

Gaasbeek Castle and its *italianità* in past & present

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Abstract. This article is intended as an introductory gateway to Gaasbeek Castle, its history and the potential for new research on sources, literature and (art) collections connecting the current museum to historic sites in Europe, such as Italy, the Low Countries, France and Austria. A first section sketches a short history of Gaasbeek Castle, the second part outlines the museum, highlighting the scenography based on the Arconati Visconti family history. A third and final section covers the research potential for scholars, with a focus on the traces and source material left by the Arconati Visconti.

Keywords: Arconati Visconti; Gaasbeek Castle; Risorgimento; Archives; Belgium; Europe

Il Castello di Gaasbeek e la sua italianità tra passato e presente

Abstract. Questo articolo si propone come un'introduzione al Castello di Gaasbeek, alla sua storia e alle prospettive di nuove ricerche sulle fonti, sulla letteratura e sulle collezioni (anche artistiche) che mettono in relazione l'attuale museo con vari siti storici europei, in Italia, nei Paesi Bassi, in Francia e in Austria. La prima sezione offre una sintesi della storia del Castello di Gaasbeek; la seconda descrive il museo, soffermandosi sull'allestimento ispirato alla storia della famiglia Arconati Visconti. La terza e ultima sezione esplora le potenzialità di ricerca per gli studiosi, con particolare attenzione alle tracce e al materiale documentario lasciati dagli Arconati Visconti.

Keywords: Arconati Visconti; Castello di Gaasbeek; Risorgimento; Archivi; Belgio; Europa

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Gaasbeek Castle: a brief history

The Old Regime

The oldest known mention of a castle on the present site hails from the thirteenth century. Godfrey of Louvain, second son to the duke of Brabant Henry I, orchestrated the construction of reinforced defences in the lordship of Gaasbeek in 1236¹. The so-called Land of Gaasbeek was situated on a strategic position along the border with the County of Hainaut to the south. The county of Flanders also posed a potential threat from the west². The Land of Gaasbeek was passed down within different branches of the ducal family. After several changes of possession (and contestations), the aldermen of Brussels confirmed a certain Sweder of Abcoude as the rightful lord of Gaasbeek on October 10, 1357³. Conflicting interests between Sweder's ambition and Brussels' aldermen would eventually lead to Gaasbeek Castle's first demolition⁴.

After Gaasbeek Castle was burnt down, the Abcoude family was reinstated in its possession and received compensations to rebuild the site. To what extent Sweder and his successor Jacob succeeded in their reconstruction is unclear. In 1434 Jacob of Abcoude gifted the Land of Gaasbeek to

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¹ S. Van Bellingen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek (gem. Lennik, prov. Vlaams-Brabant): de oostelijke sector. Interimverslag 1996-2000*, "Relicta, Archeologie, Monumenten- en Landschapsonderzoek in Vlaanderen", 2 (2007), pp. 153-96 (there: pp. 156-157). See also Fr. Vennekens, *La seigneurie de Gaesbeek (1236-1795)*, Affligem, Abdij van Affligem-Hekelgem, 1935, p. 7.

² Similar defensive measures were struck by the princes of the adjacent counties. For example, the baronies created by the counts of Flanders, close to the borders with Brabant and Hainaut. An introduction to the historiography can be found in: H. Van Ongevalle, *De baronnen en de baronie van Boelare van ca. 1377 tot 1563. Met een onderzoek naar de heerlijke rechten*, (unpublished thesis MA in History, Leuven, KU Leuven, 1987), pp. 9-13. See also H. Vandormael, *The castle of Gaasbeek*, Lennik, Kasteel van Gaasbeek, 1987, p. 3.

³ Van Bellingen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., pp. 157-158.

⁴ Vandormael, *The castle of Gaasbeek*, p. 3.

his nephew, John of Hoorne of Baucignies. His son Philip of Hoorne restored Gaasbeek Castle between 1436 and 1488. Several generations later, the Land of Gaasbeek was encumbered by mortgages and rents. Despite the financial risks, Martin of Hoorne continued the trend of his predecessors: from 1543 until 1559, he allegedly spent a fortune on modifying his residence to the contemporary architectural fashion⁵.

The Land of Gaasbeek was eventually sold on October 4, 1565 to Lamoral, count of Egmont⁶. The beheading of Lamoral and Philip de Montmorency (the count of Horne) became a famous watershed moment in the history of the Low Countries, just before the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648). The sixteenth century ownership of the Egmont family is characterized by the common troubles in the region: a fire in 1566 damaged Gaasbeek Castle. Following Lamoral's condemnation on 4 June 1568, his estates were confiscated, only to be returned to his widow in 1574⁷. The region endured further hardship, as the castle was repeatedly attacked and occupied during skirmishes between Spanish forces and supporters of Willam the Silent (especially in 1582). By 1615, the castle was sold to René of Renesse, count of Warfusée⁸.

During the short-lived peace of the Twelve Years' Truce, René of Renesse embellished the Gaasbeek estate with several lofty buildings, some of which adorn Gaasbeek park to this day: the Gloriette, a chapel dedicated to Saint Gertrude, and a terrace-garden. From 1667 until 1697, the region was ravaged by several war campaigns of Louis XIV. An inventory describes the battered state of Gaasbeek Castle at the end of the seventeenth century: the French had burnt down four towers in 1691, and during the bombardment of Brussels in 1695, the east-wing had been demolished⁹.

⁵ Ivi, p. 5. See also Van Bellinghen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., p. 159.

⁶ Vennekens, *La seigneurie de Gaesbeek*, p. 67. Vennekens references the following archival source: Archive Castle of Gaasbeek, Old Archives, Da45 (Lettre du décret et vente de la seigneurie et terres de Gaesbeek, acquise par messire Lamoral d'Egmont en date du 4 octobre 1565).

⁷ Vandormael, *The castle of Gaasbeek*, p. 5.

