

# FLEMINGS

**ALTERNATE NAMES:** Flemish

**LOCATION:** Belgium (northern region, called Flanders)

**POPULATION:** 5 million

**LANGUAGE:** Flemish

**RELIGION:** Roman Catholic; Protestant; small numbers of Jews and Muslims

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Flemings (or Flemish) are Belgium's ethnic majority. They inhabit the northern part of Belgium, which is called Flanders, and speak the Flemish language, which is closely related to Dutch. Present-day Belgium was originally inhabited by Celtic tribes and overrun by the Romans under Julius Caesar in 57 B.C. Although Roman rule continued for 500 years, Roman culture was more strongly absorbed by the people in the southern part of the region, who would one day be known as Walloons and speak a dialect of French, a Latin-derived language. In the 5th century AD the Franks, a Germanic people, invaded the region and established control, although they maintained a stronger presence in its northern portion, where early forms of the Dutch language subsequently developed. Frankish settlements in the south were less extensive, allowing the Roman culture and Latin-based dialects already in existence to flourish.

Between the 9th and 12th centuries, both the northern and southern parts of the Belgian region fell under the control of feudal lords, and numerous duchies, principalities, and towns sprang up without any unifying center of power or culture, allowing the Germanic and Latin cultures of the two regions to continue developing along separate lines. Eventually the power of the nobles was challenged by the burghers of the cities, especially in Antwerp, Bruges, and Ghent. As Flemish cities began to play a vital role in European trade, the area entered a cultural golden age in both music and art. However, beginning in the 16th century, both the Flemish and the French-speaking Walloons to their south came under the rule of a succession of foreign powers: Spain, the Austrian Habsburgs, the French under Napoleon, and, finally, the Netherlands. In spite of the Flemings' cultural and linguistic ties to Holland, they joined with the Walloons in revolting against Dutch rule, and the new Kingdom of Belgium was established in 1830.

Throughout the 19th century, the Walloons were the dominant group in Belgium both politically and economically. Their French language and culture were regarded as superior to those of the Flemings, and they led the nation in industrialization, while Flanders remained a primarily agricultural area. Belgium suffered enormous losses in both world wars. After World War II, structural and social problems had a debilitating effect on Wallonia's industries. By the 1930s Flanders had gained sufficient political and economic clout to make Flemish its official language for education, legal proceedings, and government. In the 1960s, the Flemings and Walloons were given political, social, and cultural autonomy over their respective regions. The intervening years have been a period of decline for Wallonia's traditional heavy industries, especially steel and coal, while Flanders has risen in importance as a center for international trade, high-tech manufacturing, and tourism. In 1993, Belgium's constitution was amended, making Flanders and Wallo-

nia autonomous regions within the federal state of the Belgian kingdom, together with the nation's bilingual capital, Brussels, and another autonomous community composed of Belgium's German-speaking population.

## 2 LOCATION AND HOMELAND

The Flemings live in the northern part of Belgium, above an east-west line dividing the country's Flemish- and French-speaking regions. The Flemish-speaking provinces are East and West Flanders, Antwerp, Limburg, and part of Brabant. One of Belgium's two main rivers, the Scheldt, flows through Antwerp and into the North Sea. The land is mostly low, some of it below sea level, with about 64 km (40 mi) of scenic beaches along the West Flanders coast. Silt deposits have created a rich soil excellent for farming, formerly the economic mainstay of the region and still an important source of income. The Flemings, who account for 55% of Belgium's 10 million people, are descended from Celts, who originally inhabited their region, and from the Romans and Frankish invaders who followed. "Vlaanderen," the name for Flanders, is taken from "Pagus Flandrensis," the name of an 8th-century district in the region during the Carolingian era.

## 3 LANGUAGE

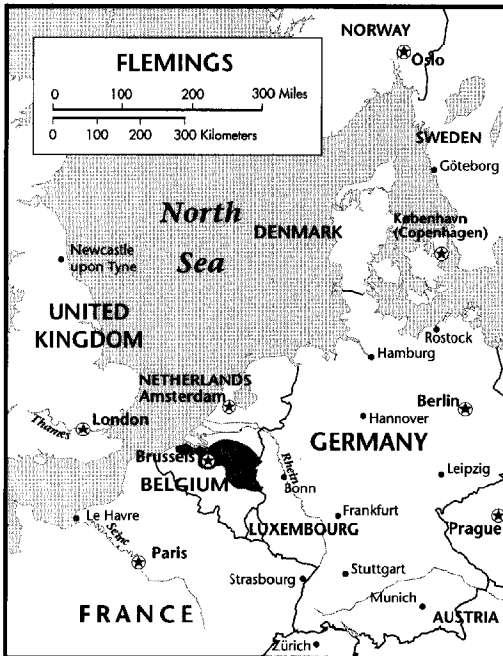
Flemish (Vlaams) is a variant of Dutch that has been spoken for about 1,000 years north of a linguistic dividing line that runs from Aachen in the east to a point north of Lille in the west, skirting the Brussels area. Recognized in Belgium as an official state language, it is distinct from the Dutch spoken in the neighboring Netherlands. Even within Belgium, dialects vary from one region to another, distinguished by differences in pronunciation, individual words, and idiomatic expressions. Flemish does not have its own written language and uses standard Dutch modified by certain specifically Belgian features. The difference between Flemish and Dutch has been compared to that between English as spoken by people in Great Britain and in the United States. However, the difference between Flemish and Dutch may be even greater, as subtitles are sometimes used on Dutch television when Flemish movies are aired. Language differences between the Flemish and the French-speaking Walloons in the south have been Belgium's most divisive political issue.

