

The sacred houses of the free women

by Devana figlia di Liliana for La Scuola delle Donne®

<She must have locked herself in a room in the country to write what she wrote; - says Virginia Woolf in "A room of one's own", about an English poet - for women the difficulty was much greater: in the first place it was completely impossible to have a room of one's own, and let's not say a quiet room or a noise-proofed room.

Even the poorest poets could take separate lodgings which, however miserable, was still a refuge against family claims and tyranny>. Virginia notes that the English writers of the 18th and 19th centuries, belonging to the middle class, wrote in the only common living room. Not having a room of their own, they were subject to continuous interruptions due to the passage of people and could therefore not devote themselves to work that required a lot of concentration, such as essays or poetry, but they had to fall back on the novel which could be completed despite the aforementioned interruptions.

This reference to Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" serves to highlight a fundamental component of the beguinal life that we want to present to you: that is, the possibility of having not only a room but even a small house of one's own, which allowed these extraordinary women, considered to be the first feminists in history, to work freely and to write works such as "The Mirror of Simple Souls" by Marguerite Porete or "The Flowing Light of the Divinity" by Matilde of Magdeburg or even the "Songs" by Hadewijch of Antwerp or "The seven ways of holy loving" by Beatrix of Nazareth, which are of such philosophical and spiritual depth and value that it still remains unmatched today. Without "A Room of One's Own", which the beguinage provided, probably none of them could have reached such heights. With a room (and a house) of one's own inspired by Virginia's words, we prepare to meet the Flemish beguinages, houses and neighbourhoods where women since the Middle Ages have been able to live in safety and peace without marrying or becoming nuns, and without answering to a husband or an abbot, as Cristine de Pizan hoped, two centuries after the birth of the first beguinage, in her work "La Cité des Dames" which our channel makes available for reading. Independent, free and self-possessed, the beguines supported themselves by their own means, cared for each other, cared for the needy, were at the same time artisans and intellectuals, nurses and philosophers, mystics and freedom activists.

The beguinal movement originated around Liège and quickly spread to Flanders, Luxembourg and Holland where it prospered. But also in the rest of Western Europe, including France and Italy, where the greatest persecutions took place. However, we cannot talk about beguines without highlighting the fundamental role of the walls that housed them, the beguinages, which guaranteed them freedom of life and movement, and in the absence of which - as Virginia Woolf brilliantly enucleated - would have been sanctioned, as women, their age-old dependence on the male will. We have already talked about the beguines in our classes and docuvideos of which we show the link in the section on further information. In that we want to show you their sacred houses: the beguinages. During our trip to Flanders we visited 12, all of which are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Some of them have given us a lot of emotion and we will tell you about them.

Stopping at the french frontier, in a window in the historic centre of Rocroi we see portraits of Hypatia, Trotula, Hildegard and Florence hanging, as if to welcome us. Florence Nightingale was the mother of the Red Cross, Trotula of Salerno and Hildegard of Bingen and Hypatia of Alexandria were medical scientists

and teachers. Four women who surely would have felt at home in the beguinages, where the first infirmaries and food banks for the poor called tables of the holy spirit were built. Our pilgrimage begins in Nivelles in Walloon Brabant, where Marie d'Oignies, born in Nivelles in the 12th century, participated in the first beguinal community of which we have documented information.

Nivelles

As early as 1208, there is evidence in Nivelles of a group of women dedicated to voluntary service and prayer. And in our opinion it is not at all accidental that the marvellous story of the beguinages, a shining example of maternal sisterhood, started in Nivelles. Five centuries before Marie in fact, a family of Merovingian princesses lived in Nivelles, a mother and two daughters, who dedicated their lives to assistance and study, choosing the monastic life: Itta, wife of Pippin, ancestor of Charlemagne, and her daughters Gertrude and Begga. Upon Pippin's death, Itta transformed her castle and all the surrounding properties into a Benedictine monastery extending to many hectares and she was abbess until her death when her authority was passed on to her daughter, Gertrude. Making the monastery double in the Irish manner, she left the material affairs to male management, to devote herself to disseminating the study. Bringing respite to dynastic struggles and the resulting hunger, Gertrude defeated the plague by cleaning the city of rats and restored serenity to the population. She cleaned with holy water. Her fame as a saint and healer was widespread. In Nivelles the three princesses are buried in the crypt of the collegiale, a term that identifies a group of women and men who lived according to a common rule under the guidance of an abbess. Women gathered in the eastern transept of the collegiale to discuss the needs of the community. Their noble coats of arms were inserted in the pews, since only the scions of the aristocracy could be part of it. Gertrude sent for books from Rome and Ireland so that her nuns were educated and could adequately care for the community. The nun sisterhood of Nivelles of the seventh century follows the Irish one of Brigid of Kildare which had spread a century and a half earlier and anticipated Hildegard's work at Bingen in present-day Germany by four centuries. Itta, Gertrude and Begga of Nivelles are therefore placed in the axis traced by the two great abbesses: Brigid to the west and Hildegard to the east. We therefore think that Nivelles, a land already filled with the energy of these extraordinary Merovingian princesses, attracted other women, bringing them together. In the great collegiale of Nivelles there are also images of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, defined as the "historically non-existent" saint who overshadows the scientist and martyr, Hypatia of Alexandria. It is interesting to note that close to every Flemish beguinage, or even within its walls, there is almost always a church of Saint Catherine. Did Hypatia watch over the beguines and inspire them? In the La Scuola delle Donne® (The Italian women's school) we cannot ignore that if Hypatia had lived in the European Middle Ages she would have been a beguine: she lived from her work as a teacher, she was a virgin, free and independent, completely dedicated to knowledge and to the service of the community, devoted, spiritually active and, finally, martyr because of her knowledge. Today in Nivelles the rue du beguinage still exists where a kindergarten and a primary school stand on what could once have been the property of the beguines.