⁸ Ibidem. See also Van Bellinghen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., pp. 159-161.

⁹ H. Vandormael, *Louis Alexander Scocckaert, graaf van Tirimont 1633-1708*, in "Gasebeca III Collectanea", 12 (1988), pp. 3-175. Vandormael studied the report of the mayor of Gaasbeek from 1695: General State Archives Brussels, Rekenkamer, n. 1377.

With Gaasbeek Castle in ruins, an ambitious state official named Louis-Alexander Scockaert, recognized a bargainous opportunity to buy it for a pinch from the debt-ridden owner John-Peter l'Esconet. Scockaert reunited many of the scattered estates from the old Land of Gaasbeek through various strategic purchases. The castle remained in rubble until Scockaert's son, Alexander-Louis, had the debris removed. With the rapid successive passing of Alexander-Louis and his close relatives, Gaasbeek eventually landed in the possession of one Paul Arconati in 1796¹⁰.

The Late Modern Period: Arconati Visconti and Gaasbeek

As many wealthy European nobles, Paul Arconati undertook lengthy travels in the spirit of the Grand Tour: a trip from 1782-1783 led from Milan across Great Britain, Scandinavia, Russia and Prussia to Brussels¹¹. He later travelled to the Ottoman empire, which left such deep impression on him, that the nobleman would often dress himself in turban and caftan¹². Paul was a flamboyant figure, who fulfilled the mayorship of Brussels twice (albeit short-lived) during the turbulent Napoleonic era: a few months in 1797, followed by an equally brief period in 1799¹³. During his last term in 1799, Paul also sojourned the regional department (the *Dijledepartement*). In a letter to the department, he described his ambitious plan to erect a triumphal arc in honour of Napoleon. This arc would be placed at the crossroads of the road between Brussels and Paris, upon which Paul envisioned a new road connecting Gaasbeek to Veeweyde in Anderlecht. Marguerite Casteels found no evidence of the department even considering Pauls proposal to spend public funds for a grand arc in Anderlecht¹⁴. However, Paul

¹⁰ Van Bellingen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., p. 163.

¹¹ B. Goossens, *Een vreemde seigneur in het Dijle-departement: Paul Arconati Visconti (1754-1821), socio-economische, politieke en culturele exponent van een samenleving in transitie*, in "Gasebeca III Collectanea", 19 (1998), pp. 5-205 (there: pp. 26-31).

¹² C. Bronne, *La Marquise Arconati: Dernière Châtelaine de Gaasbeek*, Tervuren, Les Cahiers Historiques, 1970, pp. 31-32. See also Goossens, *Een vreemde seigneur in het Dijle-departement*, pp. 146-151.

¹³ The most extensive biography on Paul Arconati can be found in Goossens, *Een vreemde seigneur in het Dijle-departement*.

¹⁴ M. Casteels, *Paul Arconati-Visconti en zijn opvatting over de bouw van een triomfboog (XIXde eeuw)*, in "Gasebeca III Collectanea", 8 (1979), pp. 129-32.

eventually had an arc built on his own domain in 1805, still adorning a road of Gaasbeek parc (which used to cross the current Postweg). The entrance facing north received a so-called folly (*follie*): a barn decorated with the façade of a gothic castle. Adjacent to the folly, an octagonal “powder house” was built. The castle itself remained in a shoddy state, as described by the visiting British captain Mercer¹⁵.

Paul Arconati was an avid art collector and acted as patron to different artists and societies in and around Brussels¹⁶. The acquired pieces testify of a rather impulsive buying strategy: Paul bought what he liked. Some artworks belong to more classical styles, such as paintings and sculptures, whereas others would rather qualify as oddities (minerals, seashells, stuffed bird specimen). The Gaasbeek archive even contains a contract between Paul and Carlos Antonio de La Serna y Santander – librarian of the École Central of Brussels, precursor of the Royal Library of Belgium – wherein Paul signed the purchase of the latter’s book collection of 6536 titles¹⁷.

After Napoleon’s definitive defeat near Waterloo and following the creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, Paul Arconati grew more and more isolated from the outside world. Between 1817 and until his

According to Goossens, the original maximalist design plans were stopped by the protest of local farmers: Goossens, *Een vreemde seigneur in het Dijle-departement*, pp. 124-126.

¹⁵ It took many years however before the arc would be completed: Ivi, p. 122-125. About the reception of English folly-architecture in the Low Countries, see M. F.D. Eekhout, *Excentriek, elitair en erfgoed? Een verkenning van het belang van de Engelse folly aan de hand van belangrijke begrippen in het erfgoeddebat* (Master of arts in Cultureel Erfgoed/Cultural Heritage, Utrecht, Universiteit van Utrecht, 2008). General (then-captain) Mercer’s journal was originally published in 1870, though various modern editions exist, such as: C. Mercer, *Journal of the Waterloo campaign*, Uckfield, Naval & Military Press Limited, 2003.

¹⁶ Casteels has transcribed and edited ten letters (in French) to Paul from various stakeholders, seeking the marquis’ patronage: M. Casteels, *Een aantal brieven gericht aan Paul Arconati (1806-1913), mæcenes van wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten*, in “Gasebeca III Collectanea” 7 (1977-1978), pp. 87-94.

¹⁷ Paul intended to instate a library based on this collection in Brussels. From 1807 onward however, Paul’s prodigality caught up with his financial health. His later attempts to transfer the books to the city of Brussels by way of sale failed as far as we know. See Goossens, *Een vreemde seigneur in het Dijle-departement*, pp. 81-84 & 135-136).

death in 1821 (august 20), Paul lived a secluded life, spending most of his time on his Gaasbeek estate. Paul's inheritance was the subject of a lawsuit between his natural daughter Sophie d'Arc and his nephew Giuseppe Arconati Visconti. Paul's belongings, valued around 2.551.448 francs, were eventually resorted to Giuseppe¹⁸.

