The Port of Ostend originated in the sixteenth century

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Cities evolve as a result of demographic changes, circumstances of war or natural disasters. Ostend is a good example. Thanks to Jacob van Deventer we have a first reliable map describing Ostend ca 1562. Due to the Eighty Years War the van Deventer map was already followed in the early 17th century by many maps depicting a totally transformed city.

Ostend, the map of van Deventer, 1562

Early 14th century Ostend is a small fishing hamlet on a dune strip. The strip is separated from the mainland by a creek, the Leed. The sea is the biggest threat. Frequently under pressure from floods, Ostend acquires (1395) 120 ha of land on the mainland. Early 15th century, a new urban area is developed on the mainland. Streets are set out in a grid pattern, there is a marketplace, a hall, a hospital, a new church

Between the old and the new district, a harbour is dug in the bed of the Leed. The two parts of the city are connected by the harbour bridge.

Around 1562 both Peter Pourbus and Jacob van Deventer visit Ostend. Pourbus is there in connection with his map of the Brugse Vrije (the area around Bruges), van Deventer for his City Atlas. These two maps are the oldest reliable representations of Ostend.

Pieter Pourbus works for about ten years (1562-1571) on his map of the Brugse Vrije. A copy (1600-1601) is now on display at the town hall of Bruges. The map is so precise that one suspects that Pourbus used the findings on trigonometry of his contemporary Gemma Frisius, set forth in his 'Libellus de locorum describendorum ratione ', 1533.

Van Deventer, in the service of Emperor Charles V, and later of his son Philip II, drew several maps and plans. Around 1558 (or before) van Deventer is entrusted with a secret mission for his City Atlas, a series of maps of the cities of the Seventeen Provinces. The maps can be considered as topographic maps for strategic military use. The maps are not printed and are not made public. By December 1571 the main job has been done.
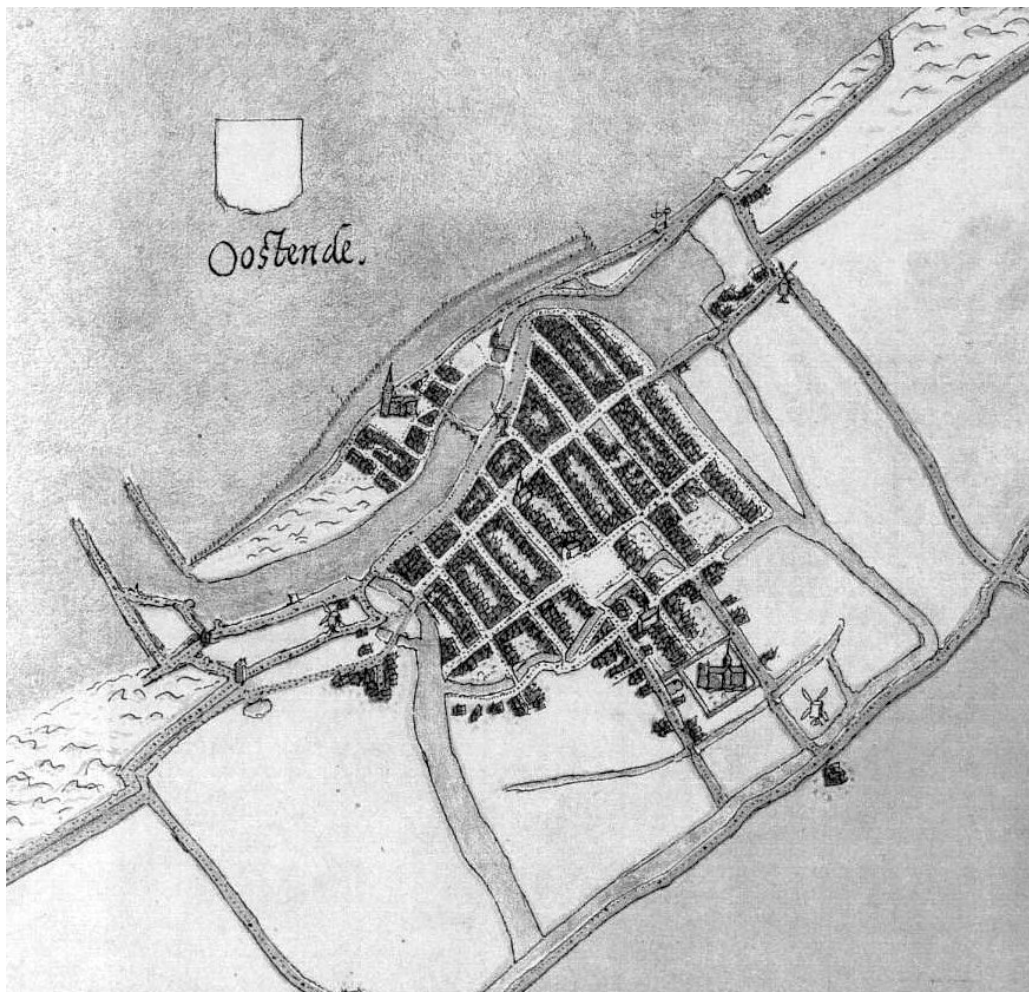

