BELVUE MUSEUM

THE KINGS OF THE BELGIANS
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. KING LEOPOLD I (1831-1865) ................................................................. 2
   Leopold, George, Christiaan, Frederik ................................................ 2
2. KING LEOPOLD II (1865-1909) ............................................................. 3
   Leopold, Louis, Philippe, Marie, Victor ............................................... 3
3. KING ALBERT I (1909-1934) ............................................................... 4
   Albert, Leopold, Clément, Marie, Meinrad ......................................... 4
4. KING LEOPOLD III (1934-1951) ............................................................ 5
   Leopold, Philippe, Charles, Albert, Meinrad, Hubertus, Marie, Miguel .... 5
5. PRINCE KAREL, REGENT (1944-1950) .................................................. 6
   Karel, Theodore, Henri, Antoine, Meinrad ....................................... 6
6. KING BAUDOUIN (1951-1993) ............................................................... 7
   Baudouin, Albert, Charles, Leopold, Axel, Maria, Gustave ..................... 7
7. KING ALBERT II ................................................................................... 8
   Albert, Félix, Humbert, Théodore, Christian, Eugène, Marie ................. 8
1. KING LEOPOLD I (1831-1865)

On 21 July 1831, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha is inaugurated as first King of the Belgians. His family ties with several European royal houses and his excellent connections in the financial world contribute to the survival of the young state. Less than a fortnight after Leopold’s inauguration, on 2 August, King William I of The Netherlands invades Belgium. Without hesitation, Leopold I takes command of the army and asks the French king, his future father-in-law, for military help. Foreign policy and national defence are domains to which Leopold I and his successors will lay claim.

In the constitutional, parliamentary monarchy of Belgium, the king is head of the executive authority. Yet the constitution does not allow him much freedom of action. He cannot act politically without the consent of a minister who is responsible for the actual policies. Nor does he bear the outer signs of royal power, such as the sceptre, throne, crown and regal cloak. Leopold I accepts these terms and publicly behaves as an exemplary constitutional monarch. But under the influence of Ancien Régime ideas – a king rules by himself – he privately criticises the restricted role of the king. In matters of domestic policy, he champions ‘unionist’ governments in which Liberals and Catholics govern jointly.

Leopold I has modern ideas on economics. His stay in Great Britain rouses his interest in British industrial expansion. As king he will set great store by the industrialisation of Belgium.

Leopold, George, Christiaan, Frederik
(16 december 1790 – 10 december 1865)

When Prince Leopold accepts the Belgian throne, he already has experience in politics, diplomacy and the army. As youngest son of the ruling duke of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfield, he receives a military education. He serves under the Russian tsar and takes part in several campaigns, for example that against Napoleon in 1814. Shortly afterwards, he meets the British Crown Princess Charlotte and they marry in 1816. Her death a year later is a serious blow. Leopold stays in Great Britain and becomes a matchmaker for his family members all over Europe. His sister marries the brother of the British king and Leopold becomes uncle and adviser to her daughter, Queen Victoria, the wife of his nephew, Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

As King of the Belgians Leopold goes looking for a new wife. Louise-Marie d’Orléans, daughter of King Louis-Philippe of France, is an ideal political choice. The marriage saves the young and vulnerable state of Belgium from potential annexation by France. The couple have three children who live to adulthood: Prince Leopold, Prince Philippe and Princess Marie Charlotte. The first queen of the Belgians dies in 1850, barely 38 years old. The much older Leopold will outlive her by 15 years. As stipulated in the contemporary constitution, he is succeeded by his eldest son.
2. KING LEOPOLD II (1865-1909)

During Leopold II’s long reign, political life is dominated by the struggle between Catholics and Liberals over the position of Church and State in society. Two emancipatory movements cause serious tensions: the Labour movement and the Flemish movement. In these conflicts, Leopold II takes on the role of arbiter and conciliator. In contrast to his father, he is faced with more experienced ministers and organised parties who are less likely to tolerate royal intervention.

Wanting to apply his talents as businessman, diplomat and politician, three domains are of special interest to Leopold II: national defence, overseas expansion and urbanism.

Like his father, he wants to safeguard Belgian neutrality by building up strong defences. After years of trying to modernise the army and introduce military conscription rather than selection by lot, he finally succeeds shortly before his death.