Giuseppe Arconati Visconti married Costanza Trotti-Bentivoglio in 1818 (his cousin from mother's side)¹⁹. By then, Giuseppe (or *Peppino*, as relatives and friends called him) had already lost both of his parents and inherited their vast fortune and estate, with immovables in Milan, Turin, Rome, Lombardy and Sardinia. The newlyweds participated in the salons of Manzoni, Porro Lambertenghi and Confalonieri²⁰. Due to their liberal ideas and involvement in the Lombard Carbonari movement, the couple fled, first to Paris, then to Gaasbeek in April 1821, to reside with Giuseppe's uncle Paul²¹. This cautionary escape was proven well-advised, as Giuseppe was convicted in absentia and condemned to a death penalty on 21 January 1824²².

¹⁸ R.O.J. Van Nuffel, *A propos du proces Masson-Arconati*, in "Risorgimento: Bulletin semestriel publié par le Comité belge de l'Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano", 8, 2 (1965), pp. 83-94 (there: pp. 83-84). See also: M. Battistini, *All'ombra del castello di Gaesbeek: il processo civile d'Arc-Masson - Arconati-Visconti (1821-1827)*, Pescia, Franchi, 1952. Van Nuffel critiques Battistini's research rigour on the above-mentioned pages: «Nous avons regretté que Mario Battistini, qui avait pu consulter les archives des tribunaux et les documents conservés au château de Gaesbeek, ait affirmé des vérités controuvées». Freely translated: «We regret that Mario Battistini, who had been able to consult the court archives and the documents kept at Gaesbeek Castle, has asserted some fabricated truths».

¹⁹ A reconstruction of the family tree can be found online: <https://gw.geneanet.org/fcicogna?lang=nl&n=arconati+visconti&p=carletto> [last consultation: 05/06/2025]. With heartfelt thanks to Jan De Leener for providing his genealogical research.

²⁰ E. Fasano Guarini, *Arconati Visconti, Giuseppe*, in DBI, 4 (1962). See also: R.O.J. Van Nuffel, *Les exilés italiens en Belgique*, in "Risorgimento: Bulletin semestriel publié par le Comité belge de l'Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano", 1964.

²¹ L. De Meulemeester, *Hoog bezoek op het Kasteel van Gaasbeek: Carbonari-leider Federico Confalonieri (1785-1846)*, in *Liber amicorum dr. Herman Vandormael*, ed. by G. Eeckhout, Lennik, 2003, pp. 59-63 (there p. 59). See also R.O.J. Van Nuffel, *Constance Arconati en Belgique*, in "Risorgimento: Bulletin semestriel publié par le Comité belge de l'Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento Italiano" 1, n. 2 (1958), pp. 67-89 (there p. 78).

²² E. Fasano Guarini, *Arconati Visconti, Giuseppe*, in DBI, vol. 4, (1962). See also Van Nuffel, *Constance Arconati en Belgique*, cit.

Gaasbeek Castle became a so-called *centro d'italianità* between roughly 1820 and 1839: numerous opposants of the Austrian-Habsburg regime found refuge in the Arconati residency. Costanza acted as the treasured host and correspondent of an important salon at Gaasbeek, visited by names such as Giovanni Arrivabene, Federico Confalonieri, Giovanni Berchet and Giovita Scalvini²³.

From 1833 onward, Giuseppe and Costanza would spend most of their time in Paris or Heidelberg²⁴. A gladly told story in Gaasbeek posits that Carletto's death on June 9, 1839, brandished the castle with the couple's grievous loss, whereafter the mourning parents seldomly returned to Gaasbeek. It was however no secret that Costanza dreaded every stay in the vicinity of Brussels, which could explain her eagerness to leave as soon as the political situation became safer²⁵. The management and upkeep of Gaasbeek Castle under Giuseppe's personnel after 1839 needs further research and deserves a dedicated publication²⁶.

Giuseppe's estates in the Low Countries ensured lavish revenues, which in turn fuelled a comfortable lifestyle in and around Gaasbeek. Italian exiles were well-treated whilst staying with the Arconati household²⁷. Various lithographs and paintings depict Gaasbeek Castle in a good condition, although the upkeep of the estate between circa 1820 and 1888 remains understudied. Boudewijn Goossens discovered sources on Giuseppe's resto-

²³ S. Gola, *Lettere e immagini dell'Europa del XIX secolo: la biografia di Costanza Arconati Visconti*, in "IDIOMA" 16 (2004), pp. 111-126. See also L. De Meulemeester, *Hoog bezoek op het Kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., p. 59; C. Bronne, *La marquise Arconati: dernière châtelaine de Gaasbeek*, Tervuren, Les Cahiers Historiques, 1970, pp. 44-54. Costanza was adored by her kin and her many friends throughout the continent. Letters from her cousins once removed (children of her siblings) reveal how the children quarrelled about whose turn it was to write to aunt Costanza (Gaasbeek castle, Old archives, Correspondence of Costanza, 2 boxes).

²⁴ R.O.J. Van Nuffel, G. Renson, and M. Casteels, *Les Arconati-Visconti: Châtelains de Gaasbeek (Publication d'exposition de 15 juillet 1967 - 3 septembre 1967)*, Brussels, M. Cloet & Co, 1967, pp. 11-12.

²⁵ See for example C. Bronne, *La marquise Arconati*, cit., pp. 53-54. See also R.O.J. Van Nuffel, *Constance Arconati en Belgique*, cit., pp. 75-79, 88-89.

²⁶ Some indications can be found in H. Vandormael, *Kasteel van Gaasbeek*, Brussels, Ludion, 1988, p. 42. According to Vandormael, Giuseppe only visited Gaasbeek to briefly meet the steward of his estates.