Fig. 1:
Ostend on the map of Jacob van Deventer.

We see Ostend with the geometric street plan of the new city, the harbour, four mills, the old church in the old town, the new church south of the new town.

City Archives Ostend KP/ G021. Facsimile edition of the original drawing

All maps have approximately the same scale (1:8000 on average) and the same orientation, magnetic north on top. (Mid-16th century the true north is about 12 degrees west of the magnetic north). Van Deventer surveyed the streets by walking through the towns, and supplemented his findings by measurements from elevated points such as walls, churches, towers, ...

The task of recording Ostend is ordered in 1560 by the then recently appointed regent Margaret of Parma (half-sister and governor for Philip II). The map of van Deventer provides a more or less accurate picture of the town in about 1562. One sees immediately the twofold aspect of the city: the old site north of the port, the new area south of it. The map helps us to understand the enormous progress of the sea at the expense of the land. The old part seems already largely drained except for the old church and some houses. The old city will completely disappear into the sea after the famous siege of Ostend (1601-1604). The old and new areas are connected by the harbour bridge. Typical of the new district is the geometric pattern of streets. The southern boundary coincides with the current commercial docks. Strategically important elements such as fortifications, roads to the city and gates are very accurately recorded. We also see the new church, town hall, new market, and four mills. On a purely visual approach, streets and roads are often too winding. The streets are usually displayed as being too wide.

The siege of Ostend during the Eighty Years War

The interplay of the geographical location of Ostend and the revolt in the Low Countries against Spanish rule leads to the growth in the 16th century of Ostend from a simple fishing port to a centre of European interest. After the previous transformation from small fishing village to fishing harbour, the city is now undergoing a rapid evolution from fishing harbour to fortified city.

In 1578 Philip II sends his best general, Alexander Farnese, to the Netherlands. He will bring all lost territory in the southern Netherlands back under Spanish control, except Ostend. In 1584 the Staatsen (rebels against Spanish rule) cut through the dunes east of Ostend. This cut brings about 'De Geule'. The whole area around the city is transformed into marshes, rivulets and creeks. This gives the city a very strong strategic position. Ostend is an almost inaccessible island. Later on De Geule will become the current port of Ostend.

After the fall of Antwerp, in August 1585, the entire southern Netherlands are back under Spanish control, except for Ostend and Sluis. Due to the fact that Antwerp is now in Spanish hands, the Staatsen cut off the river Scheldt to all Flemish trade. The Scheldt will remain closed for two centuries, meaning that either a toll charge must be paid or that the cargo has to be transferred on to Dutch ships. This situation will remain unchanged until 1 October 1795, the official date of the annexation of the Austrian Netherlands to France.

Fig. 2: Copper engraving by Tirion according to an image from S. Fokke:
'Ostend after the surrender to the Archdukes Albert and Isabella in the year 1604'
We see the Archdukes Albert and Isabella on horseback, visiting the totally destroyed city.

Published in 'Vaderlandsche Historie', J. Wagenaar, 1749.
Ostend City Archives PT/E0039, Author's private collection.

Fig. 3: 'Ostenda ', ca 1602, probably engraved by Jacob Hoefr
Published in: G. Braun and F. Hogenberg 'Civitates Orbis Terrarum', Cologne (1618), Lodovico Guicciardini: 'Description de
'Belgium dats is: Nederlant ... ', Amsterdam (1648).
We see the old and the new town. An impressive double belt of bastions and ravelins protects the city. There is the old harb

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...nagel according to a manuscript map of Floris Balthasarzoon.
...e touts les Pays-Bas', Amsterdam (1625), 'Belgium Universum seu Omnium Inferioris Germaniae ', Amsterdam (1646) and

...our and now also De Geule (right). Ostend is a virtually impregnable island. The city is under siege by the Spaniards.

