



## E-History

### The Dutch history in a nutshell

#### God created the earth but the Dutch.....

What makes the Netherlands the Netherlands?<sup>1</sup> An impossible question that we will try to answer in a nutshell! Somewhere in the periphery of mainland Europe was a wet and swampy area where people went to live.<sup>2</sup> Land, if there was any, was continuously flooded. However, the inhabitants stayed. Together they built polders and dikes and reclaimed the land.<sup>3</sup> Working together was of vital importance to preserve the newly acquired land against the overpowering water. Gradually, highly developed agriculture and industry emerged.

#### The influence of water

However, the sea and the waterways were not only the enemy for the inhabitants. When the inhabitants of the Lowlands were able to sail the sea and the rivers, trade coalitions were quickly formed, such as the Hanseatic League, the great Baltic trade ('Mother of All Trade') and later the VOC (Dutch East India Company).<sup>4</sup> It then became apparent that the lowlands with their river delta (Rhine, Scheldt and Meuse) were in a good position. The river delta was characterized by urbanization and the emergence of trading cities, which relocated and developed over the centuries.<sup>5</sup> The Netherlands became an important trading hub in Western Europe, which it still is today.

#### Pragmatic tolerance

Due to various circumstances, the power of the nobility and the church had diminished over time, and political decisions were made after long negotiations and compromises.<sup>6</sup> There was religious tolerance, although the Protestant religion was most present compared to other religions. The Dutch were pragmatic, materialistic and lived in relative freedom. People began to believe that everything was feasible. Because of the various international contacts and waves of migration (among others Flemish, Jews and Huguenots) over the centuries, the Dutch were open to foreign influences and became more cosmopolitan in nature. Partly inspired by economic interests, Dutch society became a multicultural society.<sup>7</sup> Today's expats are the living proof that this process is still going on.

## The Dutch language

Typical Dutch, of course, is the Dutch language, which came into being as gradually as the tides that come and go. The Netherlands had a high degree of literacy from an early age. One of the first sentences written in Dutch (from around 1100) that were found is incomparably beautiful: *Hebban olla vogala nestas hagunnan hinase hic anda thu, what unbidan we now? (All birds build a nest, except you and me; what are we waiting for?).*<sup>8</sup> And the rest is history...

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<sup>1</sup> Recommended books on Dutch history are: *Dutch History in a nutshell*, by Beliën en van Hoogstraten (Prometheus 2016) and *A Concise History of the Netherlands*, by James Kennedy (Cambridge University Press 2017) and *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, edited by Blom and Lamberts (Bert Bakker 2014). On the internet the websites: *Geschiedenis.nl*; *Historiek.net*; *World Atlas.com* (Netherlands History Timeline).

<sup>2</sup> A quarter of the Netherlands lies below sea level. The lowest point is no less than 7 meters.

<sup>3</sup> Between the 11th and 13th centuries, much of the area was drained by dewatering, reclamation and embankments. Water boards were created and in the following centuries lakes (e.g. *Beemster 1608-1612*) and peat ponds could be drained by windmills.

<sup>4</sup> The Hanseatic League covenanted ca. 1350-1450. It was an informal trading alliance between various cities in northwestern Europe. Such cities are: Arnhem, Bruges, Dantzig, Deventer, Groningen, Harderwijk, London, Lübeck, Cologne, Novgorod, Nijmegen, Riga, Stockholm, Turku, Wageningen and Zwolle.

<sup>5</sup> The oldest cities in the Netherlands are Maastricht, Nijmegen, Heerlen and Voorburg around the year zero. After that, Utrecht, Deventer, Middelburg and Stavoren emerged. Amsterdam only came into being around the year 1000.

<sup>6</sup> Until the 19th century, the Netherlands was divided into different regions, often with their own government.

<sup>7</sup> The Netherlands is a real immigration country. During the 80-year war, many Flemish people came to the north (in stead of the later Netherlands). The Huguenots arrived in large numbers after 1685. The Spanish and Portuguese Jews arrived at the end of the 15th and 16th centuries and the German Jews in the 17th century. In the 20th century, mainly people from the former colonial areas such as Indonesia and Surinam; and so-called guest workers from Italy, Spain, Morocco and Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> This text is written in Old Dutch with the Latin version (*quid expectamus nunc abent omnes volucres nidos inceptos nisi ego et tu*) and is written by a Flemish monk in an English monastery. A little piece of writing (probably a Spanish folk song) to try out his newly carved quill (i.e. pen). When it was written it was mainly in Latin. Stories and songs were told and sung in the vernacular and orally in these periods. Presumably, the 6th century sentence: *'malto thi afrio lito'* ('I make you free, half free') is the oldest Old Dutch sentence. Until a new older text is to be discovered!



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