Belgian Miracles

A member of the European Union, Belgium is located between the Netherlands, Germany, and France. The country takes its name from its first recorded inhabitants, ancient Celts known as Belgae, and has a rich history, having been a province of the Roman Empire, the heart of the Carolingian dynasty, and a celebrated medieval textile center. Today, among its many great attractions are such historic cities as Brussels, Ghent, and Bruges, together with museums of Flemish art. While it is a country of scientific advances (a world leader in heart and lung transplants as well as in fertility treatments [*World* 2000, 129]), it is also, according to many, a place of miracles.

I made my first investigative pilgrimage to Belgium in 1998 (accompanied by local skeptic Tim Trachet). I returned in 2006 (with Dutch science writer and translator Jan Willem Nienhuys) as a side excursion from travels in the Netherlands (Nickell 2007a). On both occasions, I looked at purported wonders such as the healing shrine known as the Belgian Lourdes, an ancient miracle statue, and a vial of the Holy Blood of Christ.

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Copy photo from shrine at Oostakker, Belgium, by Joe Nickell

Figure 1. The lower left leg bones of Pierre De Rudder, allegedly healed by a miracle in 1875.

The Belgian Lourdes

I have twice visited the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes (named after the famous healing-spring grotto in the French Pyrenees) at Oostakker, Belgium. The shrine's most celebrated miracle is the healing of a laborer named Pierre De Rudder, whose lower left leg was broken by a felled tree in 1867. Reportedly, De Rudder refused amputation and for eight years suffered constant pain from his open and festering wound. Then in April 1875, he visited the Oostakker shrine where, allegedly, he was instantaneously healed, after which he "walked normally until his death in 1898" at age seventy-six (Neiman 1995, 100–101). On July 25, 1908, the Holy See of Bruges declared the healing supernatural.

Over time, a number of legends grew up about the case, including a claim that De Rudder had been treated by professor Thiriar, physician to King Léopold II (a claim dropped by the miraculists after a denial by Thiriar himself). More significantly, it was claimed that prior to 1875 De Rudder's unmended leg could be twisted at the fracture point to the extent of revolving the foot half a turn (i.e., putting the heel in front). Then, when De Rudder was allegedly cured in 1875, the mending was "instantaneous." Unfortunately, most of the important testimony in the case went unrecorded for eighteen years, and memories of this age are subject to error (Delcour 1987).

For example, Dr. Van Hoestenberghe claimed that he had performed the twisting movement on De Rudder's leg, when in fact the physician's recollection was a false memory. A letter he had written on May 12, 1875 (which had become lost by the time of a canonical inquiry in 1893 but was rediscovered by

1957) revealed that he had not performed the twist, nor even seen it, but had only heard persons talk about it.

Moreover, the twist was apparently not demonstrated at the point of the fracture by showing the naked leg. Instead, it was done with the leg clothed, so the observers could not know where the twist actually occurred. This is a crucial point because certain supple persons can turn their feet almost completely around, like De Rudder, without benefit of any abnormal mobility.[1] Although some claimed the leg was uncovered when they saw De Rudder twist it, two men who were present for his demonstrations "well over a hundred times" stated the leg was never naked on those occasions (Delcour 1987). De Rudder's eagerness to demonstrate the effect at every opportunity suggests not a suffering man happy to suffer more but someone performing a stunt with a purpose—one that will soon become clear.

As to the supposed instantaneous nature of the healing, that claim depends on the dubious testimony of just three persons: an illiterate woman who was apparently represented by hearsay and a father and son who seemed eager to help certify a miracle. (Their story even improved over the years.)

In contrast is the evidence that De Rudder had actually undergone "a certain improvement" about fourteen months after the accident. We know that the Viscount who employed De Rudder at the time of the accident gave the invalid worker a pension, characterized as a "nice salary." It was rumored about the village that De Rudder was malingering in order to effect a life of ease.

After the Viscount died on July 26, 1874, his heir stopped the pension, whereupon De Rudder's wife and daughter had to begin working. Some eight months later, De Rudder may have hit on a clever plan that would allow him to abruptly end his pretended disability so he could, necessarily, return to work: he went to Oostakker and claimed a miraculous cure. However, he returned home with a scar that, reported by Dr. Van Hoestenberghe, was "such as one finds a long time after a healing" (qtd. in Delcour 1987).