Fig 4: 'Plan of the investiture of Ostend surrenderd, 6 July 1706'
Copper engraving published in Tindal's 'The continuation of Mr. Rapin's History of England', London 1758.
The map shows clearly the consequences of cutting through the dunes. The channel that connects Antwerp with Ostend
(mid lower half) via Ghent and Bruges ends at a sea lock where it is surrounded by Fort St. Philip.

City Archives KP/G0079 Ostend. Author's private collection.

After the fall of Sluis in 1587, Ostend is the only remaining stronghold in the Southern Netherlands. Ostend expects to undergo a siege by the Spaniards. Soldiers and civilians work feverishly on the ramparts. In 1600 Ostend is one of the most heavily fortified cities in Europe. An impressive double belt of bastions and ravelins protects the city. This belt is in turn surrounded by moats having enough water even at low tide. Ostend is a virtually impregnable island. In turn the Spaniards isolate the city from the rest of Flanders by a double chain of fortresses.

On 5 July 1601 the siege of Ostend begins. Throughout Europe the siege is followed with the utmost interest. Once the siege begins everything must be imported by sea. De Geule evolves into a full connection to the sea. On 20 September 1604 the capitulation of Ostend is signed. The city is completely in ruins. The siege has cost, in addition to huge amounts of capital, the lives of at least 100 000 people.

It is the irony of fate that due to the siege, the city is completely erased from the map shortly after the first maps, by van Deventer and Pourbus, have become available.

Ostend in the 17th century
Immediately after the siege, the Archdukes Albert and Isabella initiate the reconstruction of the town. It is their intention to use Ostend as an alternative to the port of Antwerp, still subject to the closure of the Scheldt. Wenceslas Cobergher, court architect, is put to work on the reconstruction. Cobergher is inspired by the checkerboard pattern on the map drawn by Jacob van Deventer in 1562.

The old part of the city is abandoned and taken over by the sea. The old port, situated between the old and new town, is only used as a moat. De Geule is deepened and broadened, it is today's port of Ostend.

Given the closure of the Scheldt attempts are made to unlock the port of Antwerp through canals. On 3 September 1613 the excavations of the Ghent-Bruges canal make a start. These excavations last until 1622. The Bruges-Plassendale stretch is completed in 1618-1623. In 1624 a sea lock is put into use at Plassendale. In 1676 a sea lock is completed at Sas Slykens in order to replace the lock at Plassendale. At Sas-Slykens also the Fort of St. Philip is established. Ostend is now the principal port of Flanders.

In the second half of the 17th century, the pattern of the ramparts with eight bastions is adapted to the regular checkerboard pattern of the streets. We now have eleven bastions instead of eight. The image of the city, fortified by eleven bastions, is found on many maps of the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century, most notably on the maps of Matthäus Seutter (1740) and J.J. de Ferraris (1778).

(Fig 5: see cover).

Until 1830

Under Maria-Theresa Ostend is part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The empire has two ports: Trieste in the south, Ostend in the north. Ostend is developed as a versatile international port. In 1776, south of the city, a dock complete with lock gate is built.

In 1781, under Joseph II, Ostend becomes a free port. Due to its free port status and as the only neutral port in Western Europe, Ostend grows into an international trading centre and warehouse. South of the city, a second dock is dug.

During the French period, the 'Imperial Fortress' is built from 1810 to 1812 on the east side of the port. It is later renamed 'Fort Napoleon'. West of the city arises 'Fort Royal'. The latter is completed by the British in 1815 and is then renamed 'Fort Wellington'.

The Queen of Seaside Resorts

In 1834 king Leopold I of Belgium makes Ostend his summer residence. Ostend becomes a most fashionable resort. On 20 March 1865 Ostend is exempted from its function as a fortress. By 1875 all the fortifications are pulled down. The city is further expanded westwards. From then on, beautiful villas and luxurious hotels appear along the western dyke.

1885 marks the start of the Belle Epoque which will last until 1914.