### NUMBERS

one	een
two	twee
three	drie
four	vier
five	vijf
six	zes
seven	zeven
eight	acht
nine	negen
ten	tien

### DAYS OF THE WEEK

Sunday	zondag
Monday	maandag
Tuesday	dinsdag
Wednesday	woensdag
Thursday	donderdag
Friday	vrijdag
Saturday	zaterdag



#### 4 FOLKLORE

The name of Antwerp—the major city in the Flemish part of Belgium—is derived from the name of a Roman hero who is said to have slain a malevolent giant and cut off his hand (the city's symbol is a red hand). Some of the Flemings' colorful pageants and festivals are based on local folklore, such as the Cat Festival of Ypres. This celebration is based on a legend, which exists in different versions, centering on the use of cats to control rodents in this historic city during the Middle Ages and the necessity of disposing of the cats when they became too numerous or were no longer needed. The festivals, held in their original form until 1817, used to involve throwing live cats out of windows. Since their revival in a more humane form in 1938, cloth cats have been used instead. In Belgium's famed marionette theaters, characters from folklore are associated with major cities. The Flemish ones include Schele (Antwerp) and Pierke (Ghent).

#### 5 RELIGION

The vast majority of Flemish are Catholics. While virtually all are baptized and receive a Catholic education, many do not actively practice their religion, and some are even nonbelievers who remain nominally Catholic in order to avoid being cut off from the many social services administered through the Church. Flanders also has a Protestant minority that includes Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and other denominations. There are also Jewish and Muslim communities among the Flemish.

#### 6 MAJOR HOLIDAYS

The Flemish observe Belgium's 10 public holidays: New Year's Day, Easter Monday, Labor Day (May 1), Independence Day (July 21), All Saints' Day (November 1), and Christmas. However, they also celebrate other dates on the Christian calendar (especially those that mark events in the life of Christ), as well as many folk holidays with origins in history and legend. Folk festivals and processions often involve the use of elaborate masks and papier-mâché "giants." The Flemings are especially well-known for their exuberant celebration of the pre-Lenten carnival season, which begins with the *bommelfeesten* in the East Flanders town of Ronse and continues for weeks. The famous Cat Festival takes place in Ypres on the second Sunday in May.

#### 7 RITES OF PASSAGE

Rites of passage include major Catholic ceremonies such as baptisms, first Communion, marriages and funerals. Although most Flemish do not really practice Catholicism, the important events in a person's life tend to be occasions of major family reunions and stress their religious heritage. Special gifts and wishes will be given for baptisms, first Communion, and marriages.

#### 8 INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Flemish manners are generally formal and polite, and conversations are marked by frequent exchanges of compliments and repeated handshaking.

#### 9 LIVING CONDITIONS

Most Flemish homes, like those in neighboring Wallonia, are built of red brick. The conservatively furnished interiors are generally crowded with oversized armchairs and other large pieces of furniture, including wall units, or breakfronts, containing dishes, glasses, and other household items. It is also common to see religious artifacts and mementos displayed. Often the house will have a combined living room and dining area; large kitchens are also common. A distinctive feature of Belgian housing, and one especially characteristic of the Flemish, is the location of a shop or other small business at the same site as the family residence (an arrangement referred to as a *winkelshuis* or *handelshuis*).

Like all Belgians, the Flemish have access to modern medical care through private doctors and at state-run hospitals and clinics. The vast majority have most of their medical expenses covered by national health insurance. However, they tend to be negligent about dental care and often lose teeth due to decay. Many believe in alternative medical treatments, especially Oriental ones such as acupuncture. The Flemish port of Antwerp, the second largest in Europe (after Amsterdam), is the center of Belgium's water transport system, and the nation's railway network has its hub in Brussels.

#### 10 FAMILY LIFE

The Flemish generally have larger families than their Walloon neighbors to the south. Nuclear rather than extended families are the norm, and married couples often run small businesses together. Traditionally it was frowned upon for an adult to remain single past his or her mid-thirties, and single adults usually lived with their parents until they married, contributing

their earnings to the household income. Today, many young people living at home keep their earnings, which they spend on clothes, cars, and recreation. Also, since the 1970s it has become increasingly common for unmarried couples to live together. The divorce rate among the Flemish, as elsewhere in Belgium and throughout the West, has also risen, not only among young couples married for a year or two, but also among middle-aged couples married for 20 years or longer. The growing gap between generations, as well as the high incidence of dual-career families, has made it increasingly difficult for married couples to care for aging parents at home. The elderly commonly live in retirement communities or homes for the aged, and such facilities often have long waiting lists.