²⁷ R.O.J. Van Nuffel, *Constance Arconati en Belgique*, cit., pp. 79-80.

ration campaign: architect François Coppens was tasked with redesigning the castle's gatehouse, renovating Saint-Gertrude's chapel and the triumphal arch, as well as redecorating the castle's interior. As far as Goossens' research proves, only the gatehouse plans were realized²⁸. Further archival documents kept at Gaasbeek castle provide promising source material on the administration of the Belgian estates of the Arconati Visconti family during the nineteenth century²⁹.



Figure 1: Carlo Bossoli, Gaasbeek Castle by moonlight, 19th century (ca. 1830-1840), Gaasbeek Collection. Copyright: Public domain, image provided by artinflanders: <https://artinflanders.be/en/artwork/castle-gaasbeek-moonlight> (Photo number 0450004000, inventory number: 9).

²⁸ B. Goossens, *Hoofdstuk IV: De restauratie van het Kasteel van Gaasbeek*, in *Het verleden herbouwd: Charles-Albert en de restauratie van het Kasteel van Gaasbeek (1889-1898)*, door Boudewijn Goossens e.a., Gasebeca, 20, Gaasbeek, Kasteel van Gaasbeek, 1999, pp. 67-86 (there pp. 67-70). Pages 72-73 report on the envisioned room functions of the time. Goossens refers to Coppens' plans, but these were not inventoried and without placement numbers at the time.

²⁹ The current inventory by Jules Van Cromphout mentions pieces such as: Da n° 125: "Location des herbes à Gaesbeek, Vlesenbeek, etc. commencée en 1809."; Other pieces include accounts on Giuseppe's Belgian affairs: K37 (1847-1848).

Giuseppe and Costanza conceived three sons, neither of them would live to see old age. Carletto died of a disease, probably typhus, in Gaasbeek Castle at merely 21 years old. Carletto had already survived his baby brother, Lorenzo, who died shortly after birth. Giammartino (November 27, 1839) only saw first light of day five months after his brother's passing. He was born in Pau, a South-French city overlooking the Pyrenees³⁰. Like his uncle Paul, Giammartino took part in some military campaigns and went on various travels. He visited Egypt, and voyaged through the so-called Arabia Petraea alongside painter Émile Pierre Metzmacher³¹. Giammartino's fascination of foreign cultures, landscapes and adventure culminated in a handful of books, published in Torino in the 1870's, all adorned with his personal crest: a monogram and his motto *Vita Iter* (Latin for *Life's (a) journey*)³². He also held memberships to the Società italiana di Geografia and the Royal Geographical Society of London³³.

³⁰ C. Bronne, *La marquise Arconati*, cit., p. 61.

³¹ Ivi, p. 62. Arabia Petraea is a term for the lands, part of the former Roman province in the Levant, roughly covering present-day Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and the north of Saudi Arabia.

³² See for example: G. Arconati Visconti, *Ascensione al Monte Rosa nell'agosto 1864 (estratto dal Giornale delle Alpi, p. 403)*, Torino, Vincenzo Bona, 1872. See also: G. Arconati Visconti, *Diario di un viaggio in Arabia Petrea (1865)*, Torino, Vincenzo Bona, 1872.

³³ H.C. Rawlinson, *Address to the Royal Geographical Society*, in *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 20, n. 5 (1875-1876), pp. 377-448 (there: p. 388).



Figure 2: Émile Pierre Metzmacher, Giammartino Arconati Visconti atop a dromedary, 1875, Gaasbeek Collection. Copyright: photo by Dominique Provost, Public Domain, image provided by artinflanders: <https://artinflanders.be/nl/kunst/giammartino-arconati-visconti-op-een-dromedaris> (Photo number 0450128001, inventory number: 621)

At the École des Chartes in Paris, Giammartino allegedly met his future wife, Marie Peyrat. Marie was the daughter of journalist, author, and devoted republican and anti-clerical Alphonse Peyrat, the later senator and vice-president of the French Senate³⁴. The marriage between Giammartino and Marie (opposed by their parents), who only wed by civil contract on November 29, 1873, was short-lived³⁵. Giammartino succumbed to typhus in Florence on February 24, 1876. Without children and further heirs, Marie inherited all estates in Italy and Belgium and an immense fortune. Ma-

³⁴ G. Renson, *De Arconati-Visconti gaven aan Gaasbeek een internationaal karakter*, in "Eigen schoon en de Brabander" 50, n. 6-7-8 (1967), pp. 302-311 (there p. 308).

³⁵ M. Poulain, *Marie Arconati Visconti. La passion de la république*, Paris, PUF, 2023, pp. 45-51. Both of Giammartino's parents were by then deceased.

rie employed her capital to influence sociopolitical and cultural changes, according to her strong-willed societal vision. She held two salons, mostly in her *hôtel* in the Rue Barbet de Jouy in Paris. The first salon encircled politics and was held on Thursday, hence participants were called the *Jeu-distest*. The second salon encompassed more cultural and art-related affairs, organized on Tuesdays. Perhaps most exemplary for the power and influence of marchioness Marie Arconati Visconti are her impact on the Dreyfus affair, as well as her part in the election of Alfred Loisy as chairholder of the history of religions at the Collège de France³⁶.

Marie Arconati Visconti adored history, that is, her selection of historical periods which conformed to her liking: eras of enlightenment and relative religious freedom. For example the portraits of the counts of Horne and Egmont received an honorary place in Gaasbeek Castle, where Marie often trotted around dressed up as a page. She only sparingly visited Gaasbeek: in August and September, when the weather was opportune. The castle itself underwent one of its most drastic building campaigns under the marchioness' vision of a romanticized renovation. Entrepreneur Charle-Albert was tasked with coordinating the castle's transformation, inspired on the revered Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and his so-called restoration of Château de Pierrefonds. The interior underwent great changes as well, since the furniture was often built to order with the Arconati Visconti family crest and initials³⁷. Raoul Duseigneur (a renowned art collector) advised Marie on the desired neo-renaissance furniture designs and antique purchases. He also became her new companion. The marchioness avidly collected books, furniture, jewellery and art, often bequeathed to French museums.