Leopold’s single most important project is acquiring a colony. In 1885, he succeeds in getting himself acknowledged by Belgium and the international powers as head of the Congo Free State. He governs this country in Central Africa autonomously and completely independently of the Belgian state. The exploitation of rubber and the ivory trade go hand in hand with the abuse of the local population. Due to international and Belgian criticism of his regime, he hands over the colony to Belgium in 1908.

In Belgium, Leopold II wants to put the country on the world map with his urban projects. He personally supervises and finances major projects such as the construction of parks, boulevards and prestigious buildings, especially in Brussels and Ostend.

Leopold, Louis, Philippe, Marie, Victor

(9 april 1835 – 17 december 1909)

Young Leopold has a weak constitution and he stays for long periods in countries with a warm climate, where his passion for the study of foreign nations and cultures is aroused. During his reign, this evolves into his colonial plans in Central Africa and important business projects in Imperial China. The prince is just 18 years old when his father arranges a marriage with Archduchess Marie-Henriette of Austria, who is two years younger. Leopold I wants to ensure the survival of his dynasty and to secure ties with the house of Habsburg. The young couple have four children: Princesses Louise-Marie, Stéphanie and Clémentine, and Prince Leopold. After the death of their son in 1869 there is no longer any direct male heir to the throne. The embittered king remains abroad for ever longer periods, rarely appears in public and secludes himself from his family and Belgian politics. Also, his relationship with his nephew and heir to the throne, Albert, is strained. When the king dies in 1909, there is hardly any mourning.
3. KING ALBERT I (1909-1934)

Shortly after acceding to the throne, Albert I is confronted with war clouds in the European sky. Diplomacy fails and on 4 August 1914 Germany invades Belgium.

The king takes command of the Belgian army. Just like Leopold I in 1831, he believes he can decide on the deployment of Belgian troops without the backing of his ministers. His refusal to participate in allied offensives saves many lives, but it also fits in with his political strategy: to Albert I there is no doubt that Belgium merely has to defend its own territory. He disagrees with the war aims of the allies, who reject peace through compromise and demand an unconditional German surrender. Although the king's behaviour causes tensions with the government, his popular prestige grows. The people adore the 'king-knight' and 'queen-nurse' because of their concern for the fate of the soldiers.

On 11 November 1918, Armistice Day, Albert I reaches an agreement with politicians and other prominent figures about far-reaching reforms such as the introduction of universal single male suffrage and social measures such as the law on the eight-hour working day. In subsequent years, the king discreetly but authoritatively steers a middle course between the interests of the different parties. In particular, he intervenes when he considers the country's unity to be in danger. His immense popularity continues throughout his reign and after his sudden demise in 1934 the whole country mourns.

Albert, Leopold, Clément, Marie, Meinrad
(8 april 1875 – 17 february 1934)

Albert's carefree life takes an unexpected turn in 1891 when his elder brother Baudouin dies. Suddenly he is faced with the challenging task of kingship. In 1900 he marries Duchess Elisabeth von Wittelsbach of Bavaria. Three children are born: Leopold, Karel and Marie-José. Their lifestyle and their attention to the common people contrast sharply with Leopold II's cold and detached demeanour.

During the First World War, Albert I and Elisabeth's popularity reaches unprecedented heights, both in Belgium and abroad. The countless images of the king leading his men capably and fearlessly and sharing the fate of his soldiers forges a strong bond between king and nation. In 1934, Albert I is killed in a rock-climbing accident. He leaves behind a country that loves the monarchy passionately.

For the first time a Belgian queen is not overshadowed by her husband. Elisabeth, 'the comfortress of the common soldier' in 1914-1918, after the war takes the stage as artist, patron and cultural ambassador. The Eugène Ysaïe violin contest, which will become the internationally renowned Queen Elisabeth contest, is her initiative.
**4. KING LEOPOLD III (1934-1951)**

Leopold III is the most controversial king in Belgian history. His short, pre-war reign is marked by extreme difficulties: a global economic crisis, tremendous social unrest, fierce language conflicts, numerous government changes and the imminent threat of war. In tune with his time, Leopold III is attracted by the call for a strong leadership above the parties. He wants to set matters straight by vigorous intervention, but merely strains his relationship with the political world.

