



The Little History of the Netherlands

for
dummies®

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BBNC
uitgevers

Amersfoort, 2016

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Introduction

Have you forgotten what you learned in school about Dutch history? Or would you just like to read more about it? *The Little History of the Netherlands for Dummies* is glad to be of service. With fun facts, but also with the broad outlines of Dutch history. When you've read this book, you'll be able to put in a word about what happened, but you'll also know some of the stories that are circulating.

About This Book

For sure, there is also an official canon of Dutch history, providing an overview of what any Dutchman is supposed to know. This book, however, was written to make sure you enjoy reading about the history of the Netherlands. We'll present the events – as much as possible – in chronological order. This will include mentioning dates and years, but don't be afraid... you don't have to take an exam. Dates merely provide an easy way for presenting historical facts.

What Characterizes the Netherlands?

The shelves are filled with books about this topic. If you read *The Little History of the Netherlands for Dummies*, you'll know without having to read all those books. Can we actually characterize the Netherlands? Someone from Belgium will say that Dutchmen are fearfully frugal. A German will say that we have an oversized football-ego. An Englishman will conveniently forget that the English have learned a lot from the Dutch. A Frenchman might

find us ill-mannered. And you will probably also have an opinion about the Netherlands by the time you've finished this book.

It's absolutely impossible to cover the entire history of the Netherlands in 144 pages. For those of you who would like to dig a little deeper there is the *History of the Low Countries*, edited by J.C.H. Blom and E. Lamberts, translated by James C. Kennedy, offering an overview of the history of the Netherlands and Belgium. Another book is by Paul Arblaster: *A History of the Low Countries*. A good read is *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* by C.R. Boxer. Two 19th century classics are by the American John Lothrop Motley: *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* and *History of the United Netherlands*.

Mind the Icons!

In the margins of this book, you will occasionally find some icons. They will tell you at a glance what's in the adjacent paragraph and will quickly give an impression of this particular part of the Dutch history.



This icon draws attention to a brief and clear explanation of events and processes. Interesting, but don't worry if you forget something.



This icon signals an important event in history or marks the broad outlines of a certain historic period.



This icon marks a quote from a historical figure or a visitor of the Low Countries.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Prehistory and Romans

Franks, Frisians and Saxons

From crisis to wealth

Christianity

Chapter 1

From Hunters to City Dwellers (10.000 BC – AD 1200)

Roads, embankments, fields, buildings, streets, anywhere in the Netherlands you see traces of human activity. In Amsterdam you'll walk streets that are sometimes more than seven hundred years old. In the countryside you'll even find roads that have been there for over two thousand years. Check the internet and you'll come across archives and old newspapers with great stories from our history. This book conveniently summarizes the knowledge we gathered from all those stories.

Prehistory, Featuring Hunters and Farmers

The first traces of human occupation in the Netherlands date to around 10.000 BC, when hunters gradually start to settle. Remains of the first people practicing agriculture and animal husbandry date to 5000 BC. This was quite a major development, as sowing, ploughing and keeping cattle represent an important technological breakthrough. The development is far from gradual and sometimes farmers become hunters again for a while. Some thousand individuals live in these areas around 10.000 BC. In the year 500 BC, their number has grown to 100,000. Spectacular are the dolmen in Drenthe, a type of megalithic stone tomb once covered with soil. They are about 5400 years old.

THE TREATY OF MALTA AND THE BETUWE FREIGHT LINE



IMPORTANT

Almost all European countries signed the Treaty of Malta in 1992. The Dutch law regarding the preservation of archaeological remains was adapted to this treaty, establishing a new law concerning the care for archaeological monuments (September 1, 2007). The Treaty of Malta states that archaeologists should be consulted when the plans for extensive projects are being developed. A good example is the construction of the Betuwe freight line between Rotterdam and Zevenaar. Sometimes archaeological excavations need to take place, but on occasion the line is redirected or even constructed on a higher level so as to leave the ancient remains untouched. The investi-

gations add to our insight into the human occupation of the delta, going back to 5.000 BC.

The Romans Think We're a Pathetic People (15 BC – AD 400)

Romans like to organize the world around them. In the Low Countries they build roads, dig canals and construct army camps, villas and cities. And they're the first to write about our country. The Roman general Caesar (100–44 BC) mentions Gallic tribes living here in his book *De Bello Gallico*. Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), serving as an officer in the year 47 and participating in a naval expedition against the Frisians, writes about the Chauci in the northern part of the country: 'There lives a pathetic people on high mounds or dams that they have raised to the highest water level they know.' A chaste and faithful people though, according to the Roman writer Tacitus (AD 56–117), who is fed up with the decadence of Rome in his time.