³⁶ A. Lannoy, *La marquise Arconati Visconti et les sciences religieuses en France : Aperçu d'une relation paradoxale*, in *Patrimoine, philanthropie, mécénat, XIXe-XXe siècle*, sous la direction de T. Charmasson, S. Mechine, Aubervilliers, Éditions du CTHS, 2023, pp. 77-90. See also Poulain, *Marie Arconati Visconti*, cit., pp. 64-107. Poulain also contextualizes and differentiates Maries *déjeuners* from other contemporary salons. See also Renson, *De Arconati-Visconti gaven aan Gaasbeek een internationaal karakter*, cit., pp. 308-311.

³⁷ L. Van Santvoort, *Ieder zijn middeleeuwen: de heropstanding van het kasteel van Gaasbeek: het levenswerk van markiezin Arconati Visconti*, in *Droomburchten & luchtkastelen*, ed. by J. De Maeyer e.a., Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2009, pp. 69-91. See also B. Goossens e.a., *Het verleden herbouwd: Charle-Albert en de restauratie van het Kasteel van Gaasbeek (1889-1898)*, cit.

Remaining childless, Marie Arconati Visconti employed most of her fortune to fund her desired cultural and political enrichment of the French state, through well-considered investments in academic chairs, concours, and donations. She desired to leave Gaasbeek Castle to Belgian authorities, which took some doing and (re)negotiations. Eventually, Gaasbeek Castle was bequeathed to the Belgian state on August 30, 1921 and later ratified by various Royal Decrees, to eventually open to the public on February 11, 1924 as a museum³⁸. Marie Arconati Visconti had passed away by then (May 3, 1923 in Paris). Due to federal reforms, Gaasbeek Castle passed from the national level to the Flemish Community on June 28, 1991³⁹.

A museum and its curators

Since its conception in the twentieth century as a museum, Gaasbeek Castle has been preserved under the auspices of curators. By Royal Decree of August 25, 1922, the first appointed curator was Georges Lockem, PhD in Romance languages⁴⁰. Lockem acted as curator for 32 years, but did not leave a prolific repertoire on Gaasbeek Castle. With most of the book collection having been donated to the École Normale Supérieure at Paris, Lockem laid the foundation of a new library, dedicated to the history and study of Gaasbeek Castle (amounting to a few hundred titles)⁴¹. Lockem steered Gaasbeek through the Second World War. Excavations (badly documented) were made in the inner garden during the Interbellum, laying bare two old basements⁴². Lockem also supported the Istituto per la storia

³⁸ Renson, *De Arconati-Visconti gaven aan Gaasbeek een internationaal karakter*, cit., pp. 309-311.

³⁹ S. Van Bellingen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., p. 164.

⁴⁰ E. Wouters, *Van de laatste kasteelvrouw van Gaasbeek naar de Belgische staat: De schenking van het Kasteel van Gaasbeek (1899-1924)*, Master of Arts in History, Leuven, KU Leuven, 2024, pp. 46-50. See also *Belgisch Athenaeum te Vlissingen: Herinnerings-album 1915-1916*, Vlissingen, 1916, pp. 11-13.

⁴¹ G. Renson, M. Casteels, L. Baeyens, *Bouw en ikonografie van het Kasteel van Gaasbeek (1240-1970) met bondige historische schets van het kasteel-museum sedert 1924 tot 1970*, Gaasbeek, Kasteel van Gaasbeek, 1970, pp. 23-26. See also M. Casteels, *De groei van het historisch - en kunsthistorisch seminarie*, in "Gasebeca III Collectanea", 3 (1973), pp. 67-69.

⁴² Van Bellingen, *Het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, cit., p. 164.

del Risorgimento Italiano, led by Alois Simon and professor Robert O.J. Van Nuffel, which published numerous articles on the Arconati Visconti family and their exploits in Gaasbeek and beyond.

Second curator in line became the Flemish writer and poet Maurice Roelants. He succeeded Lockems curatorship in 1954. In the brief span of nine years, Roelants realized some ambitious, albeit peculiar, changes to Gaasbeek Castle. He was a disciple of the contemporary Modernism movement, inspiring some adaptations to the building which were lauded at the time, but regretted half a century later. Some rooms in Gaasbeek Castle were redecorated: wooden panelling and wall paintings were removed or covered up, and inferior objects were banished to the storage depot. Roelants also acquired certain artworks for the museum's collection, one of the most noteworthy remains the *Stations of the Cross* series by Tytgat⁴³.

Gaston Renson took over the helm at Gaasbeek Castle in 1963 after Roelants' retirement. Renson, a history PhD, developed a vision of not only a museum, but moreover a research centre, which would determine the institute's direction and initiatives until the end of the twentieth century. During Renson's leadership, the library's book and documentation collection increased considerably. Despite challenging budgetary limitations, full-time positions for scientific personnel were secured. The ambition to consolidate Gaasbeek Castle as a politically recognized and funded research institute would however never succeed. But this did not stop Renson and his team from aspiring (or calling the institution) as such...⁴⁴ Together with his personnel, local and (inter)national researchers, Renson published a journal dedicated to the Gaasbeek castle's history, its collection and archives: the "Gasebeca" series⁴⁵. The museum welcomed temporary exhibitions by a broad spectrum of artists, lectures, recitals, and other

⁴³ These modifications and other initiatives are described and criticized both by admirers and critics of Roelants. See: S. Van den Bossche, *Maurice Roelants als kasteelheer van Gaasbeek (1954-1963)* "Dag in, dag uit met zulke grote schimmen te leven", in "Nieuw Letterkundig Magazijn", 23 (2005), pp. 17-23. See also: L. Vanackere, *Maurice Roelants als conservator van het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, in "Vlaanderen. Kunsttijdschrift", 54, n. 304 (2005), pp. 33-34.