Other medical evidence likewise supports the view that De Rudder's healing was less than miraculous. A broken leg such as he suffered could—with immobility and good hygiene—have healed without amputation. Besides, the bones (see figure 1) grew together obliquely in a fashion a surgeon would not have been proud of. Also, that which would have indeed been beyond nature—the reconstitution of De Rudder's dead tendon—did not occur (De Meester 1957, 106). One touted proof that the cure was instantaneous comes from the absence of thickening of the bone callus at the mending site, but this thickening could have been reabsorbed by the body in several months or a few years (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2009, s.v. "callus"). Adrien Delcour (1987) concludes that the physicians who consider the De Rudder case miraculous almost unanimously do so on the basis that the cure was instantaneous, and that, as we have seen, is dependent on dubious testimony. Indeed, there is evidence to the contrary.

The De Rudder case gives one pause regarding other claims of miraculous healing at Oostakker, Lourdes, and elsewhere. Such certifications are often vague and unscientific. *Miracle* is not a scientific concept, and miracle claims are typically only those found to be "medically inexplicable." Thus, claimants are engaging in a logical fallacy called "arguing from ignorance"—that is, drawing a conclusion based on a lack of knowledge (Nickell 2007, 202–205). The De Rudder case is even worse, since there is evidence that an injury, healed long before, was passed off as instantaneous—a miracle that wasn't.

Photo by Joe Nickell

Figure 2. This little statue of the Virgin at Belgium's most-frequented pilgrimage site is said to be miraculous despite being a replacement.

Miracle Statue

Belgium's most frequented pilgrimage site is Scherpenheuvel (Dutch for "sharp hill") in the north-central part of the country. There, in the Middle Ages, stood a great, solitary oak that was visible from all around. The spot was a center of superstitious practices and pagan worship until, in the fourteenth century, a small wooden figure of the Virgin Mary was affixed to the tree, and the makeshift shrine began to gain fame. In time, miracles began to be attributed to the little statue (see figure 2).

The first reputed miracle occurred in 1514 when, according to a pious little legend, a shepherd or shepherd boy discovered the figurine lying on the ground and intended to take it home. However, the Virgin Mary miraculously transfixed him—froze him in place—preventing the statue's removal. Subsequently, the shrine became more widely known.

In 1602, a little wooden chapel was built at the site, and the following year a new miracle was reported: the statue wept bloody tears, reportedly in protest

over the religious schism then plaguing the Low Countries.

Still another miracle was said to have occurred in 1604 when troops of the Archduke Albert (the Spanish-appointed governor of the Low Countries) routed the Protestants and retook Ostend. Albert and his wife, the Archduchess Isabella, determined to thank God by commissioning the erection of a monumental baroque basilica at the site, inaugurated in 1627. Albert died in the meantime, but Isabella walked to the inauguration, giving rise to pilgrimages that have continued ever since, supplicants seeking their own miracles in the form of healings and other blessings (*Scherpenheuvel* n.d.; *Scherpenheuvel-Zichem* n.d.; "Scherpenheuvel-Zichem" 2009).

What are we to make of the alleged miracles of Scherpenheuvel? First, we should remember that the site was considered magical before it was taken over by Catholic Christians, part of a common process known as syncretism in which one religion is grafted onto another. (For example, Catholic conquistadors in Mexico erected a shrine to the Virgin Mary on a hill where the Aztecs had a temple to their virgin goddess Tonantzin [Mullen 1998, 6; Smith 1983, 20; Nickell 1993, 29–34; Nickell 2004, 51–55].) In short, one may ask, are the alleged miracles of Scherpenheuvel attributable to the statue of the Virgin and the power of the Virgin herself or to pagan deities? Or might there have been no miracles at all?

The story of the transfixed shepherd boy is one of those vague, pious folktales lacking any evidence to support it. If we are prepared to believe a shepherd boy considered taking the statue, we can also believe it was only an attack of conscience that stayed his hand, and the rest of the tale is attributable to exaggeration.

As to the statue's bloody tears, that figurine was not the same one that had transfixed the shepherd boy. The original had been stolen in 1580 when the region was pillaged by Dutch Protestant iconoclasts (those hostile to the worship of images). In other words, the statue that legendarily saved itself from a shepherd's grasp was unable to stave off marauding anti-idolaters, suggesting at best its powers were limited.

