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# Introduction

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**T**he first precursor of *The Little History of Amsterdam for Dummies* was published in 1853. The author L. Th. Zeegers tried to condense the city's history to five hundred pages. However, Zeegers had to abruptly stop his history at the year 1814, otherwise it would have been too expensive to publish. Who did Zeegers write his book for? According to the author, the work was published for 'educated readers, both young and old, that are curious, and who have a preference for concise works'. In other words, 'the Dummies' of the nineteenth century!

## *Precursors*

Today Zeegers' abridged history of the city of Amsterdam is long forgotten. Historians before and after him attempted to cover the city's history without taking into account how many pages were required. Jan ter Gouw, a contemporary of Zeegers, produced an eight-volume history of the city that did not go any further than 1578. The work is still referenced today. Other Dutch authors, including Pontanus, Commelin, Dapper, and Jan Wagenaar, also tried to capture the city's history. For those who can read Dutch, most of these works are available as a facsimile or can be found on Google Books.

In the twentieth century, the erudite Dutch history professor Hajo Brugmans also gave it a shot. He wrote a concise history of Amsterdam, which was later updated by his son. Another Dutch historian, Richter Roegholt, added an additional two volumes to the set, covering the twentieth century. After that, it seemed like many historians had given up the battle until

1995 when the journalist Geert Mak produced *Amsterdam. A Brief Life of the City* (2010), which is an overview of the city's history. Mak calls it *petites histoires* or short histories based on the stories of individuals from the city. Despite the fact that the book is not a complete history of the city, the work has been widely popular and has been reprinted many times.

In the early twenty-first century, the city's history was written again, this time by a group of historians and academics based on new data. The five extremely thick and elaborately illustrated volumes shed new light on the city's history. Around the same time, Richter Roegholt produced a bird's eye view on the whole period, in only 160 pages, while P.J. Knegtmans summarized the five volumes in 2011. Two years later, the New York Times journalist Russell Shorto wrote *Amsterdam. A History of the World's Most Liberal City*, which is not a concise history of the city, but the work does highlight the city's dynamic struggle between liberalism and religious interests.

## ***About This Book***

This For Dummies-edition has 176 pages. Amsterdam has a long and rich history. It is unrealistic to strive for absolute completeness. Therefore I have limited the history of the city to specific subjects, events, and individuals. This book will focus on the main political, social, cultural, and economic developments that helped shape the city. The index includes a register of important names and key terms.

## Icons

The margins of this book are provided with icons that indicate what kind of information is presented in each paragraph.



This icon signifies major events in the history of Amsterdam.



This icon emphasizes that the paragraph is important.



This icon indicates 'nice to know' information about Amsterdam's history.



This icon lets you know that a visitor has been quoted.

## Chapter 1

# Settlement in the Moor (2500 B.C. - A.D. 1345)

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### *In This Chapter:*

- ▶ Mammoths in the city
  - ▶ History of early settlement
  - ▶ Between Count and Bishop
  - ▶ Special rights of the city's Count
  - ▶ The miracle of the Kalverstraat
- 

**A** history of Amsterdam usually starts around the eleventh century when the marshy area called Amstelland was drained. Sometimes the history starts in 1275, when the name of the city first appeared in historical sources. However, even in the prehistoric past there has always been life in the area that is now Amsterdam. There were giant mammals, including mammoths and woolly rhinoceros, and later hunters, fishermen, and farmers. All of them left their traces.

### *Giant Mammals*

Today it is difficult to imagine when you arrive at Amsterdam's Central Station and walk down the busy Damrak while dodging streetcars, cyclists, scooters, and other tourists, that four



thousand years ago it was a small settlement. The early residents were families, or groups of people that had a sedentary life and farmed, fished, and hunted the area. In contrast to nomadic societies of that era they did not travel from one location to another. They stayed put.

For prehistoric mammals we have to go back even further. They existed during the Last Glacial Age (120,000 until 9,000 B.C.). By that time, giant glaciers had melted and drained, leaving large plains of sand that were ravaged by icy blizzards. From the melted snow in the summer streams eroded a black layer of sand, which was blown up during winter, forming a bed of soil. This layer became the foundation of Amsterdam. Today, this so-called 'second bed' rests about 20 meters below the Normaal Amsterdams Peil (NAP), Amsterdam Ordinance Datum, which is the standard reference for water levels. For the construction of large buildings, a firm foundation built on poles needs to be driven down into this bed of subterranean soil.

Today the remains of giant mammals can be found in this layer of earth. During the construction of the subway underneath the Weesperplein station in the 1970s, archaeologists found a tooth from the upper jawbone of a woolly rhinoceros. In excavations prior to the building of the IJ and Schiphol tunnels, traces of mammoths were found. In the year 2000, a mammoth tusk was discovered in the Houtrakpolder when construction was started to build a new harbor. However, no traces have been found of people who might have been hunting these animals.

### *Prehistoric inhabitants*



Recently, we discovered that people lived in Amsterdam during the late New Stone Age (late Neolithic Era), which was around 2500 B.C. During the construction of the new subway, which crosses the city from north to south, artifacts under the Damrak and

Rokin have been discovered that date back to the first prehistoric inhabitants.

Objects found during archaeological excavations provide a unique glimpse into the daily life of the first inhabitants of 'Amsterdam' and its surroundings. The oldest artifact, a stone ax used in battle, was probably part of a burial ritual, placed together with other objects including a beaker from the Veluwe region of the Netherlands, and tools made from bone that were used as household utensils. Bones from cattle, sheep, and pigs were discovered, indicating that the first inhabitants were small-scale cattle farmers. The remains from a beaver and bear suggest that they were also hunters.

The first inhabitants of Neolithic 'Amsterdam' resided on the edge of a large tidal area that was near ridges and marshes, and rich with fish-filled streams and creeks. During high tide, inhabitants retreated to the higher sand ridges. During low tide, they pastured their livestock in the salty meadows. The Amstel River, which the city would later be named after, did not exist yet. However, there was a modest beginning of the IJ River: the prehistoric IJ. This water subsidiary drained off the hinterland and emptied at Castricum into the North Sea.

Between 7,000 and 5,000 B.C., tidal waves created sand barriers in the delta of the IJ River. The countryside behind it was a wet, marshy area where only reeds and other water plants could grow. After these plants had died off, the ground became fertile and rich with new plant life including grasses, mosses, and trees. The plant life that was waterlogged turned into an ever thicker layer of peat. Small creeks and streams, including the Schinkel and the Holendrecht, drained off the peat and turned into large rivers, including the Amstel.