The first Romans get here during Caesar's expedition to Gaul. The Roman emperor Augustus (63 BC–AD 14) wants the North Sea and the river Elbe to form the border of his empire, and he lets his stepson Drusus and his brother Tiberius – and later Germanicus – occupy the land of the Batavians, the Cananefates and the Frisians. A Frisian revolt temporarily upsets his plans in the year 28. More serious is the battle in the German Teutoburg Forest in AD 9, during which three Roman legions are ambushed and approximately 20,000 men are slaughtered. Corbulo subjects the Frisians again in AD 47, but subsequently retreats behind the river Rhine, which from then on will serve as the northern border of the Roman Empire, ending at Katwijk. Nijmegen becomes an

important garrison town. Naval facilities and fortifications are situated at Vechten (near Utrecht) and there is a canal between the Rhine and Lake Flevo, as well as a channel between the Rhine and the mouth of the Meuse, the current Vliet near Voorburg. A string of military sites (along the Rhine) and Roman remains were found in Katwijk, Rijnsburg, Roomburg (Leiden), Alphen, Zwammerdam, Woerden, de Meern, Utrecht, Vechten, Houten, Wijk bij Duurstede, Kesteren, Zetten, Rossum, Elst and Millingen. Spectacular discoveries are the equipment of a drowned Roman centurion, found in the marshes of the Peel, his purse still filled with money, or the famous sarcophagus of Simpelveld, which has a relief on the inside depicting a contemporary living room. Important are the stone altars, once dedicated to the indigenous goddess Nehalennia, that are still regularly dredged from the Oosterschelde.

Batavians: good allies and bodyguards



In the year 70, the Roman commander Cerialis oppressed the Batavian revolt led by Julius Civilis. Afterwards, the relations return back to normal. The Romans like to use the Batavians as recruits for their army, and in Rome itself they are popular as bodyguards. They disappear from history around AD 400, together with the last Romans. But their rebellion inspired the revolt against Spain in 1568 and the foundation of the Batavian Republic in 1795. Also Batavia, the capital of the Dutch East Indies, was named after them.

The Roman influence is still visible in the Dutch language with words like *kelder* (cellarium, basement), *tafel* (tabula, table) and *munt* (moneta, money or mint). For centuries, the Roman Empire provided stability in these regions by means of a large middle

class of Roman immigrants and the local elite. But the middle class disappears as a result of high taxation by Rome. In the legions, immigrants gradually outnumber Romans and around 400 the last Roman troops withdraw. But the Roman legacy is strong, also because Emperor Constantine reorganized the empire around 315 after the example of the dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Franks Come and Go (600-900)

The Romans leave behind a void in society. Their infrastructure works deteriorate, the trade market declines, artisans no longer practice their specialized profession and the emphasis of daily existence lies on agriculture. Life is dangerous: some farmers become serfs in exchange for protection by their landowner. They are semi-free peasants, bound to their land. Their farms are owned by the landowner and the farmers themselves are required to provide goods, labor or money. In addition to serfs, the landowner's property is also worked by slaves. The landowner is in charge of the village, both economically and administratively speaking. If the village happens to be property of a monastery, the abbot is the actual landowner. Besides serfs and slaves, monks will then also be working the lands.

Frisians, Franks and Saxons

During the sixth and seventh century, three major tribes persist: the Frisians in the North, Saxons in the East and the Franks in the center and southern parts of the country. Many aspects of the current local dialects can still be traced back to their languages.

The Frisians control the North Sea coast from Calais to Denmark. Dorestad, located at the current town of Wijk bij Duurstede, is an

important trading city. Their leader King Radboud (?-719), an opponent of Christianity, defeats the Frankish majordomo Charles Martel at Cologne in 716. He dies in 719, after which Charles annexes his territories.



FIGURE 1.1: The Frisian territories during King Radboud. The Waddenzee (Wadden Sea) does not exist yet.

The Saxons rule the eastern part of the Netherlands. The Franks want to convert them to Christianity. Charlemagne frequently has to deal with rebellions during the period in which Widukind is the leader of the Saxons.

But the Franks win. Their power base is in the southern Netherlands, Belgium, eastern France and the Eifel. After the departure of the Romans, they quickly seize power and around 496 their king, the Merovingian Clovis, is baptized in Reims. He conquers Gaul and large parts of Western Europe.