⁴⁴ G. Renson, *Gaasbeek - vijftig jaar museum*, in "Gasebeca III Collectanea", 4 (1974), pp. 60-66.

⁴⁵ G. Renson, *Ter verantwoording*, in "Gasebeca III Collectanea", 1 (1971), p. 1.

cultural events. Renson explicitly aimed to reach a broad audience, with attention to socially vulnerable groups as well⁴⁶.

Herman Vandormael continued the outlined path by Renson, with some personal accents, from 1983 until 2003. The “Gasebeca” journal, initially conceived as solely destined for the edition of source material, became receptive of research articles as well⁴⁷. Vandormael had obtained his PhD in history at KU Leuven by studying one of Gaasbeek castle’s scions: Louis-Alexander Scockaert⁴⁸. During this period, the castle and its surrounding buildings underwent direly needed restorative works, as well as archaeological research. Vandormael understood the importance and necessity of a connection between a museal historical site and its local community, which was widely lauded at his retirement in 2003. On July 11 of said year, Herman Vandormael was instated as honorary citizen of Lennik (the overarching community of Gaasbeek)⁴⁹.

Year 2004 marked a significant change of direction for the museum, since new director Luc Vanackere shifted art experience to the forefront. The castle’s role as a so-called historic house was accentuated and contrasted by various expositions and installations throughout the rooms of the museum⁵⁰. Between 2015 and 2023, largescale restorations of Gaasbeek Castle and the follies in the castle park were undertaken within the outlines of a masterplan. These invasive works, as well as the covid epidemic, held the museum closed between 2020 and 2023⁵¹.

⁴⁶ Renson, *Gaasbeek - vijftig jaar museum*, cit.

⁴⁷ H. Vandormael, *Voorwoord*, in “Gasebeca”, 9 (1986), p. 5.

⁴⁸ H. Vandormael, *Louis Alexander Scockaert, graaf van Tirimont, 1633-1708. De politieke carrière van een “homo novus”*, PhD in History, Leuven, KU Leuven, 1982.

⁴⁹ E. Van Vaerenbergh, *Voorwoord*, in *Liber amicorum dr. Herman Vandormael*, ed. by Godelieve Eeckhout, Lennik, Godelieve Eeckhout, 2003, pp. 3-5.

⁵⁰ A summary of these developments until 2015 in: L. Vanackere and B. Goossens, *Kasteel van Gaasbeek, Openbaar Kunstbezit in Vlaanderen*, 2015. See also dedicated publications such as J. De Maeyer e.a., red., *Droomburchten & luchtkastelen*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2009; D. De Vooght, S. Onghena, P. Scholliers, red., *Van pièce montée tot pêche melba: Een geschiedenis van het betere nagerecht*, Brussels, VUB Press, 2008.

⁵¹ L. Vanackere e.a., *Beleidsplan Kasteel van Gaasbeek 2021 - 2025*, Beleidsplan, Gaasbeek, Kasteel van Gaasbeek, 2021. A few parts of the masterplan will be completed the upcoming years, such as the renovation of the octagonal pavilion.

Current director is Isabel Lowyck (master in art history and cultural studies), since February 2023. The castle was reopened to the public with a new scenography on July 1st, 2023⁵². The new direction and policy plan for 2026-2030 aims to establish meaningful connections with archival institutions and research centres that share historical or thematic ties with the castle and its former inhabitants. The museum provides space for annual exhibitions curated by both established, internationally recognised artists and emerging talent, inviting dialogue with the permanent scenography. In terms of public outreach, Gaasbeek castle remains rooted within a local network and community, but also fosters international ties, following in the footsteps of the Arconati-Visconti.

Recent renovations and a new scenography: the “Arconati rooms”

Nearing the centennial anniversary of its donation, the castle required a restoration. The project was allotted to a specialized team of various organisations: Origin Architecture & Engineering, HP Engineers, Daidalos-Peutz, Ney & Partners, and Niek Kortekaas. The teams objective was not only to restore the building, but also to design a new route through the museum – increasing its accessibility – and to renew the scenography. Furthermore, the attic and Carletto’s room were opened to the public, thus expanding the route for visitors⁵³.

In order to recreate the diverse Arconati castle environments throughout the long nineteenth century, the project team chose for a box-in-box set-up. Every prominent Arconati Visconti generation received a respective *décor within the décor* to evoke their periodic lifestyle. These box-

⁵² <https://kasteelvangaasbeek.prezly.com/isabel-lowyck-start-als-nieuwe-directeur-van-het-kasteel-van-gaasbeek> [last consulted: 09/06/2025]. See also: <https://www.persinfo.org/nl/nieuws/artikel/nieuwe-directeur-van-kasteel-van-gaasbeek-maakt-een-droom-waar/55002> [last consulted: 09/06/2025].

⁵³ Since this article is primarily intended for an Italian audience, this section focuses on the Arconati rooms in the current scenography. More detailed and elaborate reports on the restoration campaign can be found in B. Pecheur, P.-J. Debuyst, J. Nijs, *Een enscenering van het verleden. Markiezin Arconati Visconti en het kasteel van Gaasbeek*, in “M&L”, 2025. See also *Origin Architecture & Engineering, Beschrijvende nota restauratie Kasteel van Gaasbeek*, in “Beschrijvende nota”, (Brussels, 29 november 2019).

es within Charle-Alberts eclectic rooms act as time capsules, transporting the observer into the character of the historical residents. This is achieved by displaying typical objects and furniture for each person's timeframe, highlighting some exemplary pieces of the collection. Relevant literature, research or film fragments are edited, summarized and displayed on touch-screens⁵⁴.

Paul Arconati's room is adorned with his treasured snuffbox. Napoleon's entourage always had an opportune amount of promotional gifts such as snuffboxes, awarded to prominent figures⁵⁵. Various clockworks refer to Pauls patronage (he gifted and ordered various clockworks, for example to Gaasbeek's parish church) and may even hint at his *memento mori*-mentality towards the end of his life⁵⁶. Giuseppe and Costanza are represented in a neoclassical salon, simulating an atmosphere that could have been the welcome refuge for Italian Carbonari.

