Historians place the emergence of Brussels at the beginning of the 11th century. It had a fast development and became one of the largest cities of the Duchy of Brabant during the late medieval period. Archaeobotanical analyses contribute to the interdisciplinary study of urban developments by providing information on human diet, trade networks, socioeconomic differentiation, agricultural developments and past environmental conditions.

The archaeological research of Brussels is still in its infancy. Although the first macrobotanical studies were undertaken two decades ago, it is only since 2008 that more systematic investigations are carried out. This poster gives an overview of the carpological data (food plants in particular) from the city centre of Brussels, and defines some research questions for future studies.

High Medieval Period
10th c. – 12th c.

Most of contents examined from this period are dark earth layers, identified by archeo-botanical studies as crop fields (Charradas et al. submitted). Macro-botanical finds are rather scarce and consist mainly of charred cereal remains and durable seeds of elderberry and blackberry. They provide information on growing practices and the consumed species but not on the locally cultivated field crops.

At one site, situated in the alluvial valley, larger amounts of waterlogged macrobotanical remains were observed. The abundant remains of flax and hemp indicate they were most likely processed in the area of the site. Cereal remains are not numerous but they are diverse: six species were observed. Besides some remains of fruits, also kitchen herbs and vegetables were found.

All food plants found, including grape, could have been grown locally. Species that could point to a rather dirt or higher status are absent.

Late Medieval Period
13th c. – 15th c.

To date, the late medieval period is the most extensively studied period. Waterlogged litter and waste pits, situated in the lower parts of Brussels, show the highest concentrations of food consumption remains. Compared to the earlier period, the amount of taxa has increased considerably. Vegetables, cereals, and cereals are the most frequently observed cereal species. According to historical sources the wine was more important than wheat in medieval Brussels. However, the amount of cereal grains found is far too small to confirm this.

Recently, remains of pepper, melons, gourds, paper, rice and zucchini, were found in small quantities in two latrines dated to the 15th century. These exotic products provide the first clear archaeological evidence for import and may suggest a rather dirt of the users of the context. Other possible luxury products found in the same context are peach, cucumbers, gourds and black mulberry. The site is not located in a particularly rich part of the city, but in a district where common people and merchants were housed.

Conclusions

- During the late Middle Ages, the spectrum of economic plants becomes much wider with exotic imports from Africa, Asia and southern Europe. Introductions from America appear in the macrobotanical dataset from the 17th century.
- Most of the studied structures with rich macrobotanical contents are situated in the lower parts of Brussels near the Senne river where preservation conditions are best.
- More archaeobotanical studies are needed for a more reliable and complete image of the differences in plant food consumption across time and space, and to confront these historical data.
- To obtain information about access to more general versus more expensive and luxurious food products, it would be interesting to study contexts from the districts of Brussels where the higher strata of society lived.

Material and methods
Macrobotanical data were collected from all museum publications and reports (Laurier et al., 1997. Laurier et al., 2008. Brouckaert et al., 2004-2015) and entered into an Arborbase database. Only well dated contexts were included in the overview. Seven of the 11 archaeological sites have contexts from multiple periods.

Early Modern Period
16th c. – 18th c.

It is striking that in the more recent periods the amount of species decreases. This can be attributed to the current state of research. From the Early modern period, three sites with latrine finds were studied. Species identified from this period include beets, pumpkin, sweet potato, and rose.

Modern Age
19th c. – 20th c.

Contents dated to the Modern Age, were only occasionally sampled. Tomatoes appear in the archeo-botanical dataset from the 18th/19th century onwards.