Kortrijk – Courtrai

Leaving Wallonie, we go through the door of our first beguinage in Flanders with a pounding heart: Kortrijk. The impact could not have been more impressive. The triangle of white houses in rows conveys the idea of

peace, simple decorum and community service that reigned at the time when the beguines lived there a millennium ago. The walls that surround it and which are still closed at sunset today, have doors that lead into the city centre. The houses are not the original ones from the 1200's. Since they were built with clay and straw, none of them has survived. The buildings we see date back to the 1600's. Nonetheless, crossing the little door of the beguinage and perceiving an energy of serene concentration is immediate. The energetic memory left by these women of industrious and deserving lives creates a sort of protective bubble that has preserved the beauty and grace of the beguinage despite the abuses and disfigurements caused by the many wars. So much so that the desire to go back in and never come out again is almost painful. The beguinage is a tiny village in the beating heart of the city. A village made up of about forty houses, a small church and a chapel only for the beguines. In the centre the house of the Grande Dame (head mistress), the venerable mother. The beguinage of Kortrijk was created by the will of Countess Johanna of Constantinople who bought the house where the beguines already lived and took on all the necessary work to transform it into a neighbourhood. Inside, a tiny garden overlooks the church where the sisters gathered in meditation and prayer, sheltered from the external busy world. As we stroll through the narrow streets, a student sits in meditation on the bench of that little garden. A corner of the church is dedicated to Lourdes with, a reproduction of little Bernadette Soubirous at the foot of the "blanca damizelo" which she saw and which became the Marian apparition of official history: six centuries later, the devotion to Lourdes is deeply felt in the beguinages, and we also find reproductions of the grotto in those of Turnhout and Hoogstraten. The Kortrijk gatehouse still maintains the original furnishings from which one can deduce the room all to itself, as Virginia Woolf would have said, where the beguines worked and wrote extraordinary texts. The beguines were not nuns, they only pronounced two promises: chastity and obedience, but not that of poverty because, if they didn't have family assets, they provided for themselves by working for example as weavers, dyers and craftswomen. It was the beguines who brought education to girls in continental Europe, starting the first "public" school at the end of the 18th century, more or less at the same time as the one opened in England by Mary Wallstonecraft. The promises of obedience and chastity could be dissolved and the beguines could leave and marry if they wished, although this happened very rarely. Women who chose an independent life were seen as rebellious and disobedient revolutionaries. Some theologians called them a "pernicious species of women" and in fact began to persecute them as heretics. Thus, compared to the beginning in which they simply gathered spontaneously to avoid persecution and protect their reputation, they had to organize themselves territorially, surround their neighbourhoods with walls and give themselves rules. So the first beguinages proper were born in the second half of the 1200s, within the walls where, in addition to their houses, there was an oratory, an infirmary, a cemetery, a bakery and in some cases a beer factory. The word *begijn* / *beguine* has been traced back to *begen* (to pray), or to Saint Begga, sister of Gertrude of Nivelles and their patroness, who had lived four centuries earlier. However, there are only theories about the origin of the name, no certainty. Among the various theories, La Scuola delle Donne® proposes one of its own: beguines could derive from *beginnen*, which in Flemish means to begin. The beguines would therefore be those who initiated or are initiated. Initiators because, thanks to the beguinal movement, many women starting from the XII century found escape from forced marriage without necessarily having to become nuns, being able to live free and independent. Initiated because if we think about the life and works of Marguerite, Mechthild, Hadewijch or Beatrix, we can without a shadow of a doubt argue that they were.

