring, lost for more than two hundred years, alongside rings which follow the same design: the historical and the lived, side by side. The ring, I believe,

was found in a separate section of the site, in an area which corresponds to one of the gardens. Guillaume suggested that the nun may have been out walking, possibly in prayer, the ring becoming lost.

From the lost ring, we'll return to the trench, and to more mundane finds. The trench that was excavated having been a waste pit, one of the things that was found, unsurprisingly, was waste. Not bodily waste, but food waste. **[SHOW SLIDES 21-23]** Here we have a picture of Guillaume showing Moira one of the many, many bags of bones. As well as this there was numerous bags of shells.

Interesting though as waste items are, the find did include a lot more historically significant items. I've included a couple of images just to give you an idea of the volume of artifacts discovered, which are really quite substantial. **[SHOW SLIDE 24]** The first image is a selection of stoneware ceramics for everyday table use, which had been made in Germany's Rhineland. **[SHOW SLIDE 25]** The next image shows a stoneware jug, believed to have been made in the Westerwald, a low mountainous range in the Rhineland, an area renowned for the quality of its stoneware. Whilst items like these might look relatively unsophisticated, mundane, 'everyday', they were in fact considered to be very high quality, albeit not artistically significant. This was at a time when the majority of people were still dining off wooden or tin dishes. For those who could afford to dispense of wood, copper, tin or pewter was the next best thing. The stoneware that we see here was a further step up the ladder. Along with earthenware jugs and bowls, skilled potters did make more sophisticated decorative items such as beer steins and pharmaceutical jars, and a few makers, such as the stoneware masters of the Westerwald region, were known for their high-quality products throughout Europe, such as the ones found in Liège. Whilst everyday items, these were highly desired items, known for their longevity, and purchasing them was a substantial investment. **[SHOW SLIDE 26]** What we see next is another example of this: a white terracotta serving tray, probably used to serve dinner to the

schoolgirls. What we see is a substantial investment by the community in modern, quality pottery. [SHOW SLIDE 27] And finally, here's an image of an ornate chamber pot, again from the Westerweld.

While I could continue sharing images of the vast body of items unearthed during the excavations, what I'd like to do now is to widen things out, and ask some questions as to what these items mean for how we understand convent life in the late eighteenth century, and how religious communities interacted with, and even perhaps, shaped life in the secular world. Religious life, and in particular female religious life, has historically suffered from a plethora of misconceptions and misrepresentations. Often commentators look upon female religious with some sort of odd curiosity, failing understand the very things that should be taken seriously like their interactions with major theological and philosophical movements. One of these unfortunate misrepresentations is that convents are often characterised as being excessively 'withdrawn', entirely separate from the outside, and the religious as having been 'dead to the world'. Now, caricatures like these are thankfully being addressed by scholars, and there's a lot more understanding of the ways in which nuns, despite being cloistered, could and did play important roles in much wider major international debates and movements. Often these are ideological and political movements. We might think of nuns as major proponents of Jansenism in seventeenth century France, or in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as supporters of the Stuart cause, or in more recent times, as champions of social justice. However, if we switch to material culture (physical items), their links might be seen as more devotional, eg. chapels like the one in Liège being an early promoter (within English Catholicism) of devotion to the Sacred Heart, erecting statues and altars and so on. We might not automatically think of them as having interacted with, and influenced by, secular artistic movements. But this is exactly what they did.

In this regard I'd like to talk about one of the more significant finds of the excavation – porcelain. Porcelain originated in China and predates Christ's birth, but only started to be brought to Europe in the sixteenth century in great numbers, often by Portuguese traders returning from Asia. Like pepper and diamonds, Chinese porcelain was a luxury good, before 1600 owned chiefly by Ottoman, Iberian, and Italian elites.

But these ceramic makers operated in markets catering to the everyday needs of peasants, innkeepers, brewers, middling townspersons; they had little hope, or ambition, to rival Chinese porcelain makers, with whom, at least until the later eighteenth century, they were not in competition. But when, in 1602, the Dutch captured and auctioned off their first Portuguese boatload of porcelain, they discovered that northern Europeans, too, were willing to pay a premium for this delicate commodity, which, moreover, made an ideal, waterproof ballast.

In the eighteenth century porcelain was beginning to be produced in Europe on a more industrial scale. In England, for example, Wedgwood was founded in 1759 in Staffordshire, initially producing imitation porcelain. The excavation unearthed a substantial amount of porcelain, much of which came not from industrial producers of England and Germany, but rather from China itself. **[SHOW SLIDE 28]** This slide shows just two examples of decorated porcelain unearthed. Both pieces are estimated to have been late eighteenth-century examples of Jingdezhen porcelain, which originated in the Jiangxi province, an area well-known for 'export porcelain'. Items like these were not especially unique in eighteenth-century Liège, but nor were they common. Once again, these items would have been costly, and their purchase would have been a substantial investment for the community. Today, I'm not going to talk about these items as art, but rather what their purchase could have meant for the community and their lives. And with this in mind, I'd like to speak a little bit about tea and coffee cups and pots and how their presence in Liège may have affected the culture of the community.

