

The Little History of Rotterdam for Dummies

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Chapter 1

What Preceded Rotterdam (ca. 150.000 B.C. – A.D. 1570)

In This Chapter:

- ▶ Oldest human remains
 - ▶ Drowned and resurrected Rotta
 - ▶ Battle against the water
 - ▶ The three 'Schieën'
 - ▶ Fat herring and ruined castles
 - ▶ Erasmus Roterodamus
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Hunters and fishermen settle in the Maas estuary. Around the year 1000 there is already a settlement named Rotta, an important trading hub. Massive floods at the end of the twelfth century put an end to Rotta. A dam in the river Rotte, built around 1270, offers a solution and a new Rotta is created on the dam. By the time Rotterdam receives the town charter in 1340, allowing the building of a shipping canal to the Schie, trading can begin.

Living in the Meuse Estuary

About 10,000 years ago, the delta of the river Meuse was inhabited by hunters and fishermen. Evidence for this is provided by spear points and harpoon and arrowheads – made of bone and antler – from the Middle Stone Age (ca. 8,000-6,000 B.C.). Traces of a permanent settlement were also found in Rotterdam itself. At a depth of twelve meters below the Central Station, traces of habitation were found; a piece of string and some food remains dating to 5,500 B.C. The Bureau of Archaeological Research of the City of Rotterdam (BOOR) uncovered a fire place and flint tools from the same era in Beverwaard near IJsselmonde. The location also yielded three cremation pits with burnt human remains from approximately 7,500-7,000 B.C. People lived in the Meuse estuary up until the Bronze Age (2,000-800 B.C.). The hunters and fishermen gradually shifted to the practice of farming but the inhabitants moved away because it was actually too wet for this. During the Iron Age (800-112 B.C.) the area of the current city of Rotterdam was again occupied by farmers.



Oldest find

The oldest find in the Rotterdam area stems from the beach of Oostvoorne near the Meuse delta (Maasvlakte). It is a flint

plane that was used between 150,000 and 50,000 years ago by a Neanderthal individual during the Old Ice Age.



Human burials

The human cremation remains that were found in three pits during an excavation in the Rotterdam district Beverwaard, are about 9,000 years old. These are the oldest dated human graves of the Netherlands. They were situated in a river dune; a high,

dry place in the swamps. The age of the deceased individuals is between 10 and 40 years. Associated objects were found, such as flint tools, a stone hammer and a grindstone. The excavation was carried out by BOOR in 2008.

International Hub

In Roman times the area was densely populated and there were hundreds of farms. The presence of the Roman army stimulated the demand for agricultural products. People tried to control the water levels by building wooden locks and digging trenches and ditches. There were many busy markets and an intensive international trade, attested by archaeological finds such as coins, glass, roof tiles and imported pottery. The area was depopulated in the second half of the third century when the Roman Empire fell apart, but also because the area was getting increasingly waterlogged.

Drowned Rotta

The settlement called Rotta developed on the clay banks along the estuary of the river Rotte. It was part of the Meuse estuary, which was an important junction between England, Scandinavia and Germany. Rotta was an agricultural settlement and a link in this trade route. Its importance is demonstrated by the fact that it already had a parish church around 1028. Massive floods put an end to Rotta. The reclamation of

land along the Rotte shifted further inland, where new settlements came into being. More dams were built along the rivers and more and more land was brought under cultivation. Thus emerged in the thirteenth century the polders Blommersdijk and Cool on the west side of the river Rotte, and on the east side the polder Voor-Rubroek. Several village communities developed. Kralingen is first mentioned as a parish in 1270, and the history of the Hillegonda-church in Hillegersberg is at least as old.

The Dam in the River Rotte: Rotterdam



The construction of the dam in the Rotte, around 1270, completed the series of embankments along the Nieuwe Maas (New Meuse). Elongated polders stretched out on both sides of the river Rotte, where one day the city of Rotterdam would arise. The 400-meter long dam is located on the site of the present Hoogstraat (High Street). After the Medieval Period it was called Middeldam (Middle Dam). It was fitted with wooden sluices to discharge the excess water from the surrounding countryside. Gradually, people started building on the dam and actually living there. Around 1300, several houses stood in the middle of the dam on a kind of low mound called 'terp' in Dutch. The dam was inhabited by no more than a few hundred people, mostly fishermen, artisans and landowners. Shortly after that period, people started building north of the dam, on either side of the Rotte. The name Rotterdam is first mentioned in the list of 'loans' of Count Floris V, dating to 1281-1284. The Middeldam was the heart of the city. During the fourteenth century, the Sint-Laurenskerk (St. Lawrence's Church) and the so-called Guest House (serving as a hospital) were constructed nearby. The settlement was owned by the count, for whom an inn was built where he stayed when he was in Rotterdam. Well into the fourteenth century, the dam was raised and expanded several times and until 1941 it remained the only high embankment in Rotterdam.

Battle against the Water: the Water Boards

Rotterdam has different soil structures north and south of the Maas. The north consists of peat while the south has clay-on-peat. This led to the use of various construction methods. Common was the fight against the water. At the end of the twelfth century, a large part of the surrounding land had been reclaimed. Polders with embankments were constructed and windmills were installed to take care of the drainage. The main river embankment in the area of Schieland was that along the north bank of the Nieuwe Maas. This embankment would later be known as Schielands Hoge Zeedijk (the high sea embankment of Schieland), dating to the end of the twelfth century. It was maintained by adjacent landowners. The mouths of the rivers Schie and Rotte into the Nieuwe Maas formed the only breaks in the embankment. To prevent flooding, dams with locks were placed in these rivers. Stakeholders from different polders and crafts joined hands for this job. Thus, the water management turned from a local affair into a supra-local job, ultimately leading to the establishment of a special organization: the water board (*hoogheemraadschap*). It was headed by the bailiff, now called 'dijkgraaf' (literally meaning count of the dike, official English equivalent is the title of dike reeve) who took care of all water-related issues in the area together with the other parties concerned.



Town charter

The town charter (also called city charter), which was a privilege, was received by the surrounding towns of Dordrecht, Delft and Vlaardingen respectively in 1220, 1246 and 1273.

Rotterdam did not receive her town charter until March 17, 1299, from the hands of Wolfert van Borselen, only to lose it again soon afterwards. Van Borselen wanted – together