Mechelen – Malines

In Mechelen we find the cleanness and attention to urban planning that we already saw in Kortrijk.

Mechelen is a sui generis beguinage. Let's look at its history. At the beginning of the 13th century some beguines started living together in the Begijnenstraat. In the meantime, due to the increase in their number, they bought a plot of land where the small beguinage and a chapel dedicated to Saint Catherine were built, near the houses where they were living. In the mid-1200's they presented a petition to the bishop asking for permission to settle outside the city walls in an enclosed place.

Before long, cottages and a church were erected on the nearly 20-hectare site between the Antwerp gate and the River Dyle. Thus it was that the beguinage was recognized as an autonomous parish and grew to become a real town which, 3 centuries later, housed 1500 beguines in about a hundred small houses and communal houses. But unfortunately due to the wars, the beguinage outside the walls was destroyed. The women had to go back inside the city walls, thus laying the foundations of the big beguinage. They bought all the land along the walls between the Antwerp gate and the bridge. The area was enclosed with a wall and two entrance gates. The relentless beguines bought up the existing buildings and built new ones and the beguinage within the city expanded. What was its hospital is now home to a large traditional beer factory. Already in the times of the beguines part of the building was dedicated to the production of beer, one of the activities they took care of themselves and which guaranteed them both a good income and a fermented drink, therefore "healthy" compared to the polluted city water. A beguinage was directed by a Grand Mistress, who was assisted by the mistresses in organizing daily life. Wealthy, usually aristocratic beguines built their own houses or bought houses already in the beguinage. The less well-off rented a room and worked as their housekeepers or lodged in small communal houses and engaged in handicraft activities such as lace-making which became one of the most important activities in the 1600's. The beguines were so integrated into the life of the city that they were seen, with their white clothes and bonnets, in the paintings of the Flemish primitive painters of the fourteenth century now preserved in the cathedral. Upon the death of the last beguines at the end of the 1990s, the houses passed to the state, which rents them out to private families who take charge of the restorations.

Leuven – Louvain

In Louvain, the oldest Flemish university, we visited the two beguinages. The big beguinage, with its narrow streets, small squares and bridges over the canal, wells and gardens, is magnificent: a delight for the eyes and the heart. Redeemed and completely restored by the university, it is a real town within a town whose houses today host, in an atmosphere of silence, peace and recollection, those people who study and do research. The harmony of the spaces in all the beguinages also results from precise urban planning regulations regarding the height, width, colour and alignment of the buildings; rules that had to be strictly observed both in the construction of new buildings and in the restoration of existing ones. This made the beguinages the first examples of urban planning and the beguines the first urban planners, aware that order in the living space favours mental and spiritual order. Of the small beguinage of Louvain, founded in the second half of the 1200s and dedicated to Gertrude of Nivelles, only one street remains. The gate, the church of Saint Catherine and the infirmary have been destroyed.

Tongeren – Tongres

The main part of the Tongeren beguinage was built on an orchard. At the time of its creation, fruit and vegetables were used as bargaining chips and this constituted a source of livelihood for the beguines. By 1600 the orchard had given way to the houses, where about 300 beguines lived and the site had become a real town within a town. There was - and still exists - the infirmary with an annexed chapel where the elderly or sick beguines were cared for. Here too there is a street named after Saint Catharine. The small museum of the beguines is housed in a 17th century house built by the sisters Oda and Margareta. After them lived a wealthy noblewoman who could also afford a housekeeper who lived in the cellar. The house has three floors in addition to the basement. In it, although changes have been made that have made it elegant in a way that does not comply with the beguinal principles of sobriety, some furniture and furnishings of the time are still preserved that show us how they lived. In particular, the tall, narrow wardrobes in which the beguines kept their possessions and on whose pull-out shelf they sewed, wrote and ate all in a row, each sitting in front of her wardrobe. In the wooden reliquary, originally placed in the attic, fabric bags were found containing relics of the saints loved by the beguines: Begga, Gertrude, Catharine, Barbara, Rosa, Ursula, Agnes.