In imitation of his legendary father, Leopold III champions a policy of neutrality and strong national defence. To keep Belgium out of a second war, he wants the country to follow an independent course, free from the great European powers. In spite of several peace initiatives, on 10 May 1940 Nazi Germany violates Belgian territory. Leopold III takes command of the troops. After the army's surrender, he stays in occupied Belgium as a prisoner of war, against the will of the government. After some hesitation, the government itself escapes to London to continue the war alongside the allied forces. Leopold's meeting with Hitler in Berchtesgaden, his second marriage, his belief in peace through compromise and his negative attitude towards the government and the allies cause a crisis in the monarchy after the war. For five years, the country is deeply divided between supporters and opponents of the king. While this 'royal question' continues, his brother Karel temporarily takes his place as regent. Under the pressure of serious riots, in 1950 Prince Baudouin takes over the royal functions of his father. A year later, Leopold III abdicates.

**Leopold, Philippe, Charles, Albert, Meinrad, Hubertus, Marie, Miguel**

(3 November 1901 – 25 September 1983)

From the beginning of his reign, the Belgian population sees Leopold III as the spitting image of his father: young prince-soldier in war, champion of scientific and technical progress, supporter of Belgian neutrality, husband and father of a model family. Leopold, Astrid of Sweden and their three children, Josephine-Charlotte, Baudouin and Albert, bring the monarchy closer to the people than ever. In 1935, Astrid dies in a car crash.

After the German invasion in May 1940, Leopold’s decision to stop fighting and stay with his people makes him very popular. The image of the king suffering with his people is shattered when the population learns of his marriage to Mary Lilian Baels in September 1941.

In June 1944, Leopold III and his family are deported to Germany. When they are liberated, in May 1945, the king cannot return to Belgium because his attitude during the war has become the subject of major controversy. The referendum of 12 March 1950 clearly reflects the long-standing discord within the country: 57% support the return of the king, 43% oppose it. In the end, Leopold III abdicates in favour of his son Baudouin. He withdraws from public life and dedicates himself to study, photography and exotic travel.
5. PRINCE KAREL, REGENT (1944-1950)

When Leopold III and his family are deported to Germany by the occupiers, his brother Karel goes underground. Shortly after the liberation, Karel is nominated regent by parliament until Leopold III can return to Belgium. Constitutionally, the regent has the same prerogatives as the king. There is only one restriction: during a regency the constitution cannot be changed.

When he takes the oath, Karel thanks the allied liberators and the resistance in the name of the king. The regent is in line with the government, to the king’s dismay. Leopold III demands a public apology from the government for its conduct in May 1940. Another disputed matter between the brothers is their attitude towards the allies. Leopold clings to his pre-war course of strict neutrality, independent of the allies. Karel, however, realises that this policy has become outdated and that new forms of international cooperation are in the making. Via its good contacts abroad, Belgium succeeds in maintaining its prestige with its allies.

During the period of the ‘royal question’ Karel remains neutral and keeps scrupulously to the rules imposed upon him by the constitution. It is not he but the government that has to find a solution to the conflict. With the return of Leopold III to Belgium in July 1950, Karel’s regency ends.

Karel, Theodore, Henri, Antoine, Meinrad
(10 October 1903 – 1 June 1983)

Prince Karel is the second son of King Albert and Queen Elisabeth. After a long marine training in Great Britain, he attends the Royal Military School in Brussels. Like the other members of the royal family, he takes part in all kinds of official activities from 1926 on.

In May 1940, Karel participates in the Eighteen-Day Campaign as a colonel. During the occupation, he leads a reclusive life in Brussels. He does not see his brother often. In the last months of the war, he disappears and lives undercover in a small village near Spa.

After the liberation, Karel becomes regent. He meets several heads of state and allied supreme commanders such as the British king, George VI; the Dutch queen, Wilhelmina; and Generals De Gaulle, Eisenhower and Montgomery. After his regency, Prince Karel retires to his estate at Raversijde near Ostend, where he dedicates himself, as Karel of Flanders, to the art of painting.
6. KING BAUDOUIN (1951-1993)

Prince Baudouin succeeds his father Leopold III in difficult circumstances. During his reign he is able to restore trust in the monarchy.

From the 1960s on, Baudouin sees the tensions between Flemings and francophones mount. Successive constitutional reforms turn unitary Belgium into a federal state. Concerned for the unity of the country, Baudouin is initially suspicious of this process. Gradually, he reconciles himself to federalisation and comes to see the monarchy as a bridge between the communities.

During Baudouin’s reign, the nature of the royal function changes, not only because of federalisation but also due to Belgium’s membership in several international alliances and organisations. Nevertheless, he takes political initiatives, e.g. during the Belgian colony’s independence crisis, though the government asks the king not to intervene.