⁵⁴ Pecheur, Debuyst, Nijs, *Een enscenering van het verleden*, cit.

⁵⁵ B. Goossens, *De snuifdoos van Napoleon*, in "Faro: tijdschrift over cultureel erfgoed", 2015, 6-7.

⁵⁶ C. Theys, *Kerkhorloge en klok te Gaasbeek*, in "Eigen schoon en de Brabander", 45, n. 5-6-7 (1962), p. 227.



Figure 3: Studio Paul Arconati. Copyright Jo Exelmans. <https://kasteelvangaasbeek.prezly.com/media/album/662e50a5-3a2c-49eb-9ba2-24a450e194a5>.

Carletto's tragic passing is remembered in the very room where he drew his last breath. His iconic portrait as a youngster echoes his youth in the castle. Giammartino's room evokes his vigour for travel, with nods to the Middle East: floor carpets, Arabic artefacts, his image on dromedary-back are displayed. His *Diario di un viaggio in Arabia Petrea* can be browsed on screen. A translation of pertinent sections for his character are translated in English, Dutch and French from the original Italian.



Figure 4: Ange François, Carlo [Carletto] Arconati Visconti, 19th Century, Gaasbeek Collection. Copyright: photo by Dominique Provost, Public Domain, image provided by artinflanders: <https://artinflanders.be/en/artwork/carlo-arconati-visconti> (Photo number 0450237000, inventory number: 1429).

Archives in Gaasbeek: perspectives for further research

Archives on the Arconati Visconti

The archives kept at Gaasbeek Castle can be divided in two groups: on the one hand it stores the collection of documents stemming from historic castle owners as legal successors. On the other hand one can discern the modern museum archive collection: containing both the archives of the museum itself, as well as acquisitions from gifts and purchases since the twentieth century⁵⁷. This section gives a brief overview of the contents and research potential of these archives, with a great focus on its Italian contents⁵⁸. Some of the inventories, such as those of Van Cromphout (1887) and d'Espezel (1918) are over one hundred years old. While their outdated method and palaeographic difficulty pose some obstacles for modern scholars and enthusiasts, the aforementioned documents are exempt from copyright and privacy regulations in Belgium, which allows online publication on the website of Gaasbeek Castle. This online open access will be available later in 2025.

The *old archives* as the documents stemming from before 1887 are called to this day, were inventoried by Marie Arconati Visconti's domain keeper Jules Van Cromphout (likely aided by his wife, who was more fluent in Dutch, and was daughter to the family formerly holding her husband's office)⁵⁹. By then, former restructuring initiatives had already been made to certain archives (for example the documents pertaining to the possessions

⁵⁷ The word *collection* is not used lightly here, although it is a highly contaminated term in archival studies. The most important reasons for describing the conglomerate as a collection are (1) the absence of the original order and (2) the presence of external documents (in essence: archives with no apparent direct archival bond to nor provenance from/to the administration of the Castle, be it before or after its current function as a museum). For terminology on *collection*, *original order*, *archival bond*, and *provenance*: see the Society of American Archivists Glossary (<https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms> [last consultation: 11/06/2025]).

⁵⁸ A concise description of the different archives kept at Gaasbeek Castle is available online: <https://archiefpunt.be/archief/66A9-123D-F305-1960-8D7B5460AE9A> [last consultation: 11/06/2025].

⁵⁹ H. Vandormael, *Rond een Gaasbeekse rentmeestersfamilie*, in "Holveo", 1 (1981), pp. 24-27.

in Hainaut had been inventoried and rearranged by one 't Kint in 1776)⁶⁰. In other words: various administrative manipulations have tampered with the original order of the old archives. Jules Van Cromphout rearranged the pieces from different families and periods according to subject (as a first class). However, these subjects are quite randomly chosen, often confusing true subjects (such as various lordships) with document styles (such as court case files for example). Contemporary researchers thus first need to reconstruct the logic of Van Cromphout's inventory (or its lack thereof), in order to find relevant documents. A new archival inventory, reconstructing the historical order insofar as possible, is one of many great challenges for the current archivist.

As far as the Arconati Visconti archives are concerned, these too are currently spread amongst different file clusters. Some administrative documents on Belgian estates were grouped under certain classes in Van Cromphout's inventory of 1887. Such documents include accounts, lease contracts, correspondence with local domain keepers, public and private deeds, wills and so on. All of said documents range from the time of Paul Arconati and his legal forebears, to Marie Arconati Visconti⁶¹.

A second file cluster was inventoried by Pierre d'Espezel, a French art historian and *archiviste-paléographe*, delivered in the first half of 1918⁶². This inventory is partly in manuscript, with a great part on typewritten paper (be it with several manual corrections). During his work, d'Espezel maintained the old order in 18 boxes (*cartons* in the French jargon), presumably organized during the nineteenth century by a native speaker in Italian (perhaps an Arconati family member). To facilitate future research, the enumeration in original language is copied below, with English transla-

⁶⁰ This section is based on Boudewijn Goossens' dissertation and analysis of the archives, complemented by insights of the current archivist and author of this article Tom De Waele. For Goossens' dissertation, see: B. Goossens, *Algemene structuurstudie van het archief bewaard op het Kasteel van Gaasbeek*, Master in Archival Science, Brussels, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1993.

⁶¹ J. Van Cromphout, *Inventaire des archives se trouvant au chateau de Gaesbeek, appartenant à madame la marquise Arconati-Visconti*, 1887.