Turnhout

Turnhout is perhaps the most beautiful beguinage among those we visited. It is decidedly opulent, with a rectangular structure around the church and a garden with trees. Upon entering the heart skips a beat at the sight of the perfect harmony of the houses, all similar and well preserved. Even here families currently live paying a monthly rent and taking charge of the restoration, thus allowing the sacred houses of free women to survive over time. We met Jenny, who lives in one of the houses and is doing the restoration. Jenny says living in the beguinage is very beautiful, being a protected and inspiring place for anyone who wants to be creative or meditate. Virginia would certainly have found “a room of her own” here. Jenny said that in 1600 360 beguines lived there and that among those people who have chosen to live here today the same community spirit exists: “we help each other, we exchange house keys and get together in one house or another”. Her cottage still has its own small back garden today. The beguines there cultivated aromatic and medicinal herbs. In the museum, which was the elegant home of a rich beguine, we notice a detail that touches our hearts: on the kitchen wall hangs a small cross of reeds, symbol of Bridget of Kildare. St Bridget is patron saint of Ireland, and as the house is original and has not been altered, it means that it was precisely one of the beguines who hung it above the door, confirming the bond that existed in previous times. The house being very large, it had an infirmary to cure sick beguines and an elegant living room to receive guests or to celebrate. In the last few years eight beguines lived there. The last one left the beguinage in 2002.

Beguinages registered to date: 600 in Germany, 300 in Belgium, The number is on the rise

The difference in treatment that neighbouring Holland, which became Protestant with the Calvinist reform, assigned to the beguines is still shamelessly revealed today. We said at the beginning that in Catholic Flanders the beguinages were protected and today they are world heritage sites. But it is enough to move

about a hundred kilometres, being the distance between the Flemish Hoogstraten and the Dutch Haarlem, to find in the renowned Frans Hals Museum this painting "A monk and a beguine" where the mocking and discrediting intention is very clear. The discredit is more than confirmed today - with the exception of the beguinages of Breda and Amsterdam protected by the royal family - given that in Haarlem in the streets named after the beguines near the cathedral, there are some red light houses for which Holland is famous . And, as we will see in a moment, not even Italy has spared these women whose fault it was to want to live in freedom and devote themselves to good works.

The beguine popess: Maifreda the humiliated of Biassono

The beguines lived even in Italy, although persecuted and quickly dispersed. Here they were called bizzoche, pinzochere or humiliata. Indeed, Italy was the birthplace of the most illustrious beguine who ever lived. Her memory and her image have been altered and obscured by patriarchal history but she has not disappeared. We are talking about Maifreda da Pirovano, an aristocrat of a young branch of the Visconti family. Born in the second half of the 1200's, Maifreda entered the House of Humiliate in Biassono, near Milan. She met Guglielma the Bohemian - Blažena Vilemína, daughter of the king of Bohemia. She had been forced to flee her land and had taken refuge in the Chiaravalle Abbey, south of Milan. Guglielma was and is still considered an incarnation of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity, and therefore by metaphor a divine incarnation. Maifreda began to venerate her as a divine feminine manifestation and was her vicar and popess. She ended up on the stake as a heretic in 1300, eighteen years after Guglielma's death, together with her ashes exhumed by the will of the inquisitors. The cult of Guglielma's divinity was secret, covered by that of Saint Catherine – or Hypatia of Alexandria - which we met in all the Flemish beguinages. In her sermons about her, when Maifreda spoke of Catherine she implied Guglielma. The Guglielmaite Catholic Church still exists and is organized in the form of a matriarchy. Today it is accepted by the same church that burned Maifreda eight centuries ago. It is the only church sui iuris to have the authority to confer the female priesthood. In the thirteenth century there were many spiritual movements that sought a voice outside the dogma: among these was the Movement of the Free Spirit which also spread among the beguines and which inspired Marguerite Porete herself. The Free Spirit valued the female mind, free from dogmas, open to intuition and to a conscious acceptance of the female body, otherwise considered a source of shame and guilt, defined by the church fathers as a "missed male", imperfect and inferior both physically and spiritually. The order of the Umiliati was formed in the 12th century on the initiative of wool artisans and craftswomen who, wanting to escape the exploitation of the powerful merchant guild, formed themselves into a religious association to have greater autonomy. The order then gave itself a rule in 1201 and was recognized by the pope. The first houses of the Humiliati were male, female and mixed. They were open to ordinary citizens and the rules of silence and fasting were not observed, so as not to slow down the work of the wool.