Hence Baudouin enriches the royal function with ethical and humanitarian projects. His concern for the fate of vulnerable groups in society earns him respect and sympathy. When the king dies, the people give him a massive and emotional farewell. Since his marriage remains childless, his brother Albert succeeds him. Shortly before his death, an important change is made to the law of succession: from 1991 women can ascend the throne.

Baudouin, Albert, Charles, Leopold, Axel, Maria, Gustave
(7 september 1930 – 1 august 1993)

The Prince has not had an easy youth. His mother dies when he is barely five. After that come the years of war, the exile in Switzerland and the abdication of his father.

The king has difficulties working with the ministers who demanded his father’s abdication. Moreover, he has not had the opportunity to receive the thorough education a future king normally gets. After his accession to the throne in 1951, Baudouin lives a rather secluded life and spends most of his time studying his files and consulting experts. Initially the cooperation with a part of the political world is strained. His marriage in 1960 to the Spanish Doña Fabiola de Mora y Aragón is a turning point in his life. Together with her, Baudouin travels through his country. The population gets to know him as a concerned and involved king. He extends its network of counsellors, both in Belgian and during his many foreign visits. Gradually his authority and prestige grow.

In 1990, there is a crisis over the Abortion Act passed by Parliament. The king refuses to ratify the Act because of conscientious objections. This serious fact is solved constitutionally by temporarily transferring the royal powers to the government. After two days the crisis is over. The popularity of the king proves to be unaffected. At his death in 1993 the expressions of sympathy and affection are innumerable.
7. KING ALBERT II

As the first king of federal Belgium, Albert II is dedicated to strengthening the cohesion between the various sections of the Belgian political system and fostering the federal civic spirit. In addition to his regular contacts with the federal government he also receives regional ministers and visits parliamentary assemblies of communities and regions. ‘Unity in diversity’ is a common theme in his speeches.

Albert II shares his brother Baudouin’s social and ethical concern. For instance, together with Queen Paola he organized a round-table conference on the disappearance and ill-treatment of children, which was held at the royal palace on 16 October 1996. He joined in the public outrage over the Dutroux affair and urged the Minister of Justice to make the working of the court more human and efficient. During the economic crisis he devoted himself to preserving jobs and the competitiveness of Belgians companies. His informal and frequent contacts with the public have made the citizen king, Albert II, very popular.

After the 2007 and 2010 elections, Albert II was confronted with the intensification of communaute differences which seriously hampered the formation of a government and the ruling of the country. As a mediator in the government negotiations he took one initiative after another to break the political deadlock. As thus, even in a new and difficult political climate, the showed the value of royal mediation. In 2013 his age, his state of health and the awareness that his son Philippe is perfectly prepared for kingship, decided him to abdicate.

Albert, Félix, Humbert, Théodore, Christian, Eugène, Marie
(6 June 1934)

Prince Albert is the second son of King Leopold II and Queen Astrid. Shortly after his first birthday, the prince lost his mother. When German troops invaded Belgium on 10 May 1940, Albert, his sister Joséphine-Charlotte and brother Baudouin were taken to safety in France and later in Spain. In the summer they returned to Belgium and spent the war years at Ciergnon and Laeken. Shortly after Albert’s tenth birthday, in 1944, the royal family was deported by the Germans. From 1945 to 1950 the family lived in exile in Pregny in Switzerland. Albert witnessed the forced abdication of his father. He received military training in the Navy. On 11 March 1958, as a child of a king, he was automatically sworn in as a senator. That same year he became President of the Belgian Red Cross and Honorary President of the Belgian Olympic Interfederal Committee.

On 2 July 1959 Albert married Paola Ruffo di Calabria. They had three children, Philippe, Astrid and Laurent. In 1962 Albert was appointed as Honorary President of the Belgian Foreign Trade Office, a post he held for 31 years, during which time he led over a hundred trade missions throughout the world.

As the marriage of his brother Baudouin remained childless, Albert was heir to the throne. On 9 August 1993 he was sworn in as the sixth King of the Belgians. Thanks to his willingness to listen and his sense of humour, the easily makes contacts with people in all walks of life. He devotes himself to the spirit of unity of the country and evinces great solidarity with all those affected by disaster. After twenty years on the throne he decided to hand on the baton to his son Philip. Albert II abdicated on 21 July 2013.