Now before I'd ever started this particular project, I'd noticed in the account books, which documented the community's individual expenses, receipts for tea and coffee in the eighteenth century. This in itself may not seem especially unusual, but it was in fact part of a wider intellectual and social movement. We are all familiar with the importance of café culture in eighteenth-century France, and how it is attributed as having aided the spread of Enlightenment ideas. If we think about it, drinking tea and coffee is quite a social activity. 'Taking tea', 'meeting for coffee', have important social connotations. But what could these mean for eighteenth-century religious, whose lives were governed by a monastic timetable, periods of isolation and times of communal meeting eg. for Mass and the Office in the chapel, and for meals in the refectory.

The consumption of tea and coffee, whilst an important facet of 'Enlightened' religious life in the late eighteenth-century, was also a radical departure from the previous status quo, whereby communities spent much of their time either together (as in times of prayer or for meals) or alone. A middle ground where much smaller groups, perhaps two or three met, was not always part of religious life. Yet this is undoubtedly what was happening at Liège. We can see this through the purchase of tea and coffee by individuals, but also by the purchase of porcelain sets.

Coffee was being drunk in Europe by the seventeenth century, and by early eighteenth century was no longer a drink for the aristocracy, being more widely consumed by middle and lower-middles classes. Coffee also had a great appeal to monks and nuns. Yet it might come as a surprise to note that coffee for quite some time had somewhat of a seditious reputation. Beer was of course widely consumed in monasteries, both male and female, but it was coffee that caused quite the stir amongst concerned superiors. Why? Because of the 'social' dimension that went hand in hand with its consumption. One of the few places for communal discussion in monasteries was the Chapter Room (and the speakhouse), the former being more formal,

while the latter often lacked privacy. As one historian writes: the introduction of coffee and tea into communities opened new possibilities for open discussion. The desire for coffee grew amongst religious: we can see from the community's own account books with individuals, not the community, purchasing tea and coffee. Superiors were concerned that the practice of taking tea/coffee in small groups might lead, for example, to the erosion of communal discipline, the spread of new and 'harmful' ideas, as well as the development of dangerous cliques within the community which might lead to unwelcome politicking.

Evidence for the individual and communal purchase of tea and coffee by the community and its members links in wonderfully with evidence unearthed during the excavations. Yet the tea and coffee cups found were not only everyday items, but rather richly decorated Chinese porcelain. **[SHOW SLIDE 29]** The first is what I believe is an Imari cup from the late eighteenth century, a style derived in Japan. There are also more traditional Asian tea sets too, like these ones. When we spoke to Guillaume, he suggested that it had not been normal practice to take tea in Liège at this time, and that this was something new.

So, what is the significance of these cups and pots? Well, they are significant on a number of levels. Firstly, it plugs the community's activities within a wider European pattern of tea and coffee consumption that was taking place across Europe. Research suggests that this was most common in male houses, so I will be interested to know how common it was in female monasteries and convents. It will be interesting to see whether or not this pattern was replicated in the English convents too. Secondly, they are important as they fit within the community's wider nature as a cosmopolitan centre. You'll remember that the community's school was international in its make-up, attracting girls from a variety of regions. As well as schoolgirls the community in Liège welcomed sizeable numbers of visitors from England and Ireland, many of whom stayed for a considerable period of time. Religious communities like yours at Liège are now being identified as having been central in the transfer of ideas from the Continent

back to England. For example, the way in which communities spread particular devotions and religious literature, or the way they helped promote a particular architectural style, or aided the transfer of ‘new’ ideas. Following this logic, and linking it to the fact that the community housed substantial numbers of British and Irish lay Catholics, it is not inconceivable that the community was aiding the transfer of more materialistic fashions into eighteenth-century Britain. **[SHOW SLIDE 30]**

Trawling through the account books one sees evidence of the purchase of increasingly fashionable items, like the ‘spa boxes’ mentioned in the next slide. **[SHOW SLIDE 31]** These were Georgian sewing boxes, which probably resembled this one shown here **[SHOW SLIDE 32]**. The excavation also uncovered ‘modern’ material culture, like these toothbrushes, probably ones that had been used by schoolgirls **[SHOW SLIDE 33]**. Concern for dental hygiene was becoming more common in the late eighteenth century, and by the 1780s the mass—produced toothbrushes began to be produced in England (I’m not sure if these ones that you see are mass-produced). The community also recognized the importance of branding. One of the most fascinating items recovered was glassware which bore the community’s Patriarchal cross **[SHOW SLIDE 34]**. Again, this would have been an investment by the community, which would have required fostering relationships with local manufacturers. In fact, Guillaume suggests that the site may have fostered important artisanal activity, something which is born out by early research on account books.

To conclude, what I intended doing today was not to speak infinitum about the objects discovered, but rather to offer an introduction to the excavation and the finds, and to put some of these within a broader context. I’m looking forward to sharing further research with you on this topic in due course. The excavation, the volume and variety of the items, and the historical context of both the convent, the school, the boarders’ house is important and worthy of further research. Next week I’m travelling to Liège to observe the next and final stage of the

excavations, which will hopefully turn up more finds for me to share with you. Currently there's discussions with Belgian partners about staging an exhibition, while there's also opportunities for publications. BBC Radio 4's 'Sunday' programme are also considering doing a feature on this.

And finally, just before we go, I was surprised to find this week that the community have it seems occurred some sort of miraculous recovery, well at least according to the author of this pamphlet on English Catholic communities from 1798 published by the Royal Society of Antiquaries. It read: 'These religious ladies flourished greatly under the direction of the late Jesuits, as also in the education of young persons of their own sex. The French Revolution put an end to them in 1794'. If only the author could see you hear today!