One day Maifreda, who had entered the House of Biassono to escape a marriage imposed on her as a Visconti noblewoman, blessed some hosts that had been placed on Guglielma's tomb and distributed them to those present. Maifreda was considered the spiritual head of the Guglielmite, that is the church of those who believed in Guglielma's divinity, and of her spokesperson, her popess who as such taught and administered the sacraments in the House of Biassono. Preaching was public and sometimes took place in the oratory, sometimes in the parlour or in the infirmary. Or even, when the weather permitted, under the portico of the

internal courtyard. However, in order not to attract hostile glances, Maifreda did not publicly affirm that Guglielma was the Holy Spirit, but only privately. On 10th April 1300, Easter Day, Maifreda assisted by the deacons, put on the priestly robes and celebrated the solemn mass foreseen by the Easter liturgy, following the Ambrosian Catholic rite. She consecrated the host and gave communion. Maifreda wanted the priesthood to be open to women. She was betrayed, arrested, interrogated and finally burned alive. Like Marguerite Porete, Maifreda da Pirovano did not make the ritual request for mercy during the final interrogation. After the group of devotees was dispersed, a legend formed around Wilhelm which replaced the historical truth. The role of the Visconti was altered, Guglielma's royal origins erased; the presence of the religious transformed into a disguise of a sexual nature. Until about three hundred and fifty years later, the researcher Giovanni Pietro Puricelli read the acts of the Guglielmites trial in the Ambrosiana code and brought the truth to the surface. Guglielma and Maifreda with their work tried to abolish the gender difference, which for millennia had caused degradation and abuse to all women.

Gertrude Moakley in her pioneering essay on tarot claimed that the popess of the Visconti-Sforza tarot deck was the portrait of Maifreda. We went to Biassono to look for traces. The farmhouse that stands where the Casa delle Humiliate once stood is today very run down, with bricked-up windows and dark rooms. Even the commemorative plaque has been removed so as not to encourage visitors. According to the maps of the civic museum, the area of the farmhouse was one of the production sites of the humiliated community. The older body of the house was demolished in the 1980s. However, in the municipal park, surrounded by three beech trees, a strange statue has been placed depicting a veiled woman with a goblet in her hand which has been attributed to Maifreda for two reasons. First, the strangeness of its discovery - it was hidden among the brambles of the old cemetery, where no trace has been found of any other two statues that usually accompany the iconography of the three theological virtues; nor has his left arm been found missing. Second, by virtue of the strong interest in the history of Maifreda which characterized the Milanese counts Pietro and Carlo Verri: Pietro Verri author of the "History of Milan" from which Manzoni obtained the information on the infamous column inserted in the "Promessi Sposi", and Carlo Verri, commissioner of the rearrangement works of the old cemetery where the statue was found. She wears a peplos in the Greco-Roman style and a veil, therefore not in line with the iconic attire of the beguines which included a closed dress and a white hood, very monastic, which covered the neck and shoulders. But local researchers point out that in the 19th century, when the statue was commissioned by Count Carlo Verri, the iconography could not have been explicit because it would have aroused suspicion in the Church. Another strange fact is that with her right hand the woman holds a goblet at the height of her heart, a detail that would refer to the act of celebrating mass, performed several times by Maifreda. Taking into account Pietro Verri's observations on Maifreda's life and his historiographical choice to value subjects that exemplified pre-Enlightenment obscurantism, there are several elements that lead us to believe that the Verri counts wanted to rehabilitate or remember the great figure of a woman who lived on their lands .

Our pilgrimage in search of the sacred houses of free women ends with Maifreda. Fortunately in Flanders, thanks to the protection of the countesses Johanna and Margareta of Constantinople and the royal family of Orange-Nassau, they have been preserved and handed down until today. Unfortunately, the Italian tradition has not benefited from any protection, but the great women of our past always find a way to reappear, even after centuries of concealment.

Credits

We have personally visited and photographed the following sites:

Collegiale of Nivelles

Kortrijk Beguinage and Beguine Museum

Big and small beguinage of Bruges

Gand Beguinage

Large and small beguinage and cathedral of Mechelen

Large and small beguinage and collegiate of Louvain

Tongeren Beguinage and Beguine Museum

Beguinage of Diest

Beguinage of Lier

Beguinage and museum of the Beguines of Turnhout

Hoogstraten Beguinage

Cascina Sant'Andrea former House of the Humiliate and park of Biassono (Mi)

Thanks to Graham Keen for checking the english version

Sources:

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trilingual official site beguines.info edited by Silvana Panciera

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"The Night of the Beguines" novel by Aline Kiner, Neri Pozza ed.

"The story of Guglielma and Maifreda" from *Ancestors - the vision of women*, by Devana, Edizione dell'Autrice 2017

"Popess Maifreda - investigation on the popess of the Visconti tarot" by Marcos Mendez Filesi for letarots.it

“The tarot cards” Gertrude Moakley, The New York Public Library

"Guglielma Church Western Matriarchy" on Chiesaboema.webs.com

Article by Alberto Caspani of the Gaetano Osculati Association, journalist and local history expert

On the beguines our productions in this playlist

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efPlc5fhxLU&list=PLw-5NhwSbsH_CWVj6Qi4EkVF9ietsu9Cc