



The ‘Amstel Canal’ in Amsterdam Canal construction as part of the medieval reclamation and drainage system of the Western Netherlands wilderness

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Usually, Amsterdam is presented as a river city, with the river Amstel as the trade route towards its hinterland, the IJ sea-branch as the portal to the world and its Dam as a focal point of transshipment and trade.

Geomorphological, sedimentological, historical and historical-geographical evidence however, points towards the straight part of the Amstel, now located in Amsterdam, as a drainage canal that was dug in the aftermath of the ‘Great Reclamation’ of the 11th and 12th centuries. During this period, large parts of the wilderness in Utrecht and Holland were cultivated and put to agricultural use.

Prior to the ‘Great Reclamations’, large oligotrophic (Sphagnum) peat bogs drained by small rivers were characteristic of the entire region. All along the straight Amstel canal, Sphagnum peat is found, which is indicative of the area’s former peat bog conditions. The ‘Amstel Canal’ connected two natural meandering watercourses, one at the north and one at the south of the canal. The soil along both watercourses exists of eutrophic peat, which is indicative of repeated natural flooding. This is a strong indication of the anthropogenous origin of the straight part of the Amstel.

The reason for digging the Amstel canal was not to create better trade links; it was a local component of a solution for major regional drainage problems in the provinces of Utrecht and Holland. These problems arose from the silting up of the Rhine rivermouth around 1100AD. Because of this, the precipitation surplus of the entire region could not be drained to the North Sea by this route anymore. This led to increased flooding and subsequently to conflicts between the rulers of Holland and Utrecht. In 1165AD, these conflicts reached a point where the Holy Roman Emperor intervened. The ruling of Barbarossa eventually led to a compromise: Utrecht and Holland redirected the entire drainage system of the region from the North Sea to the Zuiderzee in a concerted effort. This operation consisted of the digging of many canals and the construction of several sluice complexes. This shift from natural to man-made drainage systems was unprecedented at this scale in North-Western Europe.

An unlooked-for consequence of the digging the Amstel canal and many other drainage canals during and after the Great Reclamations was the layout of a network of infrastructure that later enabled the rise of cities in Holland.