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# Antwerp's Appetite for Congolese Hands

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## Antwerp's Appetite for Congolese Hands Jenny Folsom

The city of Antwerp, Belgium, narrates its history through centuries-old folklore concerning a tyrannical giant named Druon Antigoon who cut off the right hands of merchants who refused to pay the toll for crossing the Scheldt River. Antigoon terrorized the local population until Roman hero Silvius Brabo captured Antigoon, cut off the giant's right hand, and threw it into the river.

Located in the Flemish region of Belgium, the thriving port city of Antwerp has fallen victim to French and Dutch imperialism repeatedly over the course of its centuries-long existence. Antwerp, under the constant threat of domination by neighboring European "giants," has thus relied upon the Brabo mythology to narrate its own liberation. Brabo, a rising hero, stands counter to the external forces threatening the viability and independence of this fragile region.

Scholars have mused that the name Antwerp is linked to the Dutch *hand werpen*, which means quite literally to throw a hand. Indeed, the image of the severed hand symbolizes the triumph of the Flemish spirit over a maniacal giant. Today, you can buy chocolate *antwerpse handjes* (Antwerp hands) or photograph the sculpture of a large severed hand that greets tourists on Meir Street. The brick exterior of the internationally famous Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), on the bank of the Scheldt River, is adorned by 3,000 severed hands. Even the local brewery, De Koninck, proudly uses a severed hand as its official logo.

The severed hand, though, is also a sinister reminder of the brutality enacted upon Central Africans during Belgian colonial rule in the 1890s. In the Congo Free State, Congolese hands were systematically amputated when enslaved Africans failed to meet quotas for extracting rubber. Belgian colonists collected and smoked these severed hands to preserve them for later counting and recording. The process was so widespread that the Congolese believed Belgians harbored an insatiable appetite for African hands.

But Belgium does not acknowledge its role in the demise of the Congo and the too often forgotten genocide of approximately 10,000,000 Congolese under its colonial rule. Belgium, instead, memorializes colonialism as its "glorious past," celebrated in its two-dozen memorial groups comprised of former colonists and their descendants and the veneration of monuments funded by colonial exploitation. So as visitors purchase souvenirs depicting severed hands, the symbolism is expertly connected to Antigoon and Brabo, never to the atrocities perpetrated in the Congo. Tourists in Antwerp are redirected time and again to the Brabo narrative; the city has no memorials dedicated to the Congolese murdered during colonial rule.

Belgians strategically separate past from present in offering up carefully parceled bits of history to evoke pride, rather than shame. Failing to connect the chocolate hands with severed Congolese hands is not the result of collective forgetting, per se, but of studiously compartmentalizing historical events into separate spaces.

Because the symbolism of the severed hand *predated* colonialism in the Congo by at least several centuries, the practice of chopping off hands was already on the minds of the Flemish colonists who flocked to Central Africa searching for wealth, adventure, and

fame in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I contend the severed hand is evoked when Flemish nationalism is at stake; a proverbial national posturing, if you will. It represents domination over those who threaten Antwerp, with Flanders identifying with the hero Brabo, but never the bully Antigoon. And yet, the historical record is clear: the Flemish were directly involved in severing the hands of countless Africans. *That* symbolism is never misplaced by Africans.

The specific relationship between Flanders and the Congo cannot be understood without investigating the uniquely fractured history of Belgium. In Belgium, there is an immense linguistic, cultural, and historical divide between Dutch-speaking Flanders (where Antwerp is situated) and French-speaking Wallonia. In 1830, French elites in Belgium declared independence from the Netherlands, which led to a number of policies that attempted to erase Flemish culture and language. Flanders was absorbed by the newly formed nation. This history has led to feelings of indignation and hostility against the elitist French government that dominated Flanders until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of Antwerp as the colonial port connecting Belgium to the Congo accompanied nationalist movements in Flanders and reactivated the Brabo and Antigoon legend. Indeed, Antwerp erected the Brabo statue in front of city hall in 1897, just two years after the Congo Free State was established. Some Flemish nationalist groups even insisted their plight in Belgium was the same as the Congolese—they were both the victims of French elitism and oppression. In this way, Flanders carefully maneuvered itself outside of the realm of culpability for atrocities in the Congo by insisting it, too, must be counted among the oppressed. The consequences are clear: if Flanders as a victim of internal colonization by the French, there is little need to confront the region's role as perpetrator of abuses in the Congo.