Thus the bloody tears were produced by a *replacement* statue, and in any case, the phenomenon—judging from numerous modern examples—was likely a pious fraud. In 1985, for instance, a statue of the virgin that wept and bled in the home of a Quebec railroad worker proved on examination to have an applied mixture of blood and animal fat. When the room warmed from the body heat of the pilgrims, the substance liquefied and trickled realistically. In another case in Sardinia, Italy, in 1995, DNA tests on the blood revealed that it belonged to the statue's owner (Nickell 2007b, 227–228). (Her attorney explained, "Well, the Virgin Mary had to get that blood from somewhere.")

The 1604 military victory at Ostend does not seem so miraculous if one adopts the perspective of the Protestants or if one wonders why we should think statues miraculous when desirable things happen (a statue's theft is prevented, a battle

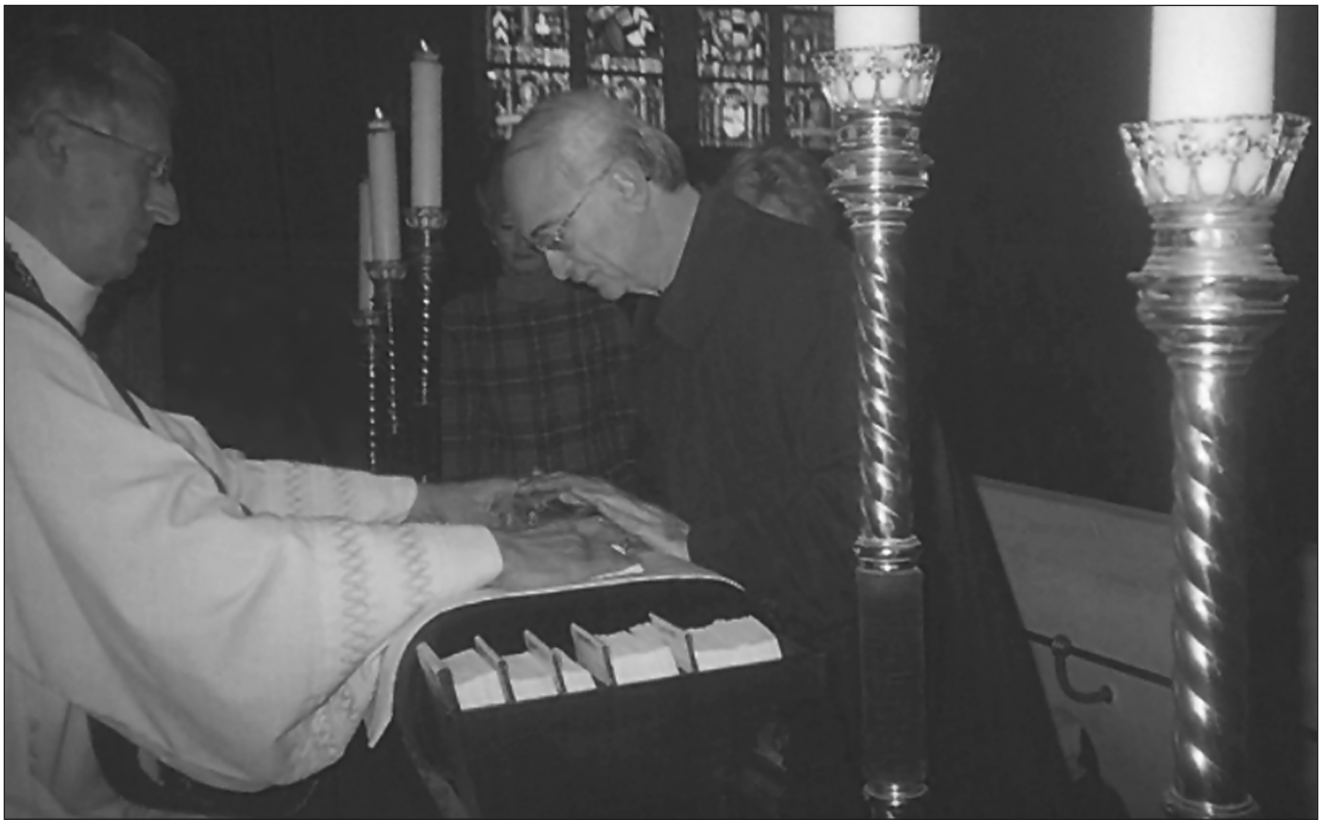

Photo by Jan Willem Nienhuys

Figure 3. Joe Nickell appears to be venerating the Holy Blood at Bruges but is really only getting a good look at it!

won) but not *un*miraculous when bad things occur (a statue is stolen, marauders overrun the land).