## 11 CLOTHING

The Flemish, like all Belgians, wear modern Western-style clothing. However, in some rural areas, the traditional dark-colored farmer's garb can still be seen.

## 12 FOOD

While Flemish cooking does reflect Dutch cultural influences to a certain extent, it has generally developed along its own lines. For example, the Flemish meat-and-vegetable stew (*hohepot*) consists of vegetables and meat in a clear broth, while in the Dutch version (*hutsot*), the vegetables are pureed, and the chunks of meat larger. Fish and shellfish are central to Flemish cuisine, with staples including mussels and herring. Lobster, shrimp, and oysters are also popular. Rabbit cooked in brown beer with stewed prunes is a regional specialty, as is *waterzooi*, a chowder made from vegetables and either chicken or fish. Dinner, the main meal of the day, is eaten at midday. A typical dinner consists of homemade soup, a meat entrée with vegetables, and fruit and pastry. The Flemings are great beer drinkers and brew some of the best beers in the world.

## 13 EDUCATION

Many Flemish children go to Catholic private schools. Education for all Belgians is compulsory from age 6 through 15, and the national literacy rate is very high. At the secondary level, students choose between trade-oriented, business, or college preparatory training. Some vocational schools maintain work-study apprenticeship programs, although students enrolled in them still live with their parents.

## 14 CULTURAL HERITAGE

In the fine arts, the Flemish are particularly renowned for their painting. The works of Jan van Eyck and the other Flemish masters of the 15th century marked an important turning point in Western art by straying from the predominantly religious themes of the Middle Ages to reflect the lifestyles and concerns of the Flemish burghers who were their patrons. Other well-known Flemish painters of the Renaissance included Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Pieter Bruegel the Younger, Peter Paul Rubens, and Anthony van Dyck.

Flemish literature began in the Middle Ages with works by authors including Heinrich von Veldeke, Jacob van Maerlant, and a Brabant nun named Hadewijch who wrote mystical dramas. During the hundreds of years of foreign rule that began with the Spanish in the 16th century, Flemish letters fell into decline but were revived after independence was attained in

1830. Established 10 years later, the Flemish Movement advocated the advancement of the Flemish culture and language and was also involved in struggles for political autonomy. Prominent 19th-century Flemish writers include Hendrik Conscience, author of *The Lion of Flanders* (*De Leeuw van Vlaenderen*) and lyric poet Guido Gezelle.

Well-known modern Flemish authors include novelists Louis Paul Boon and Hugo Claus. In the 16th century, the works of Orlando di Lasso combined the musical traditions of the Netherlands and Italy.

## 15 WORK

The Flemish are hard workers, often spending long hours running family-owned businesses, sometimes in addition to another source of income. In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, Wallonia led Belgium in industrialization, while Flanders remained primarily involved in agriculture and trade. However, the lesser-developed Flemish region was able to obtain generous international aid in the years following World War II, and its large labor force and relatively low wages drew increasing foreign investment in the 1950s and 1960s. Its maritime advantages—the busy port city of Antwerp as well as the proximity of the North Sea—rounded out a picture of economic success. Major industries today include textiles, automobiles, and chemicals. Manufacturing in new areas such as electronics and computer technology is growing, while the traditional heavy industries, including steelmaking and shipbuilding, are on the decline.

The fertile, flat land in the Flemish region—of which three-fifths is suitable for farming—remains a source of agricultural income, supporting fruit, vegetables, animal feed, and grains. Today two out of three Belgians work in the service sector, and the Flemish regions have benefited from the growth of tourism to such cities as Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, and Brussels.

## 16 SPORTS

The Flemish are enthusiastic players and fans of soccer, Belgium's national sport, and cycling is another favorite sport.

## 17 ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION

The Flemish people enjoy typical leisure time activities such as watching television and reading. Like many Belgians, they are avid gardeners, and every home has a carefully tended garden. Other typical hobbies include stamp collecting and model trains. Popular cultural pastimes include concerts and the theater, and, in Brussels and other major cities, opera and ballet as well. The Flemish also share the general Belgian love of festivals, and their calendar is filled with celebrations of all kinds, both religious and secular.

## 18 FOLK ART, CRAFTS, AND HOBBIES

The Flemish are known for their lacemaking, and other crafts include glassblowing, tapestries, and pottery. In recent years there has been a movement to revive folk arts including street singing, folk opera, and the puppet and marionette theaters that once flourished throughout the region, particularly in Antwerp. In the 1970s, Antwerp also became known as a center of women's fashion.