⁶² On d'Espezel, see: https://data.bnf.fr/en/ark:/12148/cb121631078#studies_about [last consulted: 11/06/2025].

tion of d'Espezels translation and/or explanatory notes⁶³. The archival documents are described on file level (describing the subject of each case, but not necessarily every document comprised therein). The contents of these files can be dated between the twelfth and nineteenth century (including the generation of Giuseppe and Costanza Arconati Visconti) :

- Carton 1: *Albero corredato dei relativi documenti cui è appoggiata l'illustre discendenza Arconati-Visconti*” (collection of notes and copies of old documents intended to establish the lineage of the Arconati family);
- Carton 2: *Comparizioni probatorie della discendenza Arconati-Visconti* (pleas before the members of the «college of counts, judges and knights of Milan», by various members of the Arconati family, requesting their admission to the patriciate of the city and providing proof of their lineage (16th-18th century);
- Carton 3: *Cariche e qualifiche araldiche* (documents relating to the honorary offices held by the Arconati);
- Carton 4: *Cariche e qualifiche civili e militari* (civil and military offices/rights exercised by the Arconati);
- Carton 5: *Cariche e qualifiche civili* (part 2 of civil offices, see carton 4);
- Carton 6: *Cariche e qualifiche ecclesiastiche*” (religious offices exercised by the Arconati);
- Carton 7: *Cariche e qualifiche militari* (part 2 of military offices, see carton 4);
- Carton 8: *Commende ed abbazie* (ecclesiastical donations to the Arconati);
- Carton 9: *Feudi* (fiefdoms pertaining to the Arconati);
- Carton 10: *Ordini e decorazioni* (distinctions, honorary titles and decorations);
- Carton 11: *Titoli di beneficenza appresso la patria e sovrani* (gifts and donations to and received from sovereigns and governments);
- Carton 12: *Titoli di nobiltà* (patents of nobility);
- Carton 13: *Testamenti e donazioni* (wills and donations);
- Carton 14: *Varii ogetti. Qal Z.* (miscellaneous. Mostly granted privi-

⁶³ P. D'Espezel, *Inventaire sommaire des archives de la maison Arconati-Visconti* (Paris, 1918), 1004, Gaasbeek Castle Archives.

- leges);
- Carton 15: *Matrimoni* (marriage contracts/certificates);
 - Carton 16: *Matrimoni* (2);
 - Carton 17: *Parenti illustri della famiglia Arconati* (lineage documents of families related to the Arconati);
 - Carton 18: *Individuali Arconati-Visconti per nomi A al Z* (records categorized by individual Arconati family members, more or less organized alphabetically and chronologically).

A third and final collection comprises two boxes of correspondence. Most of these pieces are letters to and from Costanza Arconati Visconti. A minor part entails letters to Giovanni Berchet. The contents of these two boxes were inventoried by Mario Battistini, published around 1932. Some of the letters were transcribed in full by Battistini, but most of the material deserves and/or needs further research⁶⁴.

Some research perspectives

While twentieth-century studies on the Risorgimento in general, and its (in) direct impact on Gaasbeek in particular, have proven their historiographical value, new research remains necessary. For example, the publications in the series by the *Comité belge de l'Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano* merit editions of or references to important source material for the history of the Risorgimento. Many twenty-first century historians would be more critical and nuanced however in their analysis of nascent nationalism and power struggles⁶⁵. Promising new research transcends the *grand histoire* narrative whilst reconstructing the sociopolitical networks of women during the late modern period and modern period. The Arconati

⁶⁴ M. Battistini, *L'Archivo Arconati Visconti nel castello di Gaesbeek*, estratto dalla "Rivista storica degli Archivi Toscani" a. III, fasc. II, III, IV (Firenze, Valecchi, 1932). Another publication analyzing the Arconati Visconti archives can be found in A. Simon, *II. Archives du château de Gaesbeek*, in *Inventaires d'archives*, door A. Simon, Cahiers - Bijdragen 5, Leuven, Éditions Nauwelaerts, 1958, pp. 16-26.

⁶⁵ For example Van Nuffel's piece on Costanza Arconati Visconti excels in its chronological reconstruction of historical events, but largely omits ideological reflection. See: R. O.J. Van Nuffel, *Constance Arconati en Belgique*, cit.

Visconti and Trotti Bentivoglio families remain on the forefront of such network analysis studies⁶⁶.

More traditional socio-economic studies on how cross-national families managed their estates often remain hindered by national borders. The mobility of said families often resulted in source material scattered amongst various institutions in different countries. This poses a challenge to date, since all except the most prestigious research fundings such as ERC and Creative Europe primarily focus on national research agenda's (international perspectives remain "nice to have", but are of often of only secondary importance at best). By consequence, research on figures as Costanza or Marie Arconati Visconti has often been imbalanced, focusing mostly on institutions and research material within the own region and nation. Digitization of collections and online open access databases in tandem with growing international collaboration between research and heritage institutions already show promising results, but much remains to be done⁶⁷.

Gaasbeek Castle holds much more potential than the sum of the possible research subjects mentioned above. This article merely scratches the surface of existing historiography and heuristic material connecting Gaasbeek to other hotspots of European history. By providing this overview, the author and the current team of Gaasbeek Castle welcome all scholarly interest. Since its opening as a museum, the castle and its historical residents have sparked a rich bibliography of studies. May the next one hundred years be as fruitful in contributing to local and international discoveries and publications.

⁶⁶ See for example: *Women in art and literature networks: Spinning webs*, ed. by M. Camus and V. Dupont, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018. See also the publications of Sabina Gola, such as: S. Gola, *Lettere e immagini dell'Europa del XIX secolo*, cit.

⁶⁷ See for example: T. Charmasson, *La marquise Arconati Visconti "bienfaitrice" de l'université de Paris*, in *Femmes de sciences de l'Antiquité au XIXe siècle: Réalités et représentations*, ed. by A. Gargam, Dijon, Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2014, pp. 275-294 ; A. Lannoy, *La marquise Arconati Visconti et les sciences religieuses en France*, cit. A promising project on digitization is: <https://www.collexpersee.eu/projet/la-marquise-arconati-visconti/> [Last consulted: 11/06/2025].