Given the image of the Virgin Mary as healer and protectress (Mullen 1998, 10), it is not surprising that desperate people still seek miracles at Scherpenheuvel, where I have witnessed the votive candles, the fervent prayers, the posted notes beseeching "Moeder Maria" for supernatural assistance. Such help may seem to come to those who count only the good luck; otherwise they discount the bad or even—sad to say—blame themselves for not praying hard enough.

The Holy Blood

John Calvin (1543, 226) critically observed that alleged blood of Jesus "is exhibited in more than a hundred places," one of the most celebrated being the Basilica of the Holy Blood in Bruges. I twice visited the site, and on the second occasion (October 25, 2006) I was able to hold in my hands the reliquary supposedly containing the very blood of Christ (figure 3). It has been called "Europe's holiest relic" (Coupe 2009, 132).

According to legend, the Bruges relic was obtained in Palestine in the mid-twelfth century, during the Second Crusade, by Thierry of Alsace. He allegedly received it from his relative Baldwin II, then King of Jerusalem, as a reward for meritorious service. However, chronicles of the crusades fail to mention the relic being present in Jerusalem (Aspeslag 1988, 10). Sources claim that Thierry, Count of Flanders, brought the relic to Bruges in 1150, while another source reports it arrived in 1204. In any event, the earliest document that refers to it dates from 1270 (*Catholic Encyclopedia* 1913, s.v. "Bruges"; Aspeslag 1988, 9–11).

The reliquary, housed in the twelfth-century Basilica of the Holy Blood, is now brought out daily for veneration by the faithful. Although mistakenly characterized by at least one source as "a fragment of cloth stained with what is said to be the blood of Christ" (McDonald 2009, 145), it in fact consists of "clotted blood" contained in a vial set in a glass-fronted cylinder, each end of which is covered with gold coronets decorated with angels. The vial (made of rock crystal rather than glass) has been determined to be an eleventh-or twelfth-century Byzantine perfume bottle.

In 1310 Pope Clement V issued a papal bull granting indulgences to pilgrims who visited the chapel at Bruges and venerated the blood. At that time, believers claimed the blood miraculously returned to its original liquid state every Friday at noon. This not only sounds like a magic trick, but it evokes the similar "miracle" of the blood of St. Januarius at Naples—a phenomenon that forensic analyst John F. Fischer and I replicated, utilizing a mixture of olive oil, melted beeswax, and red pigment. In addition to St. Januarius, some twenty other saints have reportedly yielded magically liquefying blood. My Italian colleague, chemist Luigi Garlaschelli, externally examined one of these in its sealed vial and discovered that the "blood" simply liquefied whenever the temperature rose (Nickell 2007c, 44–49, 169–170).

Unfortunately, the Holy Blood at Bruges soon stopped liquefying, supposedly as the result of some blasphemy that occurred later in 1310. The miracle recurred only one more time, in 1388 (Aspeslag 1988, 11).

Naturally, I wanted to get a good look at the "blood," so I twice stood in the pilgrims' line, supposedly to pray over the reliquary (again, see figure 3). In fact, although I bowed respectfully, I used the two brief occasions to scrutinize the substance. I observed that it had a waxen look and was bespeckled with "coagulated drops" that have suspiciously remained red (Bruges 1998, 28) unlike real blood, which blackens with age (Kirk 1974, 194–195).

In brief, the Holy Blood of Bruges lacks a credible provenance, since it has no record for a dozen centuries after the death of Jesus and is contained in a medieval bottle. It appeared with a profusion of other dubious blood relics, including several with which it had in common the property of liquefying and resolidifying, suggestive of a magic trick. Both that behavior and its current appearance are incompatible with genuine old blood and are instead indicative of a pious fraud. □

Note

1. States Adrien Delcour (1987): "At the price of slight hip dislocation certain rather supple persons (the author of the present lines, for example) can manage without effort to turn their foot around, with the great toe almost to the back by rotation [of] the ankle. This exercise should have been easier for De Rudder because he had lost the extender tendon of the big toe."

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