

The Netherlands in a Nutshell

**The Netherlands
in a Nutshell**
**Highlights from
Dutch History and Culture**

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Foreword

What basic knowledge of Dutch history and culture should we pass on to future generations of Dutch citizens? This was the difficult question facing the Committee for the Development of the Dutch Canon in 2005, when the minister of Education, Culture and Science asked it to design a canon of the Netherlands.

The commission came up with a creative response: a Canon in fifty key topics, or ‘windows’, consisting of important people, inventions and events which together show how the Netherlands has developed into the country that it now is. Each Dutch student is supposed to become familiar with these windows in the course of their primary and secondary education.

This Canon was created by bringing together a number of specialists and allowing them to consult for a year with one another and with a selection of interested individuals and stakeholders. A website gave every Dutch citizen the opportunity to voice his or her opinion. The result was a ‘Canon van Nederland’ that found widespread acceptance and extensive use, particularly in primary education. The Netherlands is one of the very few countries in the world where a ‘canon’ figures prominently in a school curriculum.

The Dutch historian Pieter Geyl once famously stated that ‘history is an argument without end’. The windows approach to the canon encouraged that kind of discussion. Nevertheless it became clear that the canon, which had not significantly changed since 2006, was in need of revision. In 2019, the minister of education assigned this work to a new commission, which completed its work in June of 2020.

This commission replaced ten of the fifty windows with new ones, revised the content of some others, and rewrote all of them to make them more accessible. It added more international references, sought a greater balance in the kinds of windows offered (in respect to gender for instance) and encouraged even more than before a multi-perspectival approach. And it devised seven main motifs by which the windows are connected to one another (see the back of the book for an overview).

One could argue that in both its creation and in its revision, the Canon of the Netherlands was created in a typically Dutch way: it was not decreed by a central authority or a single lofty institution, and neither was it created by a majority vote in a referendum, but by a broad panel of specialists representing the breadth of the Netherlands itself. The way in which this Canon was created may say as much about the Netherlands as do the fifty windows themselves.

In this book, the fifty windows of the revised Canon constitute the Netherlands in a nutshell, to anyone who would like to make a quick acquaintance with this ‘low country by the sea’.

On behalf of the committee,
James Kennedy



The Canon of the Netherlands



Canon van Nederland

-5500



1000



500



1500



1600



1700



1800





5500 BC

Trijntje

The hunter-gatherers



Rather than staying in the same spot, the first inhabitants of our river country travel from one area to the next. They hunt, fish, and collect fruit, nuts, turnips, and seeds. The winters are spent in permanent camps at dry locations. In 1997, the skeleton of hunter-gatherer Trijntje was dug up at the former site of one of these settlements.

The eldest human skeleton found in the Netherlands belongs to a woman. Some 7,500 years ago, she is lovingly buried in a sand dune in the swampy river area. At the time of her death, she is between forty and sixty years old. She has borne at least one child. When archaeologists excavate the small settlement in

which she lived, her skeleton is still complete. This means that her face and body can be reconstructed. Because she is found near a railway track, she is named Trijntje (a traditional Dutch name and a homonym for “little train”). We do not know her actual name, nor do we know which language she used to speak.

Ice ages

Before modern man (*Homo Sapiens*) arrives in Europe, some 45,000 years ago, it was already inhabited by human species.

For example, the Neanderthals, who live in the period we refer to as the old stone age, which commences 300,000 years ago.

They live in a vast steppe-like landscape featuring rivers and valleys, with barely any vegetation. The North Sea level is much lower than nowadays and during the coldest periods, it dries up. The Neanderthals live in huts and know how to make fire.

Hunters and gatherers

Trijntje lives much later, in the Middle Stone Age, among a group of some 25 people.

Every year, the group travels back and forth between summer and winter camps.

They probably live in huts made of branches, reeds, and perhaps animal skins. The hunter-gatherers make sophisticated flint tools, such as scrapers, knives, and arrowheads.

Travelling is done on foot and by canoe.

To the rhythm of the seasons, they live off what nature offers them, such as edible mammals, fish, and birds.

For the entire winter, Trijntje and her group live on a river dune. They hunt a range of animals such as beavers, otters, seals, aurochs, and a wide array of bird species. Boar and red deer feature most frequently on the menu. Nets and fish traps are used to

catch fish, mostly pike. Dogs have evolved into beloved companions; three are buried next to Trijntje.

The group uses all the parts of the animals they catch. The meat is grilled. Tendons and bowels are used to make bows and arrows.

Skins and furs are converted into clothing and bags. Bones and antlers are used for all sorts of tools, such as axes and needles.

The perforated deer teeth that have been found were perhaps worn as jewellery.

We do not know exactly what Trijntje looked like, but DNA tests of skeletons from the Early and Middle Stone Ages have revealed that many people of those times were dark-skinned, with blue eyes. The spread of specific types of flint points to trade, which in some cases covered long distances.

The advent of agriculture

On the timeline of human history, Trijntje and her tribe feature near the end of the period of travelling hunter-gatherers in these regions. Some 7,300 years ago, groups of migrants from the east settle in the hills of Limburg; they live off arable farming and stockbreeding. Food-growing methods spread rapidly. The advent of agriculture marks the beginning of the end of the hunter-gatherer era in these regions, although the two modes of existence continue to be combined for more than two thousand years.



3000 BC

Megalithic tombs

The first farmers



Nobody knows how they did it, but some five thousand years ago, early farmers managed to move huge, heavy boulders in order to build graves. These megalithic tombs are the tangible monuments of a peasant people that left their hunter-gatherer existence behind to settle in permanent locations.

Burial grounds

The megalith builders are not the earliest farmers in the Netherlands: they arrive comparatively late. The first farmers belong to the so-called “linear pottery culture”; they lived some seven thousand years ago in the hills of Limburg. Some two thousand years later, the megalith builders settle in

the Netherlands. What little they have left behind is usually buried deep in the ground. However, in the provinces of Drenthe and Groningen, their traces are there for everyone to see. They are megalithic tombs, made of giant stones that were arranged and piled up by human hands. The megalithic structures serve as communal burial grounds.