

THE NETHERLANDS

A HISTORY



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THE RISE OF THE NETHERLANDS

In about 1250, William II, count of Holland, set out toward the old hunting lodge of his father, Floris IV, in the westernmost part of his territories. He was in search of a site suitable for another home. In a land where one was hard put to distinguish the water from the bogs and the bogs from the mists, Count William was surely seeking something more than a pleasure spot. Holland was then, among the many Dutch counties, baronies, and bishoprics, the most aggressive province, and William, only recently named king of the Romans by the pope, was out to give substance and presence to his power by establishing a manor house appropriate to his stature and his ambitions.

The spot William finally chose was doubtless the most pleasant he could find in the area. It was blessed with game and potable water, and it was near the sea. On this land stood a hunting estate, built by the lords of Wassenaar, that William's father had repaired and rebuilt. The house that William constructed adjacent to this manor was known for centuries as the Old Hall, or the Hall of Rolls, and the complex itself was called 's-Gravenhage, "the count's hedge."

William's son, Floris V, had even greater ambitions, and to his father's manor house he added one of the largest rooms built in Europe during the thirteenth century - the Ridderzaal, or Hall of the Knights. The count's secretary, Gerard van Leyden, designed this monumental hall, where Floris could entertain the neighboring nobility in a manner intended to awe. Eventually, an impressive series of buildings would be constructed in front of this hall and to either side, forming the Binnenhof, or "interior court," of 's-Gravenhage. The town that grew up around the Binnenhof took its name from the original structure, shortened to Den Haag, or The Hague.

All this took time, of course, and for at least a century little stood on the site but Floris's imposing brick structure, the Old Hall, and the surrounding moats and walls. The Hofvijver, or Court Lake, protected the complex on one side, and alongside the lake were gardens and a summer house. The area beyond the gate - the Buitenhof, or "outer court" - contained the court farm, the stables, and the smithies. On the present-day Plein was a vegetable garden, sufficient in its day to supply the court as well as the small town surrounding it.

The power and prestige of Holland grew steadily after 1250, and three and a half centuries later, when the Netherlands had freed itself from foreign domination and declared itself a nation, its leaders returned to The Hague to hang the captured banners of their vanquished oppressor, Spain, from the Ridderzaal's beamed ceiling, proclaim their independence under its arch, and call this ancient home of the counts of Holland its capital.

The Ridderzaal still stands in the middle of the Binnenhof, perhaps not as vaulting and impressive as other Gothic structures of the same period, but certainly somber and imposing, with its great pointed roof flanked by two even taller towers. Here, on the third Tuesday of September, Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands delivers her speech from the throne, officially opening parliament, which meets in an adjoining building. The ceremony begins with a procession, headed by the sovereign in her gilt state coach, that passes through the city center to the Binnenhof. For this occasion, the Ridderzaal itself is banked with orange and white flowers - the royal colors - and hung with the national flag and the flags of all the Dutch provinces. The nation's past is thus remembered each year in this hall - built before anyone dreamed of a Dutch nation.

Holland's preeminence among the territories with which it would eventually unite may be traced, in part, to the struggles between the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor that took place following Charlemagne's death in 814. Before Charlemagne became emperor in the year 800, what would become the Netherlands was inhabited by staunchly independent tribes of Frisians in the north and west, Saxons in the east and the center, and Franks south of the Meuse. Conversion to Christianity, which threatened tribal integrity, was constantly attempted by indefatigable monks, but the new religion was generally resisted. As early as 695, for instance, an English monk named Willibrord was appointed bishop of the Frisians by the pope, but only under Charlemagne did Christianity finally prevail. He subdued and converted the warring Saxons and Frisians, and thereby gave this part of the world the first peace it had known in centuries. When Charlemagne died, no one ruler proved able to master the empire he left, and in 843, it was divided up among his three grandsons. The Netherlands was assigned to Lothaire as part of the Middle Kingdom - which was, in turn, di-

vided into East and West Francia, with the Netherlands belonging to the so-called Eastern Kingdom.

What really mattered in the Low Countries after Charlemagne's death was not the sovereign, whose power there was largely theoretical, but the local vassal, nobleman - or, perhaps, monastic order - to whom land had been granted in fief in return for loyal service to the emperor. Far from the center of power, in a region where there were neither great landholdings nor serfs to farm them, these vassals' hereditary fiefs were seats of absolute power. By the year 1000, the Netherlands was thoroughly fragmented. In the western areas, autonomous regions were loosely controlled by the bishops of Utrecht, the dukes of Brabant and Gelderland, the count of Holland, and the count of Zeeland and Flanders. Farther east, power was even less centralized, and local barons were practically sovereign within their own small boundaries.

The emperor had the power to appoint bishops, and, understandably, his appointments were generally guided by political rather than ecclesiastical considerations. The bishops of Utrecht, appointed by the emperor and supported by him militarily, were able to maintain control over vast territories in their diocese and keep their ambitious neighbors at bay. In 1076, when Pope Gregory VII attempted to reassert the church's right, surrendered centuries before, to appoint bishops, a fierce dispute broke out between secular and ecclesiastical authorities. While Emperor Henry IV was sojourning in Utrecht, Gregory announced his excommunication. From his pulpit, the bishop of Utrecht denounced the ban as unlawful - a not altogether surprising move, for Henry was, after all, the real source of the bishop's power and the guarantor of his independence. Both emperor and bishop lost, however: The Concordat of Worms, signed in 1122, gave the right of election to the clergy of the diocese, not to the emperor. Without imperial backing, Utrecht could no longer withstand the advances of neighboring counts. To the south, Brabant and Lorraine extended their territories north to the river Meuse; the dukes of Gelderland consolidated the eastern territories; the counts of Holland seized the entire western coast.

The crusades to free the Holy Land began during this period, and a great expansion of European trade took place.