The residence of Leopold II entices the European high nobility to Ostend. During the summer months, the curious can gaze at emperors, czars, kings and queens, princes and princesses. In 1883, the Wellington Hippodrome is inaugurated. The stands are built on the foundations of the old Fort Wellington. But Leopold II also wants his Bois de Boulogne. In 1897 the 27 ha Maria-Hendrika Park is completed. The legendary Orient Express connects London to Constantinople, the North-Express London to Saint-Petersburg, both via Ostend. An artificial lake 80 ha in size is excavated to counter the silting of the port. However the first test in 1912 shows the system is not working, all the work has been for nothing.

James Ensor looks amused ...

I would like to thank Eric Leenders for his inspired suggestions regarding the contents of this text.
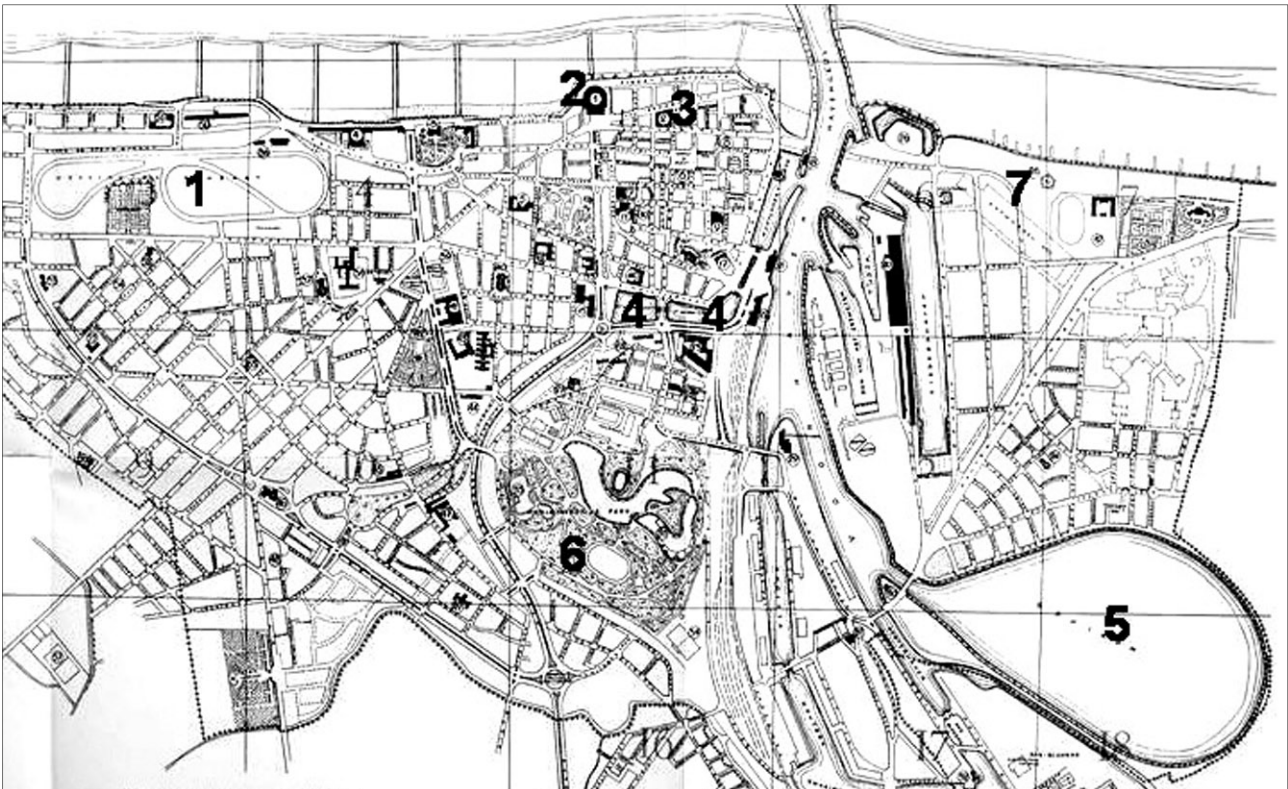

Fig. 6: Map of modern Ostend.
- Top left: the Wellington Hippodrome (1)
- Top centre: the core city. In a corner of the dyke, the Kursaal (2). This was once the entrance to the Old Port. The first street parallel to the dyke is more or less situated where the former port was located (3). South of the core city: two commercial docks (4). In the second dock you will now find the sailing ship Mercator.
- Bottom right: an artificial lake intended to counter the silting of the port (5)
- Central on the map: the Maria-Hendrika Park (6).
- Upper right: Fort Napoleon (7).