As Flanders and Wallonia fractured, King Leopold II succeeded his father to the Belgian throne in 1865. He made it his personal mission to establish an overseas colony. The infamous Berlin Conference of 1885 concluded with an agreement to recognize Leopold's sovereignty in the Congo Free State, his private colony. This accession coincided with the invention of the pneumatic rubber tire, which spurred enormous global demand for rubber, indigenous to Central Africa. Leopold quickly offered concessions to companies ready and willing to extract rubber through the exploitation of the Congolese.

The primary companies that emerged were the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber and Exploration Company (Abir) and the Société Anversoise du Commerce au Congo (SCA), both based in Antwerp. The strong business connection to Antwerp meant that a number of Flemish personnel worked for both Abir and SCA; this may be how the policy of cutting off hands was first transported to the Congo. Primarily, though, colonialism and booming trade offered the once-oppressed Flanders the opportunity to repair its fragile ego: as *the* colonial port in Belgium, Antwerp received resources and stolen goods from Central Africa and repositioned itself as a colonial giant—the Brabo of the story, not the Antigoon.

King Leopold's methods of slave labor and murder did not remain a secret for long. It was at the docks of the Antwerp Harbor that humanitarian E. D. Morel noticed that the abundance of rubber imported from the Congo was being matched by arms cargo headed back to Matadi. He quickly surmised the rubber was secured through slave labor. Before long, activists, especially British missionaries who

worked in the Congo and witnessed these abuses first-hand, formed the Congo Reform Association. The group's members worked tirelessly. They displayed photographs of Congolese severed hands throughout Europe, mounting international pressure to investigate abuses in the Congo. In 1904, an official "Commission of Inquiry" was established to collect hundreds of testimonies from the Congolese, Belgians, and British missionaries. The commission's findings confirmed prior reports of abuse, including widespread mutilation. Although Leopold launched a nefarious plan to distract the commissioners, the public pressure to relinquish his private colony to Belgium was insurmountable. In 1908, one year before Leopold's death, the Congo Free State became the Belgian Congo—officially a state-sponsored until its independence in 1960.

Central Africa has been plagued by stereotypes depicting Africans as inherently violent and uncivilized, but it is clear that the fascination with severed—and severing—hands was imported from Antwerp. All of the memorials dedicated to Brabo and the severed hand bypass the connection between Antwerp and the Congo Free State, while celebrating Flemish nationalism. To connect these historical monuments to colonialism, instead, would, of course, render the chocolate hands immediately grotesque. Who could consume the treat as she imagined the severed hands of Congolese slave laborers? It seems the Congolese were right all along: the Belgians did (and do) harbor an insatiable appetite for African hands.

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Brabo Fountain in front of Antwerp City Hall in the center of Grote Markt. The fountain was erected in 1897 by local sculptor Jef Lambeaux, just two years after King Leopold II acquired the Congo Free State. Brabo can be seen flinging Druon Antigoon's severed hand with the giant's head resting at his feet.



*Antwerpse handjes* are a popular delicacy that debuted at the Antwerp International Pastry Exhibition in 1971. Today, chocolatiers who wish to produce and sell the chocolate hands must follow the strict guidelines of the Syndicale Unie. The recipe and molds are standardized to ensure consistency in





*Hand on the Meir* located on the popular Meir Street in Antwerp.



Congolese men hold the severed hands of their compatriots, Bolenge and Lingomo, alongside British missionaries (1904).