

Introduction

In a busy harbor, workers unload ships carrying bricks and wood and hand the building materials over to their colleagues on land. Wheeled carts and cranes transport the heavy cargo to a construction site amid a densely populated city. There, using limestone and bricks, dozens of builders have already transformed a crude solid rock into a monumental edifice closely resembling the Roman Coliseum. Its polished façade is articulated with engaged columns and embellished with shallow niches, dividing it into individual dwellings. Although the construction of the tower has not yet been finished, its occupants seem to have settled in quite pleasantly, chatting, cooking their meals over a fire, and drying laundry outside, the hanging clothes a visual contrast to the balconies decorated with flowers. The scale of the edifice, whose top reaches into the clouds, the efficiency of the workers, and the comfort of the dwellers' everyday life inspire nothing less than awe toward this successful community, united in its audacious construction project.

However, the tower casts a long, dark shadow over the neighborhood to the right, the harbor, and the wide river, which has enabled the import of necessary building materials. The ominous shadow alerts viewers about the potential threat to this impressive and so far successful venture. This warning sign must be taken seriously because what we are looking at is the tower of Babel, as depicted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 1563 (figure 1). Described in the biblical Book of Genesis, the project is never brought to completion, as “The Lord scattered [the builders] from that place into all lands, and they ceased to build the city” (Gen. 11:8).¹ The seemingly thriving community in the painting is actually at the edge of dissolution, and their unfinished tower will soon crumble. The disaster will be caused by the workers' inability to communicate among themselves and with their sovereign, King Nimrod, after God confuses their tongues.

The fate of the community in the biblical land of Sennaar provided a wise admonition for primary viewers of Bruegel's painting, originally displayed in the suburban villa of a wealthy Antwerp entrepreneur, Nicolaes Jonghelinck.²

1 All biblical quotations come from the Douay-Rheims Bible.

2 *The Tower of Babel* in Vienna is one of the three known paintings with this theme by Bruegel. The earliest version dates back to the 1550s; it was mentioned by Croatian miniaturist Giulio Clovio in 1577. The painting, now lost, was made on ivory. S. A. Mansbach, “Pieter Bruegel's Towers of Babel,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 45 (1982): 46. The painting in the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam is neither signed nor dated, and while its attribution to Bruegel is broadly accepted, its date and provenance remain disputed. However, most



FIGURE 1 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Tower of Babel*, 1563, oil on panel, 114 × 155cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

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By the mid-sixteenth century, Antwerp had developed into an international commercial metropolis, where merchants from all over Europe traded goods imported to the harbor at the Scheldt and via inland routes. The city's population spiked to between 88,000 and 90,000 permanent citizens and 10,000 to 12,000 transient inhabitants.³ New neighborhoods—including the *Leikwartier*,

scholars agree that it is a late work, possibly made around 1568. Friso Lammertse, “*The Tower of Babel*,” in *Van Eyck to Bruegel. Dutch and Flemish Painting in the Collection of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen*, ed. by Friso Lammerse (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1994), cat. no. 95, p. 402. Mansbach has suggested that the Rotterdam panel was “most likely” commissioned by Nicolaes Jonghelinck. Mansbach, “Pieter Bruegel’s Towers of Babel,” 49. The panel is significantly smaller than the Vienna version, measuring only 59.9 × 74.6cm.

- 3 Jan van Roey, “De Bevolking,” in *Antwerpen*, ed. Genootschap voor Antwerpsche Geschiedenis (Antwerp: Mercurius, 1975), 96; Guido Marnef, *Antwerp in the Age of Reformation: Underground Protestantism in a Commercial Metropolis